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Mediascapes and national imaginaries: LGBT characters in the media in Vietnam

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LGBT characters in the media in Vietnam

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Abstract

In this thesis, I study representations of LGBT characters in Vietnamese contemporary movies and series. I examine the evolution of LGBT representations under various impacts of globalisation in the negotiation of identities. The aim is to understand the dynamics of change in Vietnamese queer imaginaries as they are shaped by cultural constraints. This will give insight into the disjunctions between legal, societal and cultural discourses that form tensions around LGBT issues in Vietnam, the concerns of society, and how the people involved are dealing with these issues within the boundaries of the nation-state. Another key goal is to understand the role that LGBT media plays in the development of more visible LGBT politics in Vietnam.

I employ mainly textual analysis and discourse analysis to read Vietnamese movies, television and web series. The corpus of media texts includes 37 mainstream and alternative Vietnamese queer movies, television shows and web series that were shown over 15 years from 2004 to 2019 and which attracted the attention of the media in the country. LGBT characters in these films are either main or supporting roles. Specifically, I read LGBT characters' appearance, behaviour, language, problems in their personal, family and social life, and how the public has received these representations, as evidenced by online discussions. Through the textual analysis of these films and series, I aspire to make sense of the dynamics of recent changes in Vietnamese LGBT representations and the mediascape we inhabit today.

The significance of the study is to fill gaps in the knowledge of LGBT issues related to media coverage in Vietnam. Research findings indicate that LGBT media representations in Vietnam were framed within dominant heteronormative norms. In addition, media representations of LGBT people in Vietnam are strongly influenced by the global LGBT movements and the circulation and adaptation of notions of gender and sexuality from Anglophone cultures.

Acknowledgments

Upon the completion of this PhD thesis, I would like to express my sincere thanks to Professor Vera Mackie who has been an inspirational and devoted supervisor from the very early days until the end of my PhD course. Thank you for always listening, understanding and being patient with me throughout such a winding and challenging path. More importantly, you have a strong faith in me that I will be able to accomplish my goals. You have always been calm and offered me valuable words of encouragement in difficult times so that I would not give up. I would not have made it through many challenges in my study without your continous support.

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I dedicate this thesis to the members of my family, especially my father and my mother, who never ceased to trust in my ability and send me love from my far-away hometown in Da Nang. I also want to thank my brothers, sisters-in-law, nieces and nephew who have taken care of my parents on behalf of me when I am away from home. I always feel safe and warm when I think about my family.

Possibly a common feeling among PhD candidates is the loneliness on this journey. I owe much to the ceaseless mental health support of my partner Trung, who has provided frequent food delivery when I was busy in the last month of writing my thesis, listened to my petty complaints and comforted me to keep me in a good and stable mood. Thank you for loving and taking care of me and my family in Vietnam.

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Finally, my sincere thanks to an online friend Huỳnh Nguyễn Đăng Khoa, who is the creator of the sitcom series *My Best Gay Friends*. All these years, he has put all his heart into making independent gay films and series on Youtube for everyone to view for free. His works have inspired not only me but also many people to get to know more about such a dynamic and vibrant Vietnamese LGBT community.

Certification

I, NGUYEN Thi Huyen Linh, declare that this thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the conferral of the degree Doctor of Philosophy, from the University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

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NGUYEN Thi Huyen Linh
26th August 2021

List of Publications

The following publication contains aspects of the research and was published while the project was being undertaken:

NGUYEN, THL 2019, 'Reading the Youtube sitcom My best gay friends: what it means to be gay in Vietnam', *Continuum*, pp. 1–14.

Notes on Translation and Abbreviations

In this thesis, I have referred to and analysed a significant number of terms, law, policies, films and series titles, conversations, organisations and groups in Vietnamese, Japanese and Chinese. In these situations, I have translated information by myself with great care in order to preserve the original meanings, except for some cases where an original translation is available, which will be mentioned in the footnotes. In citations, contents in the original language are presented first, followed by translations in English.

Throughout this thesis, I have used the following abbreviations.

AATH	attitudes of acceptance towards homosexuality
CCIHP	Centre for Creative Initiatives for Health and Population
COC Nederland	Cultuur en Ontspanningscentrum (Center for Culture and Leisure) Netherlands.
DTH	direct-to-home
FIDH	International Federation for Human Rights [French: Fédération internationale des ligues des droits de l'homme]
FTM	female to male
GLB	Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual
HTV	Ho Chi Minh City Television
ICS Centre	Information-Connecting-Sharing Centre
INGO	international non-governmental organisation
iSEE	Institute for Studies of Society, Economy and Environment
LGBT(Q)	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, (Queer)
MSM	men who have sex with men
MTF	male to female
NGO	non-governmental organisation
PFLAG	Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays
QVFF	Queer Vietnamese Film Festival
SOGI	Sexual orientation and gender identity
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
VCHR	Vietnam Committee on Human Rights
ViLead	Vietnam LGBT Leadership Development Program
VNGO	Vietnamese non-governmental organisation
VTV	Vietnam Television

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

Under the dim light in an attic, two men are sitting next to each other in front of a large canvas. One of them, Hoàng, puts his arm on the other, Hùng's, shoulder and curiously asks his partner.

> 'What are you drawing?'
> Hùng turns his face toward Hoàng and responds, 'Ah, I'm drawing a rainbow after [the] rain.'
> 'A rainbow? Why rainbow is white [sic][1]?', Hoàng slightly raises his voice in surprise.
> Hesitating for a while, Hùng mumbles, 'Ah… Rainbow without colours.'

Figure 1 A homosexual couple in front of a rainbow without colours

Source: Cầu vồng không sắc [Rainbow without Colours] (Nguyen 2015).

The scene described above is from the movie *Cầu vồng không sắc* [Rainbow without colours] (Nguyen, QT 2015) which premiered in many cinema complexes in Vietnam in March 2015. Its main theme is the tragedy of a homosexual couple due to social stigma against homosexuality in contemporary Vietnamese society, as illustrated by the metaphor of a rainbow without colours.

The six-colour striped flag which was designed by Gilbert Baker for San Francisco Pride in 1978 has become widely known in many parts of the world as the symbol for the pride of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender (LGBT) and queer people, representing diversity in its wide range of

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[1] Original English subtitle of the movie.

colours. As the global LGBT movements spread to Vietnam, the image of the rainbow flag has been broadly used in many community events such as pride parades and bicycle rallies. The rainbow's visibility, however, varies according to cultures, societies and legal systems. In the movie scene described above, the only rainbow that the gay couple could see is a colourless one. There have been times when homosexuality was stigmatised in Vietnam. As society progresses, the rainbow starts to gain colours with improved understandings, attention and acceptance.

In the past decade, topics about LGBT have been discussed more and more in Vietnamese mass media. Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender characters can be found in popular movies such as *Cầu vồng không sắc* [Rainbow without Colours] (Nguyen, QT 2015), *Yêu* [Love] (Viet Max 2015), *Lạc giới* [Paradise in Heart] (Phi 2014), *Lô Tô* [Lo To] (Huynh 2017), in television series such as *Cảnh sát hình sự* [Criminal Police] (Vu, MT 2004), *Ngũ quái Sài Gòn* [Saigon Five] (Nguyen 2006), and in Youtube web-series such as *Bộ ba đĩ thoã* [My best gay friends] (Huynh 2012–2016) and *Trái Cấm* [Forbidden fruit] (Nguyen 2015–2017). Coming-out stories are also highlighted to increase audiences for reality TV shows such as *Anh chàng độc thân* [The Bachelor Vietnam] (Fleiss 2018), Vietnam Idol Season 4 (Huynh, Nguyen & Nguyen 2012–2013), *Bài hát hay nhất* [Sing my song] (Lei 2016) and in pop music videos such as *Sáng mắt chưa?* [Have you seen things through?] (Dinh 2019), Nghe nói anh sắp kết hôn rồi [I heard that you're getting married] (Huynh & Nguyen 2019) and *Đong tình* [Full of Love] (Le & Nguyen 2021). At the same time, more and more celebrities in Vietnam have spoken openly about their sexual orientation and gender identity such as choreographer John Huy Trần, fashion designer Adrian Anh Tuấn, songwriter Thái Thịnh, and singer Đào Bá Lộc (VTC News 2017).

In addition to the rapid increase of LGBT visibility in the media, huge changes have also been witnessed in the social, legal, and political spheres. As a member of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights during 2014–2016, in a session of the United Nations in June 2016, Vietnam voted in favour of a new resolution on 'protection against violence and discrimination based on sexual orientation, and gender identity'. This demonstrates positive progress made by the LGBT agenda, as explained by the Vietnamese delegation: 'The reason for Vietnam's yes vote lay in changes both in domestic as well as international policy with respect to LGBT rights' (Human Rights Watch 2020, p. 1).

Significant legal changes regarding LGBT rights include the amendment of the *Law on Marriage and Family* in 2014 and the *Civil Code* in 2015. In 2014, the National Assembly removed same-sex marriage from the list of prohibited acts. As a result of this amendment, *Decree 87/2001/ND-CP* on sanctions against administrative violations in the field of marriage and family (Government of Vietnam 2001) also lifted the fine on same-sex wedding ceremonies. In 2015, the National Assembly added a new article (*Điều 37–Chuyển đổi giới tính*/Article 37–Sex change) which recognises transgenderism and allows transgender people to change their legal gender on identity documents in the updated *Civil Code*.

These changes, however, remain as a potential, given many considerable challenges in their

implementation. Although the amended *Law on Marriage and Family* of 2014 decriminalises same-sex marriage ceremonies, it still leaves same-sex relationships without legal recognition. This gives rise to gaps in the claims of rights related to same-sex relationships such as the family register,[2] inheritance, adoption, and property and finances after separation. Regarding the transgender rights mentioned in the *Civil Code* of 2015, there has yet to be clear guidance on defining the eligibility of being a transgender individual and a transparent procedure to facilitate the change of sex/gender on legal identity documents. In short, although there has been positive progress in legislation, homosexual couples and transgender people will be unable to realise their rights until further considerations and regulations are introduced.

Such accomplishments in the legislation, despite being minor, are the consequence of the unremitting efforts of LGBT activists in Vietnam. In recent years, the LGBT movement in Vietnam has been thriving. The events of the LGBT community in Vietnam have occurred on a larger scale and more frequently with the active participation of young people. One typical example is the annual festival Viet Pride, which has expanded from Ha Noi in 2012 to major cities and then 31 cities and provinces nationwide in 2019 (ICS 2019). In the large cities, rapid economic growth and liberalisation of social attitudes have helped to increase the visibility of homosexual populations. Although change is slow and the topic of homosexuality is still sensitive, Vietnam's state-run media have opened up discussion of gay issues. In 2012, the possibility of same-sex marriage legislation was a major story in the Vietnamese media and there have been efforts to raise the profile of LGBT people, their rights and social change, and the social inclusion of LGBT people. The year 2012 marked the time when the Minister of Justice Hà Hùng Cường started a consultation to consider the legalisation of same-sex marriage. Furthermore, gay and lesbian social networks are expanding, interfacing with emerging non-governmental organisations (NGOs) which work to create more positive LGBT representations in the media and to advocate for LGBT human rights.

The media and LGBT visibility are strongly connected. According to a public opinion poll on same-sex marriage conducted by the Institute of Sociology in 2013, media, movies, TV shows and the Internet are the main sources of information for Vietnamese people about homosexual people and homosexual relationships. In this survey, 66.2% of the respondents reported having gained information via these channels while the remaining reported knowing someone who was homosexual (Dang et al. 2013, p. 8). This indicates the important role of the media in providing information and communicating cultural meanings of sexual identities. With society becoming more open and tolerant toward LGBT people and the movie industry thriving, there has been an increase in the visibility of LGBT characters in Vietnamese films, TV shows and web series. This allows the public and the LGBT community to reflect on LGBT issues from various perspectives. As narrated in the film *The Celluloid Closet,* with respect to the US media:

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[2] 'Family register' is a household and residence registration system which is known in Vietnam as *hộ khẩu*, similar to Japanese *koseki* and Chinese *hukou*.

> Hollywood, that great maker of myths, taught straight people what to think about
> gay people and gay people what to think about themselves. No one escaped its
> influence (Epstein & Friedman 1995).

When homosexual relationships and the LGBT community are not so visible in real life, people seek mediated images that simplify conceptions about LGBT people. The perception of gender roles is significantly impacted by persistent media representations. People tend to make judgements and form stereotypes based on stable and repeated cultural images of masculinity, femininity, and sexuality (Holz Ivory, Gibson & Ivory 2009, pp. 176–178). In other words, movies represent accepted cultural norms as a result of cultural generalisation, which can easily degenerate into stereotypes (Giannetti 2001, p. 427). Anderson (1983, pp. 6–7) contends that a nation is an 'imagined community', where national belonging is predicated on people's *perceptions* of shared values, rituals and beliefs that circulate beyond the sphere of everyday face-to-face interaction. Within contemporary societies, the media is a key means by and through which imaginaries of national cultures and values are communicated, debated and crystallised, including debates about social change and the inclusion of minority groups such as LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans) people. As such, movies and films are media tools to create imaginaries by forming and reflecting society, politics and cultures. Thus, studying movies helps us understand the social culture encompassing the traditions, institutions, myths, and beliefs that are characteristic of a given community and nation.

There is more to learn from films and videos than a mere reflection of reality. Berry (2001, p. 212) examined 1990s East Asian film and video representations of gays and found that these films relate more to 'what it *means* to be gay in East Asian cultures [emphasis added]', rather than their real lives in the communities. He argues that, as opposed to 'Anglo' models, East Asian cultures prioritise family values. As a result, East Asian gay films include 'the representation of gayness as a family problem' (Berry 2001, p. 215). Nevertheless, the emergence of a new generation of alternative queer filmmakers in the 2000s is pushing the boundaries to reveal many other dimensions of gender and sexuality in Asia. Thai movies, for instance, portray individualism over heteronormative conformity whereby the characters might choose an independent homosexual lifestyle instead of suffering from the oppression of the family (Ünaldi 2011, p. 68). Reading representations allows us to perceive the cultural practices and the diversity of queer life.

Many studies of cultural representations have been carried out in the US, the UK, Australia, and Canada. The question is how that can translate into the study of Vietnam and whether existing frameworks and theories of media, queer theory and globalisation can be applied to Vietnam. We do not have many studies of LGBT representations in Vietnam, so the significance of the study is to fill gaps in the knowledge of LGBT issues related to media coverage in Vietnam. The analysis of media representations will give insight into the concerns of society, and how the people involved are dealing with these issues within the boundaries of the nation-state.

The reason that I picked the topic of LGBT issues in Vietnam for my PhD thesis involves my

consciousness of the eventful history of LGBT movements in Vietnam over the past two decades, which have attracted great attention from the public. I was especially impressed by the significant changes in Vietnamese social perceptions about LGBT communities in a gradual process from stigmatisation to greater respect for diversity. I have been friends with people of the LGBT communities since I was in high school (the 2000s) when prejudice against homosexual people was still prevalent. Then there came the period when LGBT people stepped out to the light and more confidently came out. There was a time that I volunteered with local LGBT groups to organise pride events. Through such volunteering activities, I had a chance to hear about LGBT people's distress and anxieties about their identity and their relationships with family and society. I also witnessed their happiness when they could come out at pride events and seek connections with other members of the LGBT communities. Such positive changes are the result of the blossoming of LGBT politics which brought more visibility to LGBT communities in Vietnam. Parallel to the growth of LGBT organisations in the country, I also noted that representations of LGBT people in the media have greatly improved. Visual media about queer people is no longer limited to thrilling and sensational movies, as I explore in this thesis. In recent years, as we shall see below, public audiences have had access to numerous movies and Youtube series and independent films which LGBT people in a humane, sympathetic and optimistic way. I have a special interest in social issues and have always wanted to contribute to social development. My curiosity about this under-researched topic led me to this PhD project. I expect that my findings will shed new light on the long term growth of LGBT communities in Vietnam in the future. While this thesis focuses on LGBT representations in Vietnam, it will also be of comparative interest to scholars working on other countries.

In this thesis, I study representations of LGBT characters in Vietnamese contemporary movies and series. I study how LGBT characters have been portrayed in Vietnamese contemporary movies and TV shows including their appearance, behaviour, language, problems in their personal, family and social life, and how the public has received these representations, as evidenced by online discussions. Through the textual analysis of these films and series, I aspire to make sense of the dynamics of recent changes in Vietnamese LGBT representations and the mediascape[3] we inhabit today. Using film and television texts, I undertake an analysis of discourses of gender and sexuality in cultural, legal, societal and global contexts.

The scope of the research will include:

- Analysis of the representation of LGBT characters in Vietnamese movies, TV shows and web series, which embraces the construction and affirmation of identities located in local

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[3] The term 'mediascape' refers to 'the distribution of electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information (newspapers, magazines, television stations and film production studios) which are now available to a growing number of private and public interests throughout the world, and to the images of the world created by these media' (Appadurai 1999, p. 223). Appadurai's idea is that as one dimension of globalisation, mediascapes provide large and complex repertoires of information and images throughout the world and influence the way people perceive reality. The less direct exposure people have with the reality, the more likely they are to construct an 'imagined world'.

social and cultural contexts.

- An examination of the online reception of the movies and web series featuring LGBT characters to see how viewers respond to particular programs.

- The relationship between LGBT media and LGBT politics in Vietnam.

1.2 Literature review

1.2.1 LGBT people in Vietnamese society and relevant legislation

Legislation involving homosexuals and transgenders was recorded as early as the 15th century. The first legal case related to a same-sex relationship in Vietnam was recorded in Article 7 of a legal code called *Hồng Đức Thiện Chính Thư* (Hong Duc Main Book of Morality), a compilation of laws in the reign of King Lê Thánh Tông (1442–1497). According to a royal decree issued on 20 April 1476, there was a case of two women living together, one of whom was single and the other was married. The unmarried woman was pregnant and accused of adultery with a man. The mandarin inspected and found out that the two women admitted to having had sexual intercourse while the husband was away from home. Then, it was concluded that the pregnancy was the result of the transference of the husband's seed to his wife and then to the single woman when they had intercourse. Therefore, she was found innocent. Remarkably, the homosexual relationship was not criticised although it contradicted feudal ethical behaviours and social perceptions at that time (Le 2013). Newton (2015, p. 258) found that *Hồng Đức Thiện Chính Thư* had a provision that when a male household servant fornicates with the son of the head of the household, he would be decapitated. Thus, sodomy was punished for the violation of status hierarchies and the social order rather than the sexual act itself. Other than this statute, there is no formal legal intervention against male homosexual activity in the history of Vietnam.

During the early modern Đại Việt period (1054–1804), Article 305 of the Lê Code (1428–1788) prohibited commoner men from castrating themselves out of the context of their servitude in the imperial court. Article 640 of this Code also prohibited men from cross-dressing. In the name of maintaining class and social order, these gender crossing acts were indirectly punished by the law (Newton 2015, pp. 257–258).

There were also records of homosexuality or transgender in Vietnamese history, such as King Khải Định (1885–1925), who was sexually attracted to men or his son Prince Vĩnh Thuỵ (1913–1997), who was criticised for dressing like a woman (Thanh Van 2012). Although these non-normative practices were portrayed as deviant, these were never criminalised in any Vietnamese laws. Homosexual or transgender practices were prosecuted only when these were attached to adultery or rape (Laurent 2005, p. 192).

The civil law of Vietnam is a combination of French civil law and socialist law although there have been several reforms of the legal system since the end of the Vietnam War. The codifiers of

the *French Penal Code* in 1806 removed sodomy offences from French law. Thus, as long as the person has reached the age of consent of 16, male-to-male sex between consenting adults in Vietnam is not prohibited (UNDP 2015, p. 28). During the French colonial period, homosexual acts were said to be popular between European men and Vietnamese male prostitutes, who were aged from fifteen to twenty-five years old (Jacobus 1898, pp. 91–93). They were called '*pédé*', as in '*pédéraste*', a French word describing a man who engages in anal intercourse with a boy. This slang term '*pédé*' later became widely used in society to refer to homosexuality. For this reason, there has been a popular discourse that homosexuality was imported from Western civilisation (UNDP & USAID 2014, p. 13).

During the Vietnam War (1945–1975), homosexual activity was objected to and criticised in the South, although there were quite a few luxury establishments where homosexual people could meet up regularly (Heiman & Van Le 1975, p. 90). Homosexual activity was common between Vietnamese male prostitutes and wealthy Chinese businessmen or French residents. American soldiers, however, were not openly targeted as customers for homosexual services because the army did not tolerate homosexuality at that time and those who were suspected of being homosexuals would receive a dishonourable discharge. Following the Revolution, sexuality was suppressed to promote revolutionary heroism and sacrifice for the collective good. Thus, the expression of support for LGBT is only discreetly expressed in poems in the prolific modern Vietnamese literature (UNDP & USAID 2014, p. 13).

During the 1990s and 2000s, there was a surge of HIV cases in Vietnam, concentrated among injecting drug users and sex workers (Gammeltoft & Nguyen 2015, p. 346). García, Meyer & Ward (2012, p. 1) analysed 16 studies undertaken during the period 2005–2011 and found that HIV prevalence among MSM (men who have sex with men) in Vietnam had grown strongly, from 9.4% in 2006 to 20% in 2010 in Hanoi and that there was a low rate of protective behaviours among these people. In 2002, homosexuality was listed as a 'social evil' by the Vietnamese Ministry of Labour, Invalids and Social Affairs and there was a call for the arrest of homosexual couples (Refugee Review Tribunal 2020, p. 3). It was not until 2006 that the National Assembly prioritised homosexual people as a high-risk group in HIV prevention programs.[4] Thanks to HIV support networks, LGBT people had a chance to form communities and learn about political issues to be able to promote their rights and equality. Since the beginning of the 21st century when LGBT movements were promoted by Vietnamese non-governmental organisations, the reports of homosexuality and transgender as a 'social evil' in Vietnamese media started to diminish and new understandings based on the import of English terminologies were communicated to the public.

The past two decades have seen significant changes in Vietnamese legislation regarding LGBT issues. One of the most important changes has been the criminalisation of same-sex wedding

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[4] Law on HIV/AIDS prevention and control No. 64/2006/QH11 dated 29 June 2006, issued by the Government of Vietnam (Clause 2, Article 11).

ceremonies in *Decree 87/2001/ND-CP*[5] and their subsequent decriminalisation in *Decree No. 110/2013/ND-CP*[6] (Government of Vietnam 2001, 2013b). The removal of the fines on same-sex wedding ceremonies has cleared the way for the enhanced public visibility of homosexual couples through their celebrations in annual pride events. In addition, Vietnamese transgender communities also received good news when their identity was recognised in the revised Civil Code of 2015, which took effect at the beginning of 2017. This change in the legislation is considered an important milestone towards the claim of equal rights for transgender communities in Vietnam. Further details of these legal changes will be discussed in Chapter 2.

Over history, there have been many changes to legal issues related to LGBT. Part of the changes reflect influences such as the punishment of adultery under Confucianism, the importation of terms relevant to LGBT from French and English, and changes in the treatment of homosexuality under economic reforms and trade liberalisation. It will also be necessary to examine globalisation and its impact on the social and cultural identities of the LGBT community in Vietnam.

1.2.2 The implications of globalisation

The role of globalisation in the construction of sexual identities is controversial, with different perspectives stressing the role of homogenisation and hybridisation. While the homogenisation approach argues that globalisation is the process of westernisation or Americanisation, the hybridisation approach emphasises diverse identities as a result of the interconnections between local, national, regional and global forces. Donham (1998, p. 7) studied the construction of sexual identities in South Africa and found that in the 1960s and 1970s, South African 'feminine' men were considered women. Only through the awareness of a global gay community were the identities re-categorised and they started to deploy the concept of homosexuality and call it a 'new gender' (Donham 1998, p. 420). Donham stresses that although modern South African gay identities are not the pure product of Western homogenisation, the West has had a certain influence on the construction of these new identities. Studying globalisation, Altman (1996, p. 79) examines the concept of a 'universal gay identity linked to modernity', suggesting that the forces of globalisation produce a common homosexual identity. He argues that the global trend of queer cultures can be attributable to the globalisation of economic and technical forces that have facilitated the borrowing of culture from the West. When a society reaches a certain stage of modernity, it becomes possible for queer identities to appear. Altman's view, however, has been

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[5] Nghị định 87/2001/ND-CP ngày 21/11/2001 của Chính Phủ về xử phạt vi phạm hành chính trong lĩnh vực hôn nhân và gia đình [Decree 87/2001/ND-CP dated 21 November 2001 by the Government on sanctions against administrative violations in the field of marriage and family].

[6] Nghị định 110/2013/ND-CP ngày 24/9/2013 của Chính Phủ quy định xử phạt vi phạm hành chính trong lĩnh vực bổ trợ tư pháp, hành chính tư pháp, hôn nhân và gia đình, thi hành án dân sự; phá sản doanh nghiệp, hợp tác xã [Decree 110/2013/ND-CP dated 24 September 2013, issued by the Government on regulating sanction of administrative violation in the field of judicial assistance, judicial administration, marriage and family, civil judgment enforcement, enterprise and cooperative bankruptcy].

criticised as having discounted cultural differences and for insufficient recognition of history (Altman 2008.).

In contrast to the homogenisation view, the literature on hybridisation appears to prevail. The notion is that globalisation shapes the cultures, politics and societies of different countries in different ways. For example, Thailand is an Asia-Pacific country where the effects of global processes are in a regional frame rather than centred on Anglophone cultures. Jackson (1997, pp. 188–189) argues that taking into account local queer cultures (for example Thai culture) borrowing Western vocabulary such as 'gay' does not necessarily represent the outcome of globalisation or homogenisation of gay identity. Not all Asian countries' homoeroticism converges towards 'Western' models (Jackson 2000, pp. 15–18). Some had argued that Thai gay male identities were imported from the West and that the politicised gay community emerged as a response to the AIDS crisis. Jackson admits that it is undeniable that the term 'gay' in Thai was borrowed from English and that many aspects of the Thai gay subculture are clearly impacted by the West's political and economic dominance. Jackson also argues, though, that the term 'gay' is not the same in Thailand but was creatively used to label local sex-cultural patterns. Adam, Duyvendak & Krouwel (1999, p. 348) observe that the globalisation of the term 'gay' takes different forms in different places. It does not, however, necessarily destroy local identity. Instead, local discourse proves resilient in the comparative study of queer cultural development across East and South East Asia through the lens of theories of cultural hybridity (Martin et al. 2008, p. 9). Boellstorff et al. (2003, p. 22) present the key concept 'dubbing culture', which they define as 'mass-mediated images [which] animate a sexual self felt to be fully modern and authentic, yet at a disjuncture from the local'. Examining *gay* and *lesbi* Indonesians, Boellstorff found that they learn homosexual subjectivities through mass media, which convey neither tradition nor the simple importation of foreign queer cultures. The construction of a local gay language (*gay Bahasa*) is derived from Indonesian. So they conclude that although Indonesian gay men have a bond with international LGBT organisations and communities, gay identity is not a 'globalised version' of the West (Boellstorff et al. 2003, p. 194).

Furthermore, globalisation processes can be decentred from Western culture, as in the case of Japanese popular culture which has been exported to other countries in the region (Iwabuchi 2002, p. 2). By conducting extensive interviews with producers, promoters and consumers of popular culture in Japan and East Asia, Iwabuchi considers the ways that Japanese popular culture is promoted, received and consumed in different Asian countries. Japan has a strong historical, political and economic position in other East Asian countries. In addition to Japan, South Korea has grown in popularity in the region over the past decades. Korean television dramas and music have achieved great commercial success and developed large fan bases in Asian countries. Popular *Hallyu* ('Korean wave') introduces soft masculinity embodied in the '*flower boys*', who are not necessarily gay but evoke 'the gay body for Koreans' (Kwon 2016, p. 1571). Kwon claims that the popularity of '*flower boys*' originates from the commodification of the subculture of gay romantic genres among female consumers. This gives a different insight into the representation of

homosexual identity, especially the subculture of gay romance, in the media of East Asian countries.

Moving beyond the Anglophone sphere, Mackie (2017, p. 2) studies the term 'sexual citizenship' in a case study of Asia-Pacific countries with different political and economic systems, welfare systems, social structures and distinctive cultural understandings of sexuality and citizenship. 'Sexual citizenship' is a relatively new term that gives us more understanding of the proliferation of cultural transformation and the possibilities of self and identity. Not all of the countries in the Asia-Pacific region, however, are liberal democracies. Therefore, unlike Anglophone countries where sexual citizenship is exercised in voting, standing for office and engaging in political campaigns, discourses of sexual citizenship in places like Thailand and Hong Kong focus on social participation and national belonging. In such countries, queer identities are affirmed in celebrations and festivals or pride parades. The new gay world is developed in commercial spaces such as entertainment venues, shops and restaurants that specifically serve homosexual clients, providing them with a place to meet up and develop social and political ties.

According to Benedicto (2014, p. 17), gay life in Manila, for example, is a picture of a local agency that 'works in the service of modernist aspirations, [and] can be mobilised to reproduce the centre in the margins' and which challenges the 'global gay' culture. Cultural capital does not only move across space but also moves through time, with the arrival of DJs from overseas and circuit parties bringing about modernity and progress. Travelling between 'gay capitals' sustains class, gender and racialised hierarchies, conditions notions of global time and affects the intersections of global and local forms of sexual identification (Benedicto 2014, p. 74). Studying sexual citizenship in Japan, Maree's case study of representations of the wedding ceremony of two women at Tokyo Disney Resort in 2013 demonstrates the affirmation of identities in public celebration, an important dimension of sexual citizenship (Maree 2017, p. 16). Contrasting this wedding ceremony with another one in Japan held at a queer community event in 2007, Maree found that in the 2007 case, the media visibility was limited, marking the event as lacking legal standing. The reporting in 2013, however, gives it an ambience as belonging to a foreign domain by situating it in a 'fairytale' world delivered by a 'foreign' multinational corporation selling 'dreams' (Maree 2017, p. 17). Although this is a domestic event, the media representation recontextualises the wedding in international trends for marriage equality, projecting the discourse of sexual citizenship onto a 'non-domestic, non-specific future time' (Maree 2017, p. 17).

In addition to multinational corporations, the emergence of international organisations and non-governmental organisations also contributes to bringing international influences to nations. Globalisation, which strengthens the links between countries, allows for the spread of new norms in terms of human rights and tolerance (Boli & Thomas 1997, p. 187). Boli and Thomas analyse the growth of 6,000 international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) between 1875 and 1973. These organisations are highly interconnected and shape world culture across major social sectors, focusing on scientific, technical, economic and infrastructural sectors. These sectoral

studies reveal a common pattern of the momentum from action operating at a transnational level. In other words, a state's policies respond not only to its own social interests but also to the global conceptions and principles promoted by these INGOs. The gaining of consultative status at the United Nations also contributes to the process of activists pressuring for LGBT rights to be recognised at a global political level. While the growth of transnational activism in scale and organisation reflects globalisation, it also constructs globalisation (Binnie & Simmons 2008, p. 169). Maiba (2005, pp. 61–62) argues that social movements are a sustained interaction among factors that share a collective identity in order to bring about changes in society and culture. She found that local events are influenced by transnational factors through the cooperative efforts of transnational activists. At the same time, activist groups get together through an overarching transnational collective identity that forms the cohesion of the networks within a broader movement, not just a movement itself.

1.2.3 VNGOs and LGBT social movements

The emergence of Vietnamese non-governmental organisations (VNGOs), as a result of economic reform in 1986, is one of the three main forces of globalisation that has boosted LGBT movements, besides relations between Vietnam and the West after the Vietnam War, and the globalisation of LGBT human rights across the world (Newton 2012, p. 12). Newton also found that the Vietnamese LGBT community was formed by alliances of Vietnamese *gay* and *les* web forum leaders and participants, American and Swedish NGO and INGO donors and the VNGO researchers. The participation of international donors as a globalising force contributes to the construction of LGBT identities in Vietnam. VNGOs are the bridge that links the global LGBT movement with the Vietnamese State in its media projects that bring visibility to the LGBT community. By employing tools such as media, art exhibitions and research, VNGOs are working hard to build positive representations of LGBT and create changes in public opinion (Newton 2012, p. 18).

1.2.4 The representation of LGBT characters in the media

There is great variation in the portrayal of LGBT characters and social attitudes towards them. The representation of LGBT people is discernible in many forms, from LGBT-related criminal reports, through comedy shows to television reports. There are stereotyped representations of LGBT characters in movies, as well as newspapers, which commonly provide the public with their knowledge and understanding about the homosexual community. For example, if American gays are portrayed as either effeminate (Hart 2004, p. 243) or asexual (Manuel 2009, p. 285), it indicates a set of prevailing attitudes and understandings that then shape the experiences of gay people. Shugart (2003, p. 83) argued in the early 2000s that American gay males were depicted as having the privilege to access women, but impotent for their homosexuality. Homosexuals can also be depicted as a threat to society, which limits their media appearance. Hart (2004, p. 251) found that American gay men were sometimes projected as superior, rather than inferior, to heterosexuals (such as in *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (Collins 2003–2007)), with their identity

positioned as witty, funny and attractive while straight men were assumed to be poorly groomed and unsophisticated and needed to be helped by a gay man to become more charming. *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* challenged heteronormative masculinity by re-idealising masculinity that was attributed to white, urban and heterosexual men. The series was also criticised, however, as having reinforced the stereotypical representation of gay men which associated them with high culture and style (Sender 2006, p. 140). The Fab Five's stereotypical style and appearance that was incorporated into the mainstream, however, failed to reflect the majority of gay lives and thus excluded awareness of other aspects of LGBT lives (Papacharissi & Fernback 2008, p. 6).

The argument over whether television reflects the cultural realities of its represented audience is still unsettled (Walters 2003, p. 10). A survey conducted by Taylor (2012, pp. 5–6) on participants in a queer youth cultural festival in Brisbane, Australia indicated that the majority of respondents felt that the non-heterosexual characters in TV shows and movies did not reflect reality. These young people also expressed anger at the media representation of queerness, reporting that gay males were often depicted as effeminate queens or in a negative way as villains or victims or funny characters. A study of five US films released between 2000 and 2007 by Riggs (2011, pp. 310–311) reported that the representations of gay parents' lives were consistent with the reality in an overall positive light and that these films to some extent offered gay parents their own reflection by highlighting their strengths as well as weaknesses.

Raley and Lucas (2006, pp. 28–30)'s work is useful for sorting through these diverse and complex representations. The authors test four stages of media representation for ethnic minority groups (non-representation, ridicule, regulation, and respect), originally developed by the theorist Clark (1969, p. 20), in which the characters become more visible and more acceptable in the latter stages. They studied 62 characters from eight American prime-time TV shows and determined that television in 2006 was at the third stage of regulation and possibly the fourth stage of respect. This suggests that LGBT characters were visible, yet in some instances still stigmatised. In another aspect, the portrayal of LGBT can be affected by the ideal heterosexual view. Focusing on gay domesticity, Dowsett (2003, p. 243) pointed out that only certain depictions of gay masculinity, which reinforce the ideal heteronormative values of home and family life, could be accepted in mainstream Australia. These portrayals, however, can also challenge the dominant image of the heterosexual nuclear family, creating a paradox of gay domesticity that offers alternative visions of everyday life at home, at work and in the suburbs (Gorman-Murray 2006, p. 231). Overall, with the increasing visibility of LGBT people in TV shows and movies, there are many changes in the way they are represented and the framework in which the representations are set.

1.2.5 Reception of LGBT movies and TV shows

Another aspect that I would like to examine in this thesis is the public reception of these LGBT movies and TV shows. Gross (2001, p. 6) suggests the theory of cultivation, whereby television defines, develops and cultivates a set of values and perceptions. It directs the way people get to perceive the world and creates norms for conduct and beliefs about real-life situations (McQuail

2010, p. 495). Gerbner et al. (2002, p. 54) suggest that the more regularly people watch television, the more likely they perceive the portrayed world to be an accurate reflection of reality. On the other hand, the lack of portrayals might influence heavy viewers that the event is abnormal or extremely rare. Fisher et al. (2007, pp. 182–184) conducted two annual content analyses for 2700 programs from the 2001–2002 and 2002–2003 US television seasons to assess the behaviours and verbal messages related to homosexuality. The authors quantified the amount of sexual content on television associated with what they refer to as GLB people. About 15 per cent of the programs were found to contain sexual content related to sexual minorities, which is relatively infrequent compared with the prevalence of sexual content associated with heterosexuals on television. Applying the cultivation theory, the authors claim that television viewers are more likely to believe that homosexual behaviour is extremely deviant. Meanwhile, the portrayal of non-heterosexuals is largely humorous and negative, which prevents young GLB people from receiving messages about healthy and responsible sexual relationships. Overall, the cultivation of negative portrayals of homosexuality makes people fear it (Fisher et al. 2007, p. 185).

Therefore, we can understand that media coverage plays an important role in shaping society's perceptions of and attitudes towards LGBT people. As pointed out by Doty and Gove (1997, p. 84), there exist 'mainstream' and 'alternative' media, in which the former dominates and addresses the majority of heterosexuals, while the latter serves LGBT people and other minorities. In recent years, however, these two are becoming integrated with many programs produced and watched by LGBT people alongside mainstream audiences, for example, *Gaytime TV* (UK) (Crombie & Parsons 1995–1999), *In the Life* (US) (Scagliotti 1992–2012), or LGBT music with messages of LGBT rights strengthened in the works of artists such as Adam Lambert, Katy Perry, Lady Gaga, or Will Young. More recent are the popular TV shows such as *Queer as Folk*: UK version (McDougall, Harding & Huda 1999–2000) and US version (Cowen & Lipman 2000–2005), *The L-Word* (Chaiken, Abbot & Greenberg 2004–2009), *Modern Family* (Lloyd & Levitan 2009–2020), and *Glee* (Murphy, Falchuk & Brennan 2009–2015).

The entertainment industry to a large extent seems to build a sense of community by creating a network of people who share interests in gender, sexuality or identity in terms of social or political issues (Robinson et al. 2014, p. 34). McKinnon (2013, p. 126) argues that the movie itself is considered a 'meeting point' in the form of creating a space for debate over presenting the image of same-sex relationships in public as well as a chance for gay and lesbian people to meet each other, thus forming a community literally and figuratively. Besides, by watching movies together, lesbian and gay cinemagoers can discuss these films and share their experiences and feelings about the movie. Cinema-going is thus considered an activity of social inclusion, where people can meet friends, other audience members, and their community to a larger extent in the space of the cinema (Bowles 2007, p. 254). According to Stimulating World Research (2007, pp. 20–21), movies have different impacts on human beings during their lifetime, evolving from 'film as entertainment' for primary children, to 'film as identity' to adolescents and then 'film as culture' to adults, especially in the mature stage of our lives. A film can encourage tolerance and promote

understanding of cultures and lifestyles. Furthermore, according to McKinnon (2013, p. 140), thanks to the thriving of same-sex activism which led to the changes in what kinds of movies can be shown to Australian audiences, cinema nowadays seems to have not only featured homosexual people as subjects but also evolved to the stage of promoting a sense of community by directly targeting gays and lesbians as its audience. In addition to the physical gathering in shared commercial spaces, a different form of community can be created in the form of a cyber community, where the members can watch movies on the Internet and have discussions over LGBT issues. The community is the connection between individuals sharing the same interests and concerns over a specific issue. The gathering may exist in the form of web forums for LGBT people, or subculture forums, or comment sections in a youtube video/page, where all participants can voice their opinions.

Media can also help raise awareness by communicating through visibility and sometimes creating the context and opportunity for a homosexual person's 'first realisation' of their sexual attraction (Leonard et al. 2012, p. 14). Leonard et al. supported this idea in their study when interviewees reported that the portrayal of a homosexual person in a film made them realise something about themselves. In addition, McKee (2001, p. 2) argued that, as opposed to a conservative perspective that seeing images of homosexuality would make someone gay, it rather raised their instinct about what they 'already possess'. Also, no research found that limiting homosexual representations would keep people heterosexual.

In a study of 1,761 undergraduate students attending a large university in the Midwestern United States about media use and attitudes of acceptance towards homosexuality (AATH), Calzo and Ward (2009, p. 293) found a strong correlation between media use and AATH. Those who viewed more TV, movies and videos were associated with a higher score, implying positive attitudes towards homosexuality. Garretson (2011, p. 165) suggested that changing media plays an important role in changing minds and that the more lesbian and gay characters people watched, the more tolerant their attitudes became. She concluded that social change was thus a result of changes in the behaviour of politicians in combination with the rise in representations of lesbian and gay characters in news and fictional media. With its strong impact on society, the television industry can work politically to benefit the LGBT community by sending messages that affirm homosexual identities and raise public awareness, promoting social change. Therefore, Farrell (2009, p. 36) recommends TV programs featuring LGBT characters to not only keep the image of LGBT on air but also to remind the audience of the inequality and discrimination experienced by the minority group. Similarly, Dillon (2015, pp. 31–34) reported that the way the popular TV series *Glee* (Murphy, Falchuk & Brennan 2009–2015) featured anti-gay bullying as more serious than other types of bullying helped attract the attention of fans in a forum to this issue. This allowed teenage fans to express their reactions to and interpretations of the show, highlighting the TV show's role as a potential agent of change concerning the issues that it featured.

Dow (2001, pp. 136–137) argued that visibility alone does not necessarily mean dominant social

attitudes shifting towards gay and lesbian inclusion. Similarly, Battles and Hilton-Morrow (2002, pp. 101–102) argued that the greater visibility of gay characters might suggest a growing acceptance of their sexuality. However, this is more of a compromise with heteronormative culture rather than improved standing for gays and lesbians. On the other hand, some studies found that increased exposure to representations of homosexuality positively affects the reception of viewers. Mazur and Emmers-Somner (2002, pp. 164–165) conducted a study of the impact of movies on viewers' attitudes towards non-traditional families. A control group watched *Father of the Bride II* (Shyer 1995), which featured a traditional family and the treatment group watched *The Object of My Affection* (Hytner 1998), with its plot containing single parenthood, racially mixed relationships, divorce, and same-sex relationships. They found that reception differed according to gender, where women tended to have a more positive attitude towards non-traditional and gay families than men. The treatment group seemed to have changed their attitudes towards non-traditional families in a more significant and positive way than the control group after seeing these films. Also, the treatment group was reported to have a more positive attitude towards homosexuality than the control group. Therefore, it was suggested that 'repeated exposure to such material would help shape more positive and tolerant attitudes, behaviours, and values regarding diverse family forms' (Mazur & Emmers-Somner 2002, p. 171).

One theory that can be used to explain the potential impact of media on social change is contact theory. According to Allport (1954, pp. 217–218), the Contact Hypothesis suggests that members of the majority group who have contact with a member of a minority group will be more likely to accept the minority group. Herek and Glunt (1993, p. 242) studied the association between heterosexuals' attitudes towards gay men and their interpersonal contact experiences with a homosexual from a national AIDS telephone survey with a sample of 937 in the United States. Regression analyses showed that those who have had interpersonal contact with homosexual people tend to hold a more positive attitude towards gay men. Examining the Contact Hypothesis in television shows, Schiappa, Gregg and Hewes (2006, p. 31) took *Will & Grace* (Burrows 1998–2006) as a case study for the correlation between exposure to gay men and attitudes towards gay men in general. The study considered 245 university students' viewing frequency of the show, 'parasocial interaction'[7] and the scores on Herek's Attitudes Toward Gay Men and Lesbians scale. It was found that increased frequency of viewing and parasocial interaction is correlated with a lower level of prejudice against homosexuals. The literature suggests that the media plays an important role in creating social changes by providing consistent and positive representations of LGBT people.

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[7] 'Parasocial interaction' refers to the phenomenon that a psychological relationship was formed between viewers and the media figures (Horton & Richard Wohl 1956, p. 215). It functions in a similar manner as interpersonal contact.

1.2.6 Background on Vietnamese media representations of LGBT issues

There is still limited research on LGBT representations in media in Vietnam. The media environment of Vietnam includes print media, radio and TV broadcasts and online mass media. The largest TV network in Vietnam is operated by the national broadcaster Vietnam Television (VTV). It was established in the capital Hanoi in 1970 and covers 87 per cent of households. In addition to four free-to-air national channels, VTV also provides paid DTH (Direct-to-home) satellite and cable (VTVCab) services. Besides VTV channels, provincial television stations such as Ho Chi Minh City Television (HTV) and Hanoi TV stations produce programs that are competitive to VTV (Banerjee & Logan 2008, pp. 528–529).

The emergence of the Internet by the mid-1990s has granted many people access to various sources of information. The number of users has been increasing strongly over the years, reaching 52.7 per cent of the total population in 2015 (World Bank 1990–2019). The accessibility to Facebook has facilitated digital activism such as the online campaign 'I do' with the participation of more than 47,000 people during the meeting session of the National Assembly to propose the legalisation of same-sex marriage in Vietnam (Quynh Trang 2013). In response to the widespread use of the Internet and its impact on the media, the Vietnamese government has enacted a censorship law to make it illegal to distribute any material online that 'harms national security' or 'opposes' the government in *Decree 72*. Prohibited acts include 'propagating and inciting violence, obscenity, pornography, crimes, social vices and superstition; harming the national fine traditions and customs'.[8] This, however, is claimed to mainly target expatriate political parties and NGOs concerned with democracy, religious freedom and human rights rather than cultural content (FIDH & VCHR 2013, p. 9). LGBT groups on the internet can develop and operate legally without being censored (iSEE 2013, p. 2).

Because homosexuality used to be listed as a 'social evil' that might fall into the category of censored content, it has been a taboo topic for media representation. The Vietnamese media has been unfriendly towards LGBT issues for a long period with sensational and distorted information, resulting in social disapproval towards LGBT people. A study of news articles by iSEE (2010, p. 23) showed that LGBT people were portrayed in a stereotypical and discriminatory way as immoral and leading unhealthy lives. Homosexuality was often linked to negative headlines over prostitution and criminality and addressed by discriminatory terms. In 2010 it was reported that the majority of articles in the press depicted homosexuals in association with other so-called 'social evils' such as crimes, drugs, prostitution in which they are the offenders targeting the victims because of their homosexual orientation (iSEE 2010, p. 17). As early as in 2004, one episode of the Vietnamese popular TV series *Cảnh sát hình sự* [Criminal Police] (Vu, MT 2004) was adapted from an award-winning novel titled *Một thế giới không có đàn bà* [A World without Women] (Bui 2000) to portray gay people involved in crimes (Mason 2004). Later on, *Trai nhảy*

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[8] Decree No. 72/2013/ND-CP dated 1 September 2013, issued by the Government on the management, provision and use of Internet services and online information (Clause 1, Article 5).

[Bar Boys] (Le 2007) captured public attention. It features the story of a straight innocent boy who is seduced into the luxurious life of a gay wealthy businessman returning to Vietnam from abroad. The film has been criticised for cultural stereotypes such as iconising gay bars and nightclubs as the importation of Western cultures through globalisation. The representations of LGBT in the early stage of visual representation suggest homosexuality in Vietnam was seen as a 'social movement imported from the West' (Pham 2014, p. 114).

Since the beginning of the 21st century, LGBT movements have gained strength and have fought for changes in media representations of LGBT people. More films and TV shows featuring LGBT people are shown at cinema complexes and on television. During this stage, Vietnamese films in general presented only two scenarios, which are either miserable and closeted gay or trans people; or effeminate and sexually outgoing gay or trans people (Megson 2015). In early Vietnamese films (such as *Cảm hứng hoàn hảo* [Perfect inspiration] (Le 2011), *Trai nhảy* [Bar Boys] (Le 2007), *Lạc giới* [Paradise in Heart] (Phi 2014), *Đập cánh giữa không trung* [Flapping in the middle of nowhere] (Nguyen, HD 2014), *Cầu vồng không sắc* [Rainbow without colours] (Nguyen, QT 2015)), most plots involved the homosexual or transgender characters struggling with their sexual orientations or identities, which they kept secret. In most cases, it comes as a shock to their families and surrounding people to discover their secrets, ending in tragedy. On the other hand, in movies such as *Để Hội tính* [Let Hoi decide] (Nguyen, C 2014) or *Nàng men chàng bóng* [Masculine Lady and Feminine Guy] (Vo 2012), gay characters were normally portrayed as 'highly feminine', obsessed with sex and playing an entertaining role in the whole story. LGBT characters in Vietnamese TV shows and movies have been represented in a stereotypical, disrespectful and unfavourable way and often act as fodder for comedy. This further discourages homosexual people from revealing their own gender identity and sexual orientation.

Vietnamese contemporary society, however, has witnessed many changes in culture, legislation and representations concerning the LGBT community. There have been various programs addressing gay and transgender issues in Vietnam on radio, the mainstream press and national broadcast channels reaching an audience of millions (UNDP & USAID 2014). Local NGOs organised workshops to promote LGBT rights and established LGBT activist groups such as NextGEN, Parents and Friends of Lesbian and Gays (PFLAG), Vietnam LGBT Leadership Development Program (ViLEAD) at a grass-roots level. These activities have successfully raised public awareness of LGBT people and have thus added more colour to the rainbow in Vietnam. This leaves a big gap in the literature of Vietnamese LGBT studies. Therefore, research on these changes is timely.

1.2.7 Ways of thinking about LGBT and Queer theory

In order to produce a consistent use of terms in the paper, I have considered various terminologies. In Vietnam, *'đồng tính luyến ái'* (same-sex love) is the most common term to refer to same-sex eroticism. This term is the Sino-Vietnamese pronunciation of the Chinese term *tong xing lian ai* 同性戀愛). The Chinese terms for sexuality are influenced, in turn, by the Japanese terminology,

such as the translation of the term 'homosexual' as dōseiai 同性愛. The word *tong xing lian ai* 同性戀愛 (or *tong xing 'ai* 同性愛) is not offensive in itself (at least in Japanese and Chinese) and is perhaps a bit clinical in tone, compared to other terms (Chou 2000, p. 2). Martin and Heinrich (2006, p. 8) found that the history of Chinese terms such as like woman (*nuxing/nuren*), man (*nanxing/ nanren*), homosexual (*tongxing'ai/tongxinglian*), and heterosexual (*yixing'ai/yixinglian*) was subject to the influence of Japanese indigenisation of western sexology and gender concepts during the Republican period. In Vietnam, however, the term is sometimes used in the context of a discourse which 'describes same-sex homoeroticism as a pathology, moral offence, and sociopolitical symptom of the degenerative effects of globalisation' (Newton 2015, p. 256). The term *đồng tính luyến ái* was used in the campaign against *tệ nạn xã hội* [social evils] in Vietnam during the Renovation period since 1986, which condemns behaviours such as alcoholism, drug abuse, gambling, prostitution and homosexuality. In both Vietnamese and Chinese, there are modifications of the term to refer to a variety of gender and sexual identities such as *người đồng tính nam* (homosexual male), *người đồng tính nữ* (homosexual female), *người lưỡng tính/người song tính* (bisexual person), *người chuyển giới* (transgender person), *người dị tính* (heterosexual person).

There is also a wide range of slang terms in Vietnam which are used to refer to non-normative forms of gender and sexuality such as *pê-đê* (*pédéraste* in French), *ái nam ái nữ* ('hermaphrodite'/'half man half woman'), *bóng* ('shadow') , *đồng cô* (womanlike men), *hi-fi* ('two-stereo'), *xăng pha nhớt* ('petrol mixed with engine oil'), *lại cái* ('penetrated by the female spirit') for gays and FTM (female to male) transgenders or *ô môi* (*homo* in French) for lesbians and MTF (male to female) transgenders (Newton 2015, p. 256). The local term that has been used to indicate any form that differs from the two binary genders in Vietnamese society, man and woman, is '*thế giới thứ 3*' ('the third world')/'*giới tính thứ 3*' ('the third gender') (Bich 2012, p. 31). '*Thế giới thứ 3*' involves both homosexuals and transgenders in a sense that is similar to the term *'queer'* in English. These local terms, however, are considered offensive, insulting and humiliating to LGBT people.

Since the beginning of the 21st century with the increase of LGBT movements, the LGBT community in Vietnam has borrowed various terms from English to categorise gender identities and sexual orientations. LGBT people often prefer to use terms from English such as 'LGBT', 'SOGI' ('xu hướng tình dục'/sexual orientation and 'bản dạng giới'/gender identity). These borrowed terms are used by Vietnamese NGOs and are seen as less negative (Newton 2015, p. 256). Also, there is no Vietnamese term to differentiate between masculine and feminine gay males or lesbian females. The contemporary LGBT community has adopted and adapted English words to label several categories such as '*bot*' gay (bottom), '*top*' gay, *trans guy*, *B (butch), SB (soft Butch), fem*. This suggests that vernacular terminology is unable to cover all categories of biological sex, societal/cultural gender identification and sexual orientation, as argued by (Jackson 1997, pp. 188–189).

In this thesis, I choose to use the term 'LGBT' as an inclusive term for the characters in films with self-identified diverse sexual orientation and gender identity. Vietnamese media use the term '*phim đồng tính*' to refer to queer films although the word '*đồng tính*' means 'homosexual'. In addition to the clearly identified characters, some films contain 'queer' elements that lie outside the mainstream and refuse to be tied to default norms. 'Queer' deconstructs identities and binaries in cultural and moral assumptions. 'By refusing to crystallise in any specific form, queer maintains a relation of resistance to whatever constitutes the normal' (Jagose 1996, p. 99). Rather than focusing on the division of sexual orientation like LGBT, queer is inclined to demonstrate the lifestyle and the expressions that do not conform to gender norms.

The concept of queer is new in Vietnam but it has been growing during the past decade, opening up many discussions on LGBT and gender equality in popular culture such as the film festival 'Queer Forever' in Hanoi in 2013 (Thanh Nien News 2013). Queer films feature the ambiguity and deviation in sexuality that requires queer reading, ranging from homosexual relationships to transsexuality or sexual disguises. It goes against the popular representations of LGBT people in the media in certain formulas which form common prejudices. The purpose of queer films, therefore, is not only about negotiating LGBT rights but reaches further to form the third space that is situated between the binaries and creates resistance within queer discourses. Reading queer is the understanding of LGBT people's lives and desires that shape the minority group in heteronormative Vietnamese society.

1.3 Research Questions

This thesis will test the theories mentioned above, including the framework of four stages of media representation (non-representation, ridicule, regulation, and respect), cultivation theory, contact theory, queer theory, globalisation through film representations and factual information. I will consider whether these hypotheses fit in the legal, societal and cultural context of Vietnam.

The specific Research Questions include:

- What is the availability of mainstream and alternative movies made in Vietnam with LGBT characters playing main roles and subordinate roles over time?

- What is the demography of LGBT characters in the movies? How are the personalities and characteristics of LGBT characters portrayed in the movies?

- How do society and the LGBT characters themselves treat their identity and sexual orientation in the movies and TV shows– discrimination, sympathy, opposition or support?

- How do the LGBT movies and TV shows end? What are the challenges for LGBT characters and what do they achieve in the end?

- How have the representations of LGBT characters changed over time?

- What are the responses of viewers to LGBT movies and TV shows and web series?

Key goals:

The goals of this research are:

- understanding the visibility, characterisation and representation of LGBT characters communicated to the public, based not only on time frame but also in cultural, political, economic and global contexts;

- analysing social debates prompted by LGBT representations and mapping social attitudes using the evidence of social media posts;

- understanding the role LGBT media has played in the development of more visible LGBT politics in Vietnam.

1.4 Research Methods

I will study the representations of LGBT characters in Vietnamese contemporary movies and TV shows. Representation is the process that produces and exchanges meaning that members of a culture share through the use of language, signs and images (Hall 1997, p. 15). Among various theories on how language represents the world, the constructionist approach acknowledges that people use systems of representation to construct and perceive meaning. According to Foucault (1980, p. 114), the word representation refers to the use of discourses dependent on context, rather than just language, to produce knowledge and to know where meaning comes from, which he names a discursive approach. In other words, 'meaning' is not just the function of language but relies on discursive formations that define and limit how a certain topic can be conceptualised and formulated in a specific period. In the case of highly complex economic and political realities, representation can make use of 'discursive simplification' that constitutes a subset of social relations to construct 'imaginaries' as a socially negotiated process (Jessop 2002, p. 7).

Popular cultural texts are not an exact reflection of reality, but the representations might give us some ideas about the culture from which they originate. This study will employ qualitative analysis focusing on how the representation of LGBT people is communicated to the public. Content analysis using keywords to clarify the uses of language that express perceptions about LGBT will be applied. I will analyse:

- terms that are used for self and community identification;

- references to the relationship of a homosexual couple as one of 'love' or 'deviation';

- images of LGBT people as normal or deviant;

- acknowledgment or acceptance of LGBT people;

- storyline including plot twists and endings.

The Vietnamese language texts will be analysed closely. I will provide English translations of relevant passages in the thesis. I will focus on the analysis of the social and cultural context of media practices together with linguistic analysis. I aim to consider how LGBT people have been depicted on screen and to evaluate audience reactions.

The corpus of media texts includes 37 mainstream and alternative Vietnamese queer movies, TV shows and web series that were shown in cinemas over 15 years from 2004 to 2019 and which attracted the attention of the media in the country (see Filmography). LGBT characters in these films are in either main or supporting roles. The videos are collected from various Internet sites. I will look at the movies and TV shows and identify particular themes embodying the cultural representations. These include the appearance of the characters such as fashion or hairstyle, their personalities, the use of language, their practices as individual and community and so on.

In addition, the reception of a Youtube web series will be studied through textual analysis of user comments in Vietnamese and English (if any). Youtube web series are easy to access and have a large number of comments that can be used to examine the responses of viewers and how the messages of films are perceived. These reviews and comments are coded into themes. The discourses will be examined based on images, texts and plots, using qualitative analysis.

The thesis will clarify several hypotheses, based on the framework of media representations for minority groups (non-representation, ridicule, regulation, and respect). These hypotheses are that:

- LGBT characters in Vietnamese films are around the second stage spreading to the fourth stage;

- LGBT representations are presumed to grow more in destigmatisation and the social, cultural, political and economic impact of globalisation has shaped the images of LGBT people in convergence with neighbouring countries;

- there are more positive responses in the reception of LGBT films in Vietnam as the LGBT community has become more visible and LGBT movements are getting stronger.

The significance of this study is to fill gaps in our knowledge of LGBT issues related to media coverage in Vietnam. I will examine the evolution of LGBT representations under various impacts of globalisation in the negotiation of identities. Thus, we can understand the dynamics of change in Vietnamese queer imaginaries as they are shaped by cultural constraints. The representations will give insight into the disjunctions between legal, societal and cultural discourses that form tensions around LGBT issues in Vietnam, the concerns of society, and how the people involved are dealing with these issues within the boundaries of the nation-state.

1.5 Chapter structure

This thesis consists of seven chapters dealing with different aspects of media representation. This introduction (**Chapter 1**) lays the foundation for my study in its legal, cultural, societal and

globalised contexts. It includes the introduction of the focus and scope of the study, the literature review, summary of research questions, discussion of research methods and a description of the chapter structure. This chapter outlines the corpus of media texts and timeframe of the thesis, which includes 37 mainstream and alternative Vietnamese movies, TV shows and web series related to LGBT issues between 2004 and 2019. The thesis has three main goals:

(1) the analysis of the representations of LGBT characters in Vietnamese movies, TV shows and web series,

(2) an examination of the online reception of these representations, and

(3) an evaluation of the relationship between LGBT media and LGBT politics in Vietnam.

The main content of this thesis is divided into two main parts. The first half of the thesis includes chapters on the legal, societal, political and cultural contexts which inform LGBT visibility in contemporary Vietnamese society. I also map out how LGBT visibility in Vietnam bears the influence of global and particularly Anglophone LGBT identities. These first chapters focus on how Vietnamese LGBT people negotiate national imaginaries (and beyond) of belonging through sexual and gender identity. The second half of the thesis provides close textual readings of how non-normative forms of gender and sexualities are represented in Vietnamese media. Specific movies, TV shows and Youtube series over the past two decades have been selected for the study. The research focuses on how LGBT visibility has been strongly shaped and influenced by Vietnamese heteronormative and Confucian values which have narrowly depicted homosexuality and have produced a range of stigmatising discourses.

The legal background related to LGBT issues in Vietnam will be examined in **Chapter 2**, focusing on changes in the laws on same-sex relationships and transgender in recent years. This chapter studies the legislation regarding same-sex marriage, wedding ceremonies and partnership, child adoption and access to In Vitro Fertilisation (IVF) of homosexual couples, and the regulation of identity change of transgender people. The participation of Vietnamese NGOs and international organisations in LGBT rights movements will also be considered. Overall, this chapter explores the impacts of global LGBT movements on legal and social changes in Vietnam regarding LGBT issues.

Placing Vietnamese queer culture in the context of globalisation, I will evaluate the term 'queer' and the cultural practices of the Vietnamese LGBT community in **Chapter 3**. I study vernacular LGBT and queer terminologies in Vietnam, their historical dimension, international and colonial trajectories, and their contemporary intra-Asian regional cross-pollination within the circulation of popular cultural products and fan cultures. I trace the history of the relevant terminology and the social, cultural and political nuances that are associated with the transmission and adaptation of terms, most often from Western to Asian contexts but also within the Asian region. This chapter

aims to analyse how Vietnamese popular culture is influenced by neighbouring cultures in the Asian region.

Considering these contexts, the chapters in Part two provide textual analysis of Vietnamese LGBT and queer film and TV shows. This analysis considers the imaginaries of LGBT characters in media during the early decade of this century (**Chapter 4**), destigmatised representations of homosexual people and Vietnamese family values in the concept of 'coming out' (**Chapter 5**), the LGBT community and alternative media channels and how the public receives these movies and series (**Chapter 6**).

Chapters 4 and 5 provide close reading of selected films and outline patterns of representation of homosexuality in Vietnamese media. The analysis is built on media theories including Cedric Clark (1969) on evolutionary stages of media representation of minority groups, Chris Berry (2001) on chronological changes in representation, Robert Entman (1993) on framing theory, and Iwabuchi Koichi (2001) on cultural proximity. The study is also informed by the question of visibility (Walters 2003) and the role that representations of 'family' (Chou 2000, Dasgupta 2009) play in the Asian context. The selected films and TV shows are examined chronologically and presented through a narrative approach in order to test the hypothesis that there has been a significant shift from invisibility to visibility of homosexual characters in movies and series in Vietnam.

Chapter 6 studies LGBT representations in alternative media in Vietnam through the analysis of the texts and comments on the popular Youtube sitcom *My Best Gay Friends* (Huynh 2012-2016) that has millions of views and thousands of comments per episode. Circulated via the social media platform Youtube, the series facilitates audience reception and involvement and produces a dynamic part of the discourse regarding sexual minorities within the wider society. I argue that such new forms of media can provide opportunities for enhanced LGBT representation. In my analysis and interpretation of the sitcom, I explore the topic of 'family' when evaluating the meanings and potentials of these media. I found that familial institutions – marriage, reproduction and 'filial piety' – both promise new sites for inclusion and foreclose more difficult conversations around gender and sexual diversity.

In my Conclusion, **Chapter 7**, I raise questions over the role of visual media in representing LGBT and queer people, the interrelationship between media representation and changes in society, popular culture and legislation. This chapter connects media developments of the past two decades in Vietnam to the politics and legal developments that have shown signs of easing homophobic provisions and the influence of international and Vietnamese NGOs. I confirm the hypothesis of increasing visibility of queer discourse in the mainstream media and its increasingly affirmative representations, along with the critical deliberation on such normalisation that remains within the confines of binary understandings of genders and sexualities.

Chapter 2: An overview of the legal and social background to LGBT issues in Vietnam

Since the Netherlands pioneered the legalisation of same-sex marriage in 2001, more and more countries all over the world have embraced the recognition of equal rights for non-heterosexual people in the past two decades. As the global LGBT movement spreads across Vietnam, discussions of gender and sexuality have become vibrant especially with respect to legal aspects. Keeping pace with the progress in global LGBT politics, the Vietnamese government has started to take the LGBT community into consideration in law and policy amendments in recent years.

Like any other members of society, LGBT people and their related legal and civil rights and responsibilities are governed by legislation under the notion of citizenship. The citizenship of non-heterosexual citizens, however, is not exactly the same as that of their heterosexual peers. Bell and Binnie (2000, p. 142) have noted that, 'the ways in which different sexual identities fit in with the logics of citizenship require that we attend to the intersection of discourses of citizenship with discourses of sexuality. We may all be sexual citizens, but we are not all equal sexual citizens.' Kymlicka & Norman (2000, pp. 30–31) argue that citizenship consists of four aspects: legal status, identity, civic virtue, and social cohesion. In the case of gender and sexual minority populations, the notion of citizenship is intimately concerned with the right to marry a person of the same sex, the recognition of one's gender identity, the ability to participate in sexual politics, the ability to participate in discussions in the public sphere and the sense of national belonging. Global LGBT movements are striving for equal rights for non-heterosexual people compared to heterosexual citizens on these aspects.

In this chapter I will examine the laws revolving around legal and civil aspects of same-sex relationships, transgender persons and children of LGBT people. In addition to the legal changes, I also discuss the social changes achieved as a result of advocacy movements by Vietnamese NGOs (VNGOs) which situate the debates of LGBT rights in Vietnam. Understanding the legal and social background of a country allows us to perceive the challenges that LGBT people in that country are dealing with and how these issues are being tackled. Such legal and social contexts help explain shifting understandings of gender and sexuality and LGBT visibility in the public sphere. Additionally, this context sheds light on how LGBT movements inform and shape media representations of LGBT people in Vietnam.

2.1 Laws on same-sex relationships and same-sex marriage

As mentioned in Chapter 1, although homosexuality has been labelled as a 'social evil', there are no laws against same-sex sexual activities in Vietnam. Same-sex civil unions and marriage have not yet been recognised in Vietnam, though. The first *Law on Marriage and Family* was issued by the National Assembly of Vietnam in 1959; and it was revised in 1986 and 2000; with the latest

revision in 2014 (The National Assembly 1959, 1986, 2000, 2014).[9] The *Law* of 1959 only applied in the Socialist North Vietnam. After reunification of the country in 1975, the *Law* of 1986 replaced the *Law* of 1959 and is valid nation-wide. [10]It states that:

> The State guarantees the implementation of the regime of voluntary, progressive, and monogamous marriage in which husband and wife are equal, with a view to nurturing a democratic, united, happy and lasting family (Article 1).[11]

Among the prohibited conditions of marriage in this Law, there was no mention of marriage between persons of the same sex. As stated in Article 1, however, marriage is formed between *một vợ một chồng* [a wife and a husband], implying that same-sex marriage is not recognised.

In practice, although the marriage of people of the same sex is neither legally recognised nor prohibited, some couples still undertake wedding ceremonies. The first public same-sex wedding ceremony was reported to be held in 1997 between two men in a hotel in Ho Chi Minh City with around 100 guests (UNDP & USAID 2014, p. 15). As there had been no precedent for such a marriage, how the authorities should respond to this wedding ceremony became controversial. The Vice-Director of the Consulting Centre for Love, Marriage and Families, Nguyen Thi Thuong said that it 'should be publicly condemned' while the police claimed that they could not prosecute this couple because there was no provision in the law on this matter (UNDP & USAID 2014, p. 15). On 7 March 1998, another public marriage ceremony was held by a lesbian couple in Vinh Long. They applied to register their marriage but were refused by the local authorities. Thanh Nien News also reported that the couple was forced to sign an agreement that they would not live together (Pastoetter 2004, pp. 1348–1349). A representative of the local justice department stated that their cohabiting would not have been noticed if they had not hosted that public wedding ceremony (Pastoetter 2004, pp. 1348–1349).

According to Agence-France Press, in response to the public wedding ceremony in 1998, the National Assembly modified the *Law on Marriage and Family* of 2000, which now forbade marriage ceremonies between people of the same sex (clause 5, article 10) (Refugee Review Tribunal 2020, p. 2). The Vietnamese government also issued *Decree 87/2001/ND-CP,* which prescribes a fine of between VND 100,000 and VND 500,000 to be imposed for the act of '[m]arriage between persons of the same sex' (clause 1, article 8) (Government of Vietnam

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[9] Luật 2/SL về Hôn Nhân và Gia Đình [Law 2/SL on Marriage and Family] of 1959, replaced by Luật 21-LCT/HĐNN7 về Hôn Nhân và Gia Đình [Law 21-LCT/HĐNN7 on Marriage and Family] of 1986, Luật 22/2000/QH10 về Hôn Nhân và Gia Đình [Law 22/2000/QH10 on Marriage and Family] of 2000 and Luật 52/2014/QH13 về Hôn Nhân và Gia Đình [Law 52/2014/QH13 on Marriage and Family] of 2014.

[10] In the Geneva Accords, an agreement to secure peace and self-government in Vietnam, signed in 1954, Vietnam was divided in two parts, with the North under the control of the Vietnamese Communist Party and the South under the authority of the former Vietnamese emperor Bảo Đại. The *Law on Marriage and Family* of 1959 was established by the Vietnamese National Assembly of the North and was applied only to the North. When the country reunified in 1975, the South started to adopt the *Law on Marriage and Family* of 1959 until the revised Law in 1986 replaced the old Law.

[11] Translations from Vietnamese are my own unless indicated otherwise.

2001).[12] This *Decree* was applied to a same-sex wedding ceremony in 2012 in Ha Tien with a fine and cancellation (Thai 2012). That is to say, homosexual couples' ability to be visible in public space, which is one of the conditions of sexual citizenship, was thereby circumscribed.

The prohibition of same-sex marriage embraces the anxiety of the threats that same-sex marriage is seen to pose to the family system, which is defined in the preamble of the *Law on Marriage and Family* of 2000.

> Families constitute cells of the society, cradles where people are brought up, and
> an important environment for personality formation and education, contributing to
> the construction and defense of the Fatherland. Good families make good society,
> good society makes better families.[13]

The role of family is to connect a heterosexual man and woman, who will participate in the process of reproduction, upbringing, and education of a new generation. The family serves the purpose of consolidating the structure of the society. In this way, same-sex marriage is perceived to disrupt the reproductive function of the family, which endangers the continuation of society. On the other hand, LGBT activists argue that there is no foundation for prohibiting and sanctioning same-sex wedding ceremonies because the ceremony itself does not constitute a marriage, and thus does not violate the regulation (Huynh 2012). In Vietnam, a heterosexual marriage is recognised as valid once it is registered at the local People's Committee. A wedding ceremony is not compulsory but only serves the purpose of celebrating and confirming the relationship. It is considered a chance to publicly introduce the newly wedded couple to their family and friends.

After many years of advocacy for LGBT rights in the lawmaking process by VNGOs, the year 2013 marked an important change in the political and legal environment for Vietnamese LGBT people, with the decriminalisation of same-sex wedding ceremonies through *Decree No. 110/2013/ND-CP* which replaced *Decree 87/2001/ND-CP* (Government of Vietnam 2013b). This removed the fine for same-sex wedding ceremonies.[14] This is also reflected in the amended *Law on Family and Marriage* of 2014, which removed clause 5, article 10 in the old *Law* of 2000 forbidding same-sex marriage ceremonies. Despite not forbidding ceremonies, clause 2, article 8 of this *Law* of 2014 states, however, that the 'State shall not recognise marriage between persons of the same sex.'

The revision of the law can be seen as progress in improving the image of homosexual people in Vietnam. The wedding ceremony is a form of public celebration where same-sex couples affirm their identities. It is an important dimension of sexual citizenship (Maree 2017, p. 16). Especially when mainstream legal and medical discourses are heteronormative, bringing representations of non-heteronormative relationships, partnerships and families into the public sphere is very

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[12] Ibid.

[13] My translation of the Vietnamese law.

[14] Ibid.

important (Mackie 2017, p. 9).

Regarding transnational marriage, *Decree 24/2013/ND-CP* refuses marriage registration between Vietnamese citizens and their same-sex foreign partners because each party shall have to abide by his/her country's legislation on marriage conditions (clause 1i, article 12) (Government of Vietnam 2013a).[15] This *Decree* also states that:

> Marriages between Vietnamese citizens or between Vietnamese citizens and
> foreigners already carried out at foreign competent agencies in a foreign country,
> in conformity with law of that country, shall be recognized in Vietnam, if by the
> time of marriage such Vietnamese citizens have not violated Vietnam's law
> provisions on marriage conditions.

In cases where there are violations of Vietnamese legislation on marriage conditions but by the time of requesting the recognition of the marriages, the consequences of such violations have already been overcome or the recognition of such marriages is beneficial to the protection of the interests of women and children, such marriages shall also be recognised in Vietnam (clause 1, article 16).

The implementation of this regulation may vary according to the interpretation of the authorities. First, it is necessary to consider whether same-sex marriage actually results in any 'consequences of such violations' that are to be overcome. Second, in the case where a lesbian couple has children, the question is whether 'the recognition of such marriages is beneficial to the protection of the interests of the women and children'. Notwithstanding, there have been no details on the implementation of this regulation, so it is still open to controversy.

There is no regulation on the recognition of civil unions of homosexual couples, either. Article 16 of the *Law on Marriage and Family* of 2014 regulates the 'settlement of property relations and obligations and contracts between men and women cohabiting as husband and wife without marriage registration'. At the moment, the cohabitation of a same-sex couple is treated in the same way as a civil [i.e., non-marital] relationship between any two individuals. VNGOs are lobbying for the application of this regulation for heterosexual cohabitation to homosexual unions. This is necessary because, in addition to the property issue, when children are put into the picture, the relationship of a same-sex couple turns out to be much more complicated.

2.2 Children of LGBT people

Except for natural pregnancy, 'giving birth with assisted reproductive technology', 'altruistic gestational surrogacy' and adoption are three other legal methods to have children in the family.

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[15] Nghị định 24/2013/ND-CP ngày 28/3/2013 của Chính Phủ Quy định chi tiết thi hành một số điều của Luật Hôn nhân và gia đình về quan hệ hôn nhân và gia đình có yếu tố nước ngoài [Decree 24/2013/ND-CP dated 28 March 2013, issued by the Government detailing the implementation of a number of articles of the marriage and family law on the marriage and family relations involving foreign elements].

Compared to the *Law on Marriage and Family* of 2000, the new *Law* of 2014 adds regulations on 'giving birth with assisted reproductive technology' and 'altruistic gestational surrogacy' (article 93–98). 'Giving birth with assisted reproductive technology' means giving birth through artificial insemination or in vitro fertilization (clause 21, article 3). Altruistic gestational surrogacy is defined as:

> a pregnancy carried voluntarily for non-commercial purposes by a woman for a couple of whom the wife is unable to carry a pregnancy and give birth even if assisted reproductive technology is applied. The voluntary gestational carrier is impregnated and gives birth through the transfer into her uterus of an embryo created by in vitro fertilization from the ovum of the wife and sperm of the husband (clause 22, article 3).

Giving birth with assisted reproductive technology for commercial purposes and commercial gestational surrogacy are prohibited in order to protect the marriage and family regime (clause 2g, article 5). Decree 10/2015/ND-CP states the principles of application of in vitro fertilization and altruistic gestational surrogacy that:

> [a]n infertile couple or a single woman has the right to give birth through in vitro fertilization under the prescription of a specialized doctor. An infertile couple has the right to ask for altruistic gestational surrogacy (clause 1, article 3) (Government of Vietnam 2015).[16]

Given that Vietnamese legislation does not recognise homosexual couples as husband and wife although they may celebrate a wedding ceremony, homosexual couples are not qualified for these two options. Similarly, homosexual couples are also excluded from adopting a child as The *Law on Adoption* of 2010 regulates that 'a person may be adopted by only one single person or two persons being husband and wife' (clause 3, article 8) (The National Assembly 2010). [17]

Instead, homosexual couples can adopt as a single parent or one person of a lesbian couple can act as '[a] single woman who gives birth to a child with assisted reproductive technology' and thus is identified as the mother of the child (clause 2, article 93, *Law on Marriage and Family*).

A marriage involving a transgender person with an opposite sex partner will be recognised and they will have the right to apply for all of the options as a heterosexual couple once the revised *Civil Code* of 2015 is validated (The National Assembly 2015).[18]

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[16] Nghị định 10/2015/ND-CP ngày 28/1/2015 của Chính Phủ quy định về sinh con bằng kỹ thuật thụ tinh trong ống nghiệm và điều kiện mang thai hộ vì mục đích nhân đạo [Decree 10/2015/ND-CP dated 28 January 2015 by the Government on giving birth through in vitro fertilization and conditions for altruistic gestational surrogacy].

[17] Luật 52/2010/QH12 về Nuôi Con Nuôi [Law 52/2010/QH12 on Adoption].

[18] Bộ Luật Dân Sự năm 2015 [Civil Code of 2015].

2.3 Rights of transgender people

On 24 Nov 2015, the National Assembly passed a new *Civil Code* of 2015, which took effect at the beginning of 2017. The revised *Civil Code* is regarded as a turning point in Vietnamese LGBT history. Article 37 of the *Civil Code* of 2015 legalises gender reassignment of individuals, allowing them to change their name, family register[19] entry and have personality rights[20] in conformity with the transformed gender identity. Once the *Civil Code* of 2015 comes into effect, transgender people who have undergone sex reassignment surgery can apply for a change of civil status. They are now considered to have their reassigned gender and thus can get married to a person of the opposite sex.

In terms of legislation concerning sex reassignment, in 2008 the Vietnamese government issued *Decree 88/2008/ND-CP* which allows persons to have their sex reassigned if they have 'congenital sex defects or are [of] unidentifiable sex' (clause 1, article 1) (Government of Vietnam 2008). [21]This *Decree* also prohibits '[c]onducting sex reassignment for persons without sexual variants' (clause 1, article 4) and '[c]onducting sex assignment without the permission of the Ministry of Health or a provincial-level Health Service stipulated in Article 8 of this Decree' (clause 2, article 4). According to this regulation, gender reassignment surgery on a person with 'perfect gender' is illegal in Vietnam. Thus, transgender people resort to travel abroad to countries where gender reassignment surgery is legal and available such as Thailand, Korea, Canada or the US to get sex reassignment. Those who come back after gender reassignment surgery overseas have to face up to various problems in their daily lives in legal and civil aspects. The mismatch between names and gender on identification documents with their current gender interferes with their rights and duties in various matters including marriage, adoption, inheritance, medical treatment, employment, military service, immigration or emigration and so on. At the moment, *Decree 88/2008/ND-CP* is still in effect, as there has been no other decree to replace it. The regulations concerning sex and gender reassignment in the *Civil Code* of 2015 is a first idea that requires many other guidelines to come into realisation.

The *Civil Code* of 2015 regulates two types of reassignment, including *xác định lại giới tính* [sex re-determination] in article 36 and *chuyển đổi giới tính* [sex change] in article 37. According to Lawyer Phạm Tuấn Anh (2021), the phrase *'xác định lại giới tính'* [sex re-determination] refers to the sex confirmation of those whose gender is subject to a congenital defect or has not yet been adequately formed. The subjects of this right can be understood as those who have atypical development of sexual and physiological characteristics in their bodies. Meanwhile, *'chuyển đổi giới tính'* [sex change] refers to the case when one identifies with a gender which is different from their biological sex. Thus, in biological aspects, a transgender individual is totally normal. An

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[19] Ibid.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Nghị định 88/2008/ND-CP ngày 5/9/2008 của Chính Phủ về xác định lại giới tính [Decree 88/2008/ND-CP dated 5 August 2008, issued by the Government on sex reassignment].

article on the online Thư viện Pháp luật [Law library] also confirms this interpretation of the difference between sex reassignment and transgender rights (Chau 2021).

In the *Civil Code* of 2015, regulations for *'chuyển đổi giới tính'* [transgender] is simply stated as:

> [t]he gender reassignment shall comply with the law. Each transgender who has undergone sex reassignment surgery has the right and obligation to apply for change of civil status affairs as prescribed in law on civil status affairs and has personal rights in conformity with the transformed gender as prescribed in this Code and relevant laws (clause 2, article 37).

The *Law on Transgender*, however has not yet come into existence. This Law and relevant documentation which will provide guidelines and detailed regulations are still being drafted by the Ministry of Health and have been postponed from submission for discussion in the 15th National Assembly in 2021 due to the impact of the global Covid-19 pandemic. The absence of a law regulating the conditions and procedures for reassignment of gender identity leaves a gap for questions on what conditions qualify a person for being recognised as transgender and how the procedures related to transgender will be conducted. For example, it is unclear whether someone can undergo gender reassignment if they are married or have children. What medical certificates do they need for gender reassignment? Are individuals under hormone replacement therapy without undergoing genital surgery qualified for legal recognition? In addition, there might need to be Ministry of Health legal documents guiding the implementation of the *Law on Transgender* in order to conduct gender reassignment surgery at health facilities. Thus, transgender people in Vietnam still have a long way to go before they can claim their rights.

2.4 Heteronormativity in Vietnamese legislation

An overview of the legal background to LGBT issues in Vietnam shows that Vietnamese legislation reinforces heteronormativity in the Vietnamese family. Marriage is based on a heterosexual relationship, which is constituted by a man and a woman. A marriage forms a family that has a reproductive function and contributes to the maintenance and development of the nation. Homosexual couples are excluded from marriage because they do not fulfil a reproductive function. This in turn leads to the exclusion of same-sex couples from other rights related to family including transmission of property, adoption, giving birth through in vitro fertilization and gestational surrogacy.

In addition, legislation in Vietnam supports the binary classification of male and female. While transgender is seen to challenge the gender binary and there is also a discourse of *giới tính thứ ba* [the third gender] in Vietnamese culture, it is not legally recognised. Previously, transgendered people crossed the boundaries of nations to change their gender in another country and became alienated after returning. Now that the new regulation incorporates them back into the legal system, transgender people in Vietnam are expected to conform to the norm. Gender re-determination and sex reassignment surgery serve the purpose of 'fixing' the deviation. Once

being fixed as a 'normal' heterosexual person, they may benefit more from this perspective than their homosexual counterparts when it comes to marriage, surrogacy and adoption. As long as transgendered individuals do not challenge the heteronormative society and family values, they can be included in the legal and family system at the same time as same-sex marriage is excluded.

The anxiety of a potential threat to the reproductive function of the family, so to speak, places same-sex couples outside the boundary of the family. Despite reinforcing the gender binary, however, the *Civil Code* of 2015 allows transgendered persons to find their way back into the boundaries of the nation and also the family.

2.5 NGOs and international organisations in LGBT rights movements

The positive changes in Vietnamese legislation on LGBT issues are partly thanks to the LGBT rights movements initiated by Vietnamese NGOs and international organisations. As early as the 2000s, several NGOs targeting LGBT people were established in Hanoi including *Trung tâm Nghiên cứu và Ứng dụng khoa học về Giới, Gia đình, Phụ nữ và Vị thành niên* [Centre for Studies and Applied Sciences in Gender, Family, Women and Adolescents] (CSAGA) (2001), *Viện Nghiên cứu Phát triển Xã hội* [Institute of Social Development Studies] (ISDS) (2002) and *Trung tâm Sáng kiến Sức khỏe và Dân số* [Centre of Creative Initiatives in Health and Population] (CCIHP) (2008), focusing on the HIV issue. *Viện nghiên cứu Xã hội, Kinh tế và Môi trường* [Institute for Studies of Society, Economy and Environment] (iSEE) was established in 2007, targeting three main issues including ethnic minorities, LGBT and civil society. iSEE's activities are inclined toward academic research, policy advocacy and capacity building. In 2008, the Information Connecting and Sharing Centre (ICS) was founded out of iSEE's cooperation with four major Vietnamese LGBT websites (*Tình Yêu Trai Việt* [Viet Boys' Love], *Táo Xanh* [Green Apple], *Vườn Tình Nhân* [Couple Garden] and *Bạn Gái* [Girlfriends]) in Ho Chi Minh City. ICS has expanded the scope of its work to the LGBT rights movement through information sharing and job assistance services. In 2011, *Hội phụ huynh và người thân của người đồng tính, song tính và chuyển giới Việt Nam* [Parents, Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays Vietnam] (PFLAGVN) was established in Ho Chi Minh City by iSEE and ICS. It is a part of the international PFLAG [Parents, Family and Friends of Lesbians and Gays] and targets parents and friends of LGBT people. Currently, iSEE, ICS and PFLAGVN are the three main NGOs working specifically on LGBT issues in Vietnam.

Together, they have built up a network actively engaged in advocating for legal and social changes. In her study on VNGOs' activism, Newton (2012, p. 321) makes the criticism that the work of VNGOs on homosexuality privileges the male experience and excludes the lesbian (*les*) community. This may be the result of the initial work on HIV/AIDS prevention among the gay male community that laid the foundation for the contemporary LGBT rights movement activities. We can also note the prevalence of gay and male-to-female transgender representations in the media compared to other groups in the umbrella term 'LGBT'. The situation, however, has

changed in the past decade. There have been more and more groups and events which are inclusive of other groups such as lesbian, female-to-male transgender, and queer people.

With the support of these NGOs, many community groups have been founded such as NEXTGEN– a network of young leaders actively involved in the rights of LGBT people, the Vietnam LGBT Leadership Development Program (ViLead), NYNA (Nữ-yêu-nữ/Girl-love-girl Association), the LGBT Community Development Centre 6+, and Hanoi Queer. In addition to these projects, ICS also manages a network of Facebook fanpages including 'Cộng đồng LGBT' [LGBT community] in many provinces and cities, LGBT 24/7 and Trans Fun Facts, which communicates updated information related to LGBT from iSEE, ICS and PFLAG. All of these local groups coordinate with iSEE, ICS and PFLAGVN to organise LGBT celebration events on the national level such as Viet Pride, the International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia (IDAHOT), *Trường học cầu vồng* [Rainbow school] and information workshops on promoting LGBT rights.

Among the LGBT advocacy activities, Viet Pride is the most prominent annual celebration that occurs on a national scale. In 2012, the event was first organised in Hanoi in the movement for gender equality and sexual diversity in Vietnam with strong support from the Swedish Embassy in Hanoi. Since then, it has gradually spread to 35 cities and provinces throughout the country with a variety of activities including film festivals, bicycling, a pride parade, LGBT expo, art exhibitions, performances and so on. The funding for these kinds of activities comes from the private sector and various international donors including international human rights organisations and consulates of European, North and South American countries, especially the Swedish embassy. Under international influence, VNGOs have constructed LGBT culture and identities in Vietnam in a way that Newton (Newton 2012, p. 70) refers to as 'the NGO-ization of the global LGBT human rights movement'.

VNGOs act as a mediator between international and domestic LGBT movements. They lobby for law reform to gradually integrate sexual minority groups with the majority public. They also cross-national boundaries by participating in the globalising movement, introducing international Anglophone terminologies such as SOGI, translating, and shaping the terminologies that are now used in the Vietnamese LGBT community. Through the nation-wide LGBT movement activities, including awareness raising workshops and pride parades, VNGOs consolidate the LGBT community and identities.

It is worth noting that the VNGOs' activism is especially dynamic in the media in order to improve cultural representations of the LGBT community. As mentioned above, there have been a variety of activities and events such as film festivals, photograph exhibitions, pride parades, performances, celebrities engagement and TV shows. These cultural activities in the LGBT

counter-public[22] challenge the heteronormativity of cultural representations in the mainstream public sphere. At the same time, this points to the importance of cultural representations in the media and visibility in the claim of sexual citizenship in addition to political rights and the right to use public space. In the next chapter, I will analyse the cultural contexts for the development of media visibility of LGBT people in Vietnam.

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[22] Counterpublic is defined by Michael Warner as 'a scene in which a dominated group aspires to re-create itself as a public and, in doing so, finds itself in conflict not only with the dominant social group, but also with the norms that constitute the dominant culture as a public' (Warner 2002, p. 80).

Chapter 3: LGBT and queer identities and the understanding of gender and sexuality in Vietnam

In Chapter 2, I investigated the relationship between the changes in the legal context, sexual citizenship and public visibility of LGBT people in Vietnam. In the past decade, the Vietnamese government has considered and revised legislation to be more inclusive of LGBT citizens, although such changes were found to still reveal heteronormativity and binary systems of gender classification. Nevertheless, given the decriminalisation of same-sex wedding ceremonies in the *Law on Marriage and Family* of 2014 and the recognition of transgender individuals in the *Civil Code* of 2015, growing activism on LGBT issues in recent years such as queer wedding ceremonies, pride parades and pride festivals happening in public spaces have contributed to enhancing the visibility of the LGBT community in Vietnam. Such events fall in line with the progress in global LGBT movements to call for equal rights of members of the LGBT community and improve the images of LGBT people.

The impact of queer globalisation, however, is not confined to advances in the legislation related to LGBT people and social tolerance. It is further embraced in cultural adaptations of LGBT and queer identities. It is important to study these sexual and gender identities because they are closely tied to certain histories and particular ways of understanding the meaning of gender and sexuality. This chapter lays out an analysis of LGBT and queer terminology that are both vernacular and borrowed from foreign languages. I not only consider their definitions and meanings but also place them in a historical context to better understand how these terms represent the conceptions, ideologies and culture that the Vietnamese LGBT and queer community is shaping. The cultural context provided in this chapter will lay the foundation for the analysis of media texts in the following chapters.

Similar to the previous chapter, this chapter tracks LGBT and queer terminology in chronological order, starting with a study of vernacular queer terms. My discussion will then follow with an examination of global terms for sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) which were adopted from international NGO discourse by Vietnamese LGBT organisations and have been adopted by Vietnamese mainstream media and the LGBT community. In addition to the borrowed terms that are widely used internationally, I also consider a variety of terms adapted from the queer cultures of other Asian countries. This part of queer culture in Vietnam is imported through Japanese manga books, Chinese '*danmei*' [decadence] (boys love boys) fictions and *hallyu* ('Korean wave') popular culture. Overall, in this chapter, I will track popular LGBT and queer terms in Vietnam, how LGBT individuals connect to make a community, and how Asian queer cultures influence the imagination of Vietnamese queer culture.

3.1 Vernacular LGBT and queer terminologies in history

The system of sex and gender in Vietnam is broadly covered by the term *giới tính*, which features a combination of constructs including biological sex, social gender, sexual orientation and spiritual gender (Newton 2012, p. 179). Under this umbrella construct, queer terminology encompasses the conceptions and meanings of sex and gender identity in Vietnamese culture. I will discuss various constructs of sex and gender through the emergence and use of terms that refer to non-normative gender and sexual identities in the social and cultural context of Vietnam.

3.1.1 Spiritual queerness

Bóng is a local term, which has been widely used in the vernacular with many variants. The origin of this term is still in controversy. The most popular definition of *Bóng,* however, points to its roots in *hầu bóng* [being possessed by deities], which is a ritual in the folk religion called *Đạo Mẫu* [Mother Goddess] of Vietnam and some other countries (Heiman & Van Le 1975, pp. 93–94). *Hầu bóng* is a musical performance during which the performers, who are called *thanh đồng,* go into a trance and then incarnate different spirits. *Thanh đồng* can be either male or female but in general, they share the same characteristics of being vulnerable, inconsistent, fanciful and 'effeminate'. A mentally and in some cases physically weak person is perceived to be able to adapt to spiritual changes and thus to go into a trance easily. The *hầu bóng* rituals are heavily theatrical and usually involve transgressions of conventional gender norms such as cross-dressing. *Thanh đồng* often wear silky and showy costumes with heavy makeup and some men may wear long hair. Although the ritual *hầu đồng* was popular in Vietnam, under the influence of ideas of Western progress in the early 20th century, this practice has been seen as vulgar, superstitious and outdated (Vinh 1998, p. 4). Over time, *bóng* became a disparaging term used to refer to cross-dressers and effeminate men, whose appearance and behaviour does not conform to gender norms. In this sense, *bóng* signifies the spirit that will be incarnated in the body. Later on, the homosexual slang term *bóng* came to refer specifically to men who have sex with men (MSM) including gay and male-to-female (MTF) transgender people. It can also be an adjective, meaning 'gay' or 'homosexual'.

Besides the meaning 'spirit', *bóng* has another interpretation as 'shadow', which refers to the dark and hidden side of a subject. This meaning is close to the metaphor of the closet in Anglophone culture. Those who hide their 'true' spirit (a woman's spirit inside a man's body) and remain in the dark are called *bóng kín* (closeted). Those who reveal their hidden sides, such as cross-dressing or acting against dominant gender norms, are called *bóng lộ* (exposed). *Bóng* often appears in combination with other adjectives as listed in the table below. These slang terms were synthesised by a male-to-female transgender person Cherry Minh Ngoc in her Youtube video on the categorisation of different *bóng* people. These combinations reveal a variety of statuses (open/closeted), sexual orientations and gender expressions, personalities and demography including age, location and occupation of the MSM called *bóng*. Although not all of the listed terms are confirmed to be widely used by people in the LGBT community, *bóng kín, bóng lộ,*

bóng nửa mùa, bóng mén, bóng già are some prevalent terms that were reported in previous studies on Vietnamese homosexuality (Ngo et al. 2009, pp. 4–5; Tran 2014, p. 21).

Table 1 The categorisation of *Bóng*

Term	Translation	Meaning
Sexual orientation and gender expression		
bóng kín	closed shadow	closeted MSM
bóng lộ	exposed shadow	open MSM
bóng nửa mùa	half-baked shadow	MSM who was gay but settles down in marriage later
bóng lén	sneaky shadow	married and closeted MSM
bóng thời vụ	seasonal shadow	bisexual MSM
bóng bùng binh	rotary shadow	versatile MSM
bóng muộn	late shadow	MSM who recognises their sexual orientation at later stage in life
bóng bẩm sinh	innate shadow	innate MSM
Age		
bóng mén/bóng nhi đồng	young shadow/kiddy shadow	teenager MSM
bóng già	old shadow	middle age MSM
Characteristic		
bóng thời sự	news shadow	talkative MSM
bóng tập đoàn	shadow group	MSM group
bóng chúa	queen shadow	queen MSM
bóng đại lý	shadow agent	a family with homosexual siblings
bóng xà bang	chaotic shadow	problematic MSM
bóng tệ nạn	evil shadow	MSM who is involved in drugs
bóng cơ bắp	muscular shadow	sportive MSM
Location		
bóng Hanoi/Saigon/Soc Trang/Bien Hoa	Hanoi/Saigon/Soc Trang/Bien Hoa shadow	MSM who lives in Hanoi/Saigon/Soc Trang/Bien Hoa
bóng tỉnh lẻ	rural shadow	MSM who lives in a rural area
bóng biển	sea shadow	MSM who lives in seaside regions

bóng cao nguyên	highland shadow	MSM who lives in mountainous regions
Occupation		
bóng đám ma	funeral shadow	MSM who sings at funerals
bóng đại gia	wealthy shadow	MSM who works as a real estate broker
bóng văn phòng	office shadow	MSM who works in an office

Source: *Phân loại bóng (Full trọn bộ)* [Shadow categorisation (Full version)] (Cherry Minh Ngoc 2015)

In Vietnamese *bóng* also means 'balloon', 'bubble', 'ball' and 'shiny'. 'Balloon' and 'bubble' are sometimes used to represent the vulnerability of the MSM. A variant of *bóng* in this meaning is the term *bể bóng* [popping balloon/bubble], which refers to being discovered to be homosexual or 'outed'. *Bóng* also carries the meaning 'shiny' to illustrate the flashy and gaudy appearance of *bóng lộ* [open MSMs], who act or dress like women and want to attract attention.

Overall, *bóng* has quite a wide range of interpretations, including the 'dark' and spiritual side in the meaning of 'shadow/spirit', the fragile characteristic of a 'balloon' and the showy side in the meaning of 'shiny'. The great deal of variants of this term suggests that it is popular in the LGBT community. It is used to disclose the concerns of MSM when looking for a partner such as sexual orientation, age, occupation and location. Also in the above-listed senses, *bóng* is associated with the stereotypical portrayals of homosexual men and their gender expressions.

3.1.2 The legacy of the French colonial period

Another popular term covering the MSM community is *pê-đê/bê-đê*. This term originates from the French borrowed term 'pédérastie', which refers to a homosexual relationship between an adult male and an adolescent male. This kind of relationship was prevalent during the French colonial period in Vietnam when adolescent male prostitutes worked in the pubs and opium dens serving French and Chinese customers (Pastoetter 2004, pp. 1349–1350). In the 1898 Annamite-French dictionary, *pédérastie* or *sodomie* is the translation of the Vietnamese word 'nam sắc', which means male pleasure (Tran 2011, pp. 52–53).

The adapted term in Vietnamese *pê-đê* is reported to be first used by the overseas Vietnamese community from the late 1960s to the mid-1970s (Tran 2011, p. 79). It was then found in a four-part series of reportages titled '*Tình Pêđê*' [Pede Love] published on Ho Chi Minh City's Công An News (Public Security News) during the Renovation period in 1987 in Vietnam for the first time (Tran 2011, p. 79). This reportage explained that *pêđê* was a shortened form of the term 'pederasty', which refers to 'unnatural [sic] relationships between a man and boy or another man' (Tran 2011, p. 79). The article reported the phenomenon of *pê đê* as a widespread infectious disease. In addition, it also introduced the notion of *pêđê thật* (real pêđê) and *pêđê dởm* (fake pêđê). 'Real pêđê' are truly ill ones while 'fake pêđê' are those who pretend to be of the opposite sex (womanlike man or manlike woman).

Similar to *pê-đê*, *ô-môi* also has a French origin but is a slang term used to refer to homosexual women. It is a shortened form of the French feminine noun 'homosexuelle'. There is also a claim that the term originated from a tropical fruit '*quả ô-môi*' in Vietnam as the way it is consumed resembles the act of cunnilingus (Masequesmay 2003, p. 200). This term is also popular among the overseas Vietnamese community to refer to women who act like men. Like *pê-đê*, *ô-môi* is also categorised as being 'real' and 'fake'. Regardless of being 'real' or 'fake', the implication of the term *pêđê/ô-môi* is the gender inversion within a binary and heterosexual regime (Tran 2011, pp. 79–80).

In a study of the print media in Vietnam on the issue of homosexuality, Tran (2011, pp. 86–97) reported that representations of *pêđê/ô-môi* in both non-fiction and fiction are closely associated with crimes and unhealthy lifestyles such as deception, stealing, robbery and murder. Such representations shape social contempt for the *pêđê/ô-môi* individuals and the term *pêđê/ô-môi* is thus commonly understood as a derogatory reference to non-heterosexual individuals.

Over time, the *pê-đê* has developed several variants for the convenience of the Vietnamese language. Some variants include *bê-đê*, *B.D.*, *3D* (the Vietnamese pronunciation of number three is 'bah', which resembles the world 'beh' in beh-deh (bê đê)), and most recently *buê-đuê* (an intentional spoonerism of *bê-đê*). Besides the variation in writing and pronunciation, the variants are interestingly accompanied by shifting meaning. At the end of 2014, a community page 'Tumblr Buê Đuê' with LGBT-related funny content such as memes and jokes was established on the social platform Tumblr. Since then, the term *buê-đuê* has been widely disseminated among social networking sites, especially among young users. Buê-đuê can be understood as a way for LGBT and queer people to make fun of themselves by embracing the stereotypes associated with non-normative forms of gender and sexuality. Thanks to the positive widespread use of the term *buê-đuê*, members of the LGBT community are able to turn what was a demeaning term *pê-đê* to a tool for them to liberate and empower themselves. This phenomenon is similar to the embrace of the term 'queer' in Anglophone contexts.

3.1.3 Gender binary

Some terms were created based on a gender binary by placing homosexuality and transgender in a spectrum of sexuality and gender. This view includes such terms as *bán nam bán nữ/ái nam ái nữ* [half man, half woman], *xăng pha nhớt* [petrol mixed with oil], *hifi* [stereo], *hai thì* [two cycle (engine)], *tám vía* [eight souls] (there is a belief in Vietnamese culture that a man has seven souls while a woman has nine souls) (Nguyen & Dash 2009, p. 137) and *lại cái* [womanlike] (Newton 2015, p. 256). In the Vietnamese dictionary, the term *ái nam ái nữ* is explained to 'have the genitals that are neither male nor female' (Phê 2013, p. 4). This description is close to the term 'intersex' in English, which refers to those who were born with such atypical features. Another interpretation of this term is 'love man, love woman', as *ái* also means 'love'. Overall, this term and other terms have been used to refer to individuals with non-conforming gender or sexual orientation.

In the same vein, the term *giới tính thứ ba/thế giới thứ ba* [the third gender/the third world], which places queer individuals outside the binary system of gender and sexuality, is also prevalent in Vietnamese society. If the term 'Third World' in English is understood to indicate economically developing countries, the term *giới tính thứ ba/thế giới thứ ba* [the third gender/the third world] can also be understood as an underpriviledged or marginalised group of genders and sexualities, with the first world being male and the second world being female. As mentioned in the early part of this chapter, the Vietnamese term *giới tính* broadly intertwines biological sex, social gender, sexual orientation, and spiritual or karmic gender.[23] Thus, the term *giới tính thứ ba* [the third gender] is widely known as an umbrella term to include all of the queerness in gender and sexuality for many people.

Giới tính thứ ba/thế giới thứ ba [the third gender/the third world] is widely used both in mainstream media and among members of the LGBT community to refer to themselves. In a recent popular TV game show Người *ấy là ai?* (Who is Single?) in 2018, the phrase *giới tính thứ 3* [the third gender] has provoked controversy over the term being used as a label. In this game show, five male players each appear on the stage and provide a brief self-introduction via a short video clip. Then the judge members and audience will help the only female player to pick the right guy by guessing which male players are 'single', 'in a relationship', or 'the third gender'. While some people find the term conveys a sense of belonging to the LGBT community, other people are concerned about the exclusion and marginalisation of non-heterosexual people. This is especially true when Vietnamese LGBT organisations are making an effort to destigmatise and assimilate LGBT individuals into mainstream society.

In some cases, *thế giới thứ ba* can be used to specify transgenders only. This meaning emerges from a website called *Thế giới thứ 3* (thegioithuba.com) established in 2005 for MSM including gay and MTF transgender people. At first, the website came from pre-existing terminology *thế giới thứ 3* [the third gender] as a forum for all LGBT individuals but later the high visibility of *bóng lộ* [open shadow] makes many people think that Thegioithu3 is MTF transgender exclusive (Pham, Le & Mai 2012, p. 24). This website is no longer accessible but during its operation the website hosted many performances, beauty contests and talent shows where the majority of the participants were transgendered. Because of the emergence of specialist gay websites such as *Táo xanh* [Green Apple] the number of gay members in *Thế giới thứ 3* has gradually decreased. Later on, it was dominated by transgender members and the MSM community use the term *thế giới thứ 3* to indicate transgender people (Pham, Le & Mai 2012, p. 24). Most of the time, *thế giới thứ ba* or *giới tính thứ ba* still has broad coverage, separating the LGBT community from the heterosexual and gender binary society.

Existing vernacular terms are regarded as informal and disrespectful terms by LGBT advocacy organisations, which aim to introduce more formal terms that can be used in the media (iSEE

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[23] Refer to the previous part of the definition of bóng (shadow) above.

2010, pp. 20–21). Thus, the use of these terms has been limited in newspapers or on television. Instead, a new set of terms borrowed from English has been promoted in line with advocacy for LGBT rights. The language changes happen in accordance with changes in social perceptions of LGBT. They also shape new identities for the LGBT community.

3.2 Internationally accepted terms introduced by VNGOs

VNGOs promote the use of the international vocabulary 'SOGI' (sexual orientation and gender identity) and 'LGBT' (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender) in their agendas. These terms are translated into Vietnamese with descriptions in information and training materials and are labelled as non-discriminatory in contrast to the discriminatory vernacular terms discussed above (iSEE 2010, pp. 20–21). In addition, various websites and forums for LGBT people in Vietnam also play an important role in popularising these notions. The appearance of SOGI and LGBT in social movements does not only destigmatise social perceptions of LGBT people but also changes the way LGBT people behave and treat others and themselves (Newton 2015, pp. 263–264).

3.2.1 Separation of transgender

The concepts of *xu hướng tính dục* [sexual orientation] and *bản dạng giới* [gender identity] are different from the existing identity constructs in Vietnam, which focus on the term *giới tính* [sex/gender]. Newton (2012, p. 384) found that *giới tính* is used with a wide range of meanings including social gender (man/woman), biological sex (male/female), sexual orientation (homosexual/heterosexual/bisexual) and even sub-categories of homosexuality (B/SB/Fem). *Giới tính* is binary and thus any deviation from the two extremes falls in between or *giới tính thứ ba/thế giới thứ ba* [the third gender/the third world]. There is no differentiation between homosexual and transgender. Instead, transgender is considered an extreme form of homosexuality (UNDP & USAID 2014, p. 12).

SOGI reconstructs identities by offering two aspects, sexual relationship with another person and self-expression. Based on this foundation, LGBT and additional terms such as intersex, asexual, pansexual and queer are generated. As a result, transgender is separated from both the gay and lesbian categories. For instance, instead of gathering as a big community, many members separated from the website *Thegioithu3* [The third world], which was intended for MSM, to establish forums exclusively for gay members such as *taoxanh* [Green Apple], *vuontinhnhan* [Couple Garden], *theboy*, *tinhyeutraiviet* [Viet boys' love], and *ngaytho* [Innocent]. Before the introduction of LesKing – a website meant for FTM (female to male) and lesbian people – in September 2010, the concept of 'trans guy' had not yet appeared (Pham, Le & Mai 2012, pp. 24–25). The reconstruction of identity has provided LGBT people with more dimensions to explore their own identities.

3.2.2 Sexual role division

Within the categorisation of gay and lesbian is the gender system, which consists of *top* and *bot* [bottom] for gay males, and *B* [butch], *SB* [soft butch] and *fem* [femme] for lesbians, *Top* men and *B* women play an active role and express masculinity while *bot* men and *fem* women play a passive role and embrace femininity in a romantic relationship. *SB* women are described as being in the middle of the gender presentation range, who usually date another *SB* or *fem* woman. Newton (2012, p. 426) argues that the gender system is a continuum with the subcategories placed along the two extremes and that there is a match of masculinity and femininity in a relationship. There is a shift from the gender system of man/woman to another gender system with *top/bot* and *B/SB/fem*. These systems, however, still maintain the binary of masculinity and femininity to strike the balance of romantic and sexual roles.

3.2.3 Queer

Compared to other English borrowed terms, the adoption of the term *queer* is relatively more recent. In general, 'queer' is the umbrella term to indicate all non-heterosexual individuals, and may also have the meaning of being 'abnormal' to social norms. In Vietnam, the first appearance of the term *queer* is recorded in a book called *Culture, Society and Sexuality* by Parker and Aggleton (1999, p. 97), which was translated into Vietnamese and published by the Centre for Creative Initiatives for Health and Population (CCIHP) in August 2013. CCIHP also sponsored an event called 'Queer Forever!' in December 2013 to introduce artworks of Vietnamese and international artists. Established in 2016, the Queer Vietnamese Film Festival (QVFF) celebrates independent films created by the LGBTQ Vietnamese community. Hanoi International Queer Film Week was founded in 2017 and has become an annual film festival to bring stories of the queer community to people in Hanoi.

In recent years, the term *queer* has started to be adopted by the Vietnamese LGBT community. Some Facebook social groups such as Hanoi Queer, Quận Queer [Queer District] and Vietnamese Queer Culture have been operating actively and have brought deeper knowledge of gender and sexuality concerning the LGBT and queer community to their members. Although there is not an equivalent translation of the term *queer* in Vietnamese, it has been used to indicate a variety of sexual orientations and gender identities in an effort to tackle the gender binary and honour gender and sexual diversity.

3.3 The Influence of neighbouring cultures in Asia on Vietnamese popular culture

There is limited literature on the importation of Japanese and Chinese subcultures into Vietnam through manga, anime and *đam mỹ* [danmei/decadence] fictions. These subcultures have entered

Vietnam as a result of globalisation since the *Đổi Mới*[24] [Renovation] era in 1986. With the significant growth of the Internet during the past decades, Vietnamese readers are getting greater access to these sources through web forums and social networks. In this section I will discuss the three subcultures that are interrelated, Japanese Boys' Love, Girls' Love and Chinese *danmei* subcultures which are influencing homosexual subcultures in Vietnam.

3.3.1 The flow of Boys' Love and Girls' Love subcultures as commodities

In the early 21st century, manga and anime are made available and popular in Vietnam through both authorised publishers such as Kim Dong Publisher and illegal translation and publishing. Together with mainstream content, the Boys' Love (BL) and Girls' Love (GL) novels and manga and their associated subcultures were quickly received by Vietnamese teenagers. BL is a type of manga largely created by female authors targeting women and the plots revolve around gay male relationships. Parallel to BL, Girls' Love (GL) is a type of literature that illustrates the relationships between girls.

Japanese homosexual subcultures have traveled to China since the late 1990s and the most popular term to refer to Boys' Love fiction in China is *danmei* [耽美] (Williams 2015, p. 1). *Danmei* is a Mandarin pronunciation of the Japanese term *tanbi*, meaning 'indulgence in beauty' or 'decadence'. *Danmei* spread to Vietnam in the form of fiction or films and is called *đam mỹ* (the Vietnamese pronunciation of 耽美). Similarly, GL which is sometimes known as *Yuri* [百合] in Japanese turns to *baihe* (using the same ideographs) in China and is known as *bách hợp* in Vietnam. *Đam mỹ/bách hợp*'s main characters are classified as *công* [seme/攻/top] and *thụ* [uke/ 受/bottom]. There is also a term *hỗ công* [seke/攻互/reversible] for people who can switch between top and bottom sexual roles. There is also a match of active and passive (seme x uke) in a typical relationship featured in *đam mỹ/bách hợp* fictions. Due to the availability of a transcription system of Chinese characters in Vietnamese, a wide range of terms to describe backgrounds, characters, relationships and plots come directly from *đam mỹ/bách hợp* fictions compared to limited terms imported from Japan. Chinese *danmei* subculture is the medium for the spread of Japanese Boys' Love and Girls' Love in Vietnam.

The flow of Boys' Love and Girls' Love subcultures also forms a special group of consumers as *hủ nữ* [腐女/腐女子/fujoshi/rotten woman] and *hủ nam* [腐男/腐男子/fudanshi/rotten man]. *Hủ nữ* and *hủ nam* refer to female and male fans of Boys' Love (BL) and Girl's Love (GL). The Vietnamese terms are adapted from Chinese terms *funü* [腐女] and *funan* [腐男]. Again, these Chinese terms are rooted from the Japanese term 腐女子 (fujoshi, 'rotten woman') which sounds like the Japanese term fujoshi 婦女子 (fujoshi, woman) and 腐男子 (fudanshi, 'rotten man'). At

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[24] The *Đổi mới* [renovation] policy was introduced by the Vietnamese government in 1986 with the goal of creating a 'socialist-oriented market economy'. As Vietnam opened its doors to the world's commodities, products and images of sexuality, it has undergone rapid societal changes (Rydstrøm 2006, p. 283).

first, the term *fujoshi* was used for female fans of BL and *Yaoi*,[25] but later it has expanded to cover *otaku*[26] women generally (Aoyama 2009, p. 8). The discourse on *fujoshi* culture explains that the consumption of *Yaoi* allows females to explore sexuality in a freer and safer way. *Fujoshi* can 'play sexuality', change their viewpoint from passive to active and overcome the restrictions of conventional gender roles through homoerotic fantasies (Aoyama 2009, p. 15). As they mature and assume the roles of a spouse or a mother, they are deemed to 'graduate' from the genre (Williams 2015, pp. 20–21).

Over the past decade, the *BL* subculture and *fujoshi* discourse have increased in popularity among Vietnamese fans with many discussions on forums and social media. As the access to the Internet is getting easier nowadays, BL products have become more available to Vietnamese readers. Especially, the genre *danmei*, which is Chinese gay fiction and is translated into Vietnamese, is available both online and in print. The pervasiveness of *danmei* fiction, however, has been challenged by Vietnamese governing bodies.

3.3.2 The outlawing of Chinese fiction

In recent years, modern Chinese fiction has emerged into the Vietnamese market. Chinese fiction is not only popular among readers but has also influenced emerging young Vietnamese writers despite growing concerns about its low quality (Mi Ly 2015). Chinese fiction is criticised by the Vietnamese Publishing and Printing Department as 'having commonplace, useless, even vulgar, offensive contents' (Thời báo Ngân Hàng [Bank Times] 2015). Many Chinese romantic novels were found to contain 'deviant' and 'immoral' content such as explicit sex scenes, premarital intercourse, incest, homosexuality, rape, and polygamy (Tran 2017). The target market of these novels is young females, who are thought to be easily influenced to absorb a decadent lifestyle. According to the authorities, erotic scenes and gay themes depicted in these fictions are regarded as morally objectionable, which might fuel erroneous notions of love (Toppa 2015).

The increasing popularity of Chinese fiction in Vietnam has resulted in changes in policies to control this type of product. In 2015, the Vietnamese Publishing and Printing Department (2015) issued a temporary ban on Chinese novels in *Document 2116/CXBIPH-QLXB*[27] dated 16 April 2015. This document requires publishers 'not to register for the publication of romantic and gay themes' and 'to consider buying the copyright, translating and publishing the publications that have healthy contents and conform to the Vietnamese pure tradition and beautiful customs'. On 13

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[25] *Yaoi* is used for various types of fantasy on male homosexuality. It emphasizes that the plots contain purely sex scenes between young male characters (McLelland & Yoo 2007, p. 10).

[26] *Otaku* is a sometimes derogatory term for people who have obsessive interests in manga, anime and video games (Galbraith 2019, p. 8).

[27] Công văn số *2116/CXBIPH-QLXB* ngày 16/4/2015 về việc rà soát và biên tập kỹ nội dung xuất bản phẩm ngôn tình, đam mỹ [*Document 2116/CXBIPH-QLXB* dated 16 April 2015 regarding the review and editting with caution of romance and *danmei* publications].

January 2017, an official ban was implemented (Kim Cang 2017). The main reason given is that the content of Chinese fiction is deemed to be unsuitable for Vietnamese habits and customs.

While national media promote the outlawing of Chinese fiction, this has encountered the reaction of readers. A poll conducted by the online newspaper *Văn hoá & Thể thao* [Culture & Sports] (2015) found that 70 per cent of respondents (63,649 votes) supported the unregulated publishing of these fictions like before. Twenty four per cent of respondents thought that Chinese romantic fiction should be totally banned. Three per cent of respondents suggested that such publications should not be banned but needed stronger regulation. Only one per cent of the readers agreed that Chinese fiction should be banned temporarily before appropriate regulations are issued. The poll reveals that the majority of readers who responded to the survey in *Văn hoá & Thể thao* are in favour of this genre of Chinese fiction. Some stated that published *đam mỹ* in Vietnam have actually helped reduce discrimination against homosexuality. As a matter of fact, although the publishing of these fictions has been suppressed to filter out so-called 'poisonous' products, they are still widely available online and well received by Vietnamese readers.

In conclusion, as part of globalisation, queer cultures including *Yaoi/Yuri* and *fujoshi* have travelled around East Asian countries. On the pathway to Vietnam, China has acted as an important gateway, where the ideas of *đam mỹ* were picked up directly from Chinese terms and integrated into popular Chinese romance fiction. Concerns have been raised about literature embodying foreign influence. It is charged that such literature has a negative impact on young readers and should thus be subject to restriction by the authorities. The regulation of Chinese literature aims to preserve the purity of 'traditional' moral values from the 'pollution' of foreign ideas.

The importation of international queer culture has introduced a set of queer terminologies and has shaped queer culture in the destination countries. The consumption of Boys' Love and Girls' Love subcultures allows readers to explore sexuality and escape gender and sexual norms. In addition, homosexual relationships depicted in the fiction provide readers with more insight into homosexuality, not only from the sexual but also from romantic aspects. This has contributed to changes in the contemporary public perceptions of the LGBT issue in Vietnam.

3.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have highlighted a variety of terms used to indicate non-normative forms of gender and sexuality in Vietnam. I placed these terms in historical context to better understand the meanings that they convey and the shifting discourses of gender and sexuality over time. It can be said that the glossary of LGBT terms has become more and more diverse with borrowed terms in addition to vernacular terms. This reveals the increase in accurate knowledge and information on the LGBT community, respect for gender and sexuality diversity as well as the enhanced visibility of LGBT cultural representations. Furthermore, the embrace of terms which were deemed derogatory in the past such as *pê-đê* points to the significant development of LGBT movements in

Vietnam to boost the pride and positive images of the LGBT community. The adaptation of queer subcultures from neighbouring countries also plays an important role in improving knowledge of LGBT identities. At the same time, Vietnamese authorities' censorship of these new cultures and the backlash of readers indicate existing gaps in the adoption of LGBT cultures in Vietnamese society.

Chapter 4: Imaginaries of LGBT people

In 2014, the blockbuster film *Để Hội Tính* [Let Hoi Decide] (Nguyen, C 2014) featuring a gay man was released. It soon broke office records for a domestic film with 3.85 million US dollars' worth of ticket sales within three weeks (Rosen 2015). *Để Hội Tính*, also known as *Để Mai Tính 2* [Fool for Love 2] is the sequel to the box office record-breaking film in 2010 *Để Mai Tính* [Fool for love] (Nguyen, C 2010). The flamboyant gay man Phạm Hường Hội is a supporting character in *Để Mai Tính* and is featured as the protagonist in the sequel. The success of *Để Hội Tính*, however, triggered an acrimonious debate about the way it represented gay people. The facebook page *Tôi Đồng Ý* [I do] which was administered by Information, Connecting and Sharing (ICS) Centre, an LGBT advocacy NGO in Vietnam, launched a campaign to boycott the film for reinforcing negative stereotypes of LGBT people (Megson 2015). The leader of the campaign, Luong The Huy, explained that,

> [t]here are usually only two scenarios [in Vietnamese films]: sad, unhappy and closeted gay or trans people; or feminine and sexually outgoing gay or trans people. As a result, lots of Vietnamese filmgoers see all LGBT people in the image of Pham Huong Hoi: funny, flashy, desperate for love and often in an unhappy relationship (Megson 2015).

The debate then raised the question of how LGBT people have been portrayed in Vietnamese media. In Chapter 3, I reviewed the social and cultural meanings of queer terms in Vietnam and the classification of them into 'positive' and 'negative'. In this chapter, I will study the process of representing homosexual people in Vietnamese popular visual media, which includes films and series over the past decade. This dates from the earliest film released in 2004 until the time of writing, which is the end of 2021. First, I consider relevant theories for the study of media representations. In Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 I provide close readings of selected films and outline patterns in the representation of homosexual people in Vietnam. In Chapter 6, I will discuss the emergence of independent films and series created by LGBT people and circulated through the Youtube platform, a social media channel which displays the diversity of media representation.

4.1 Media visibility and the politics of sexual identities

In recent years, there have been a growing number of texts that feature LGBT individuals and make them more visible in mainstream media. It is important to study media visibility because visibility is an important form of social and political recognition of minority groups. Walters (2003, p. 13) emphasises the importance of visibility in movements for inclusion and social change. She mentions that, '[w]e come to know ourselves and to be known by others through the images and stories of popular culture' (Walters 2003, p. 13). Media representations are sites where LGBT people explore, recognise and form their identities (Hilton-Morrow & Battles 2015, p. 77). Gerbner and Gross (1976, p. 182) introduced the concept of symbolic annihilation, which argues that the absence of representations or negative representations in the fictional world signifies

social impotence. The absence or limited images of LGBT individuals in the media signifies that they are either non-existent or inferior to their heterosexual counterparts. In other words, invisibility keeps marginalised groups at the bottom of the power hierarchy.

When little is known of a minority group, mainstream media then functions to cultivate the images of the group. Media representations construct what the audience, both LGBT people and heterosexual people, understands about LGBT identities. In order to study media representations of minority groups, Clark (1969, p. 20) proposed four stages of representations of ethnic minorities on US television with a progression from 'non-recognition', 'ridicule', 'regulation' to the final stage of 'respect'. 'Non-recognition' means that the group is invisible on television. 'Ridicule' means being portrayed as ridiculous and laughable in a stereotypical way. 'Regulation' means that the minority group is represented in positions associated with the maintenance of law and order such as police officers, nurses or military personnel. 'Respect' is the stage when the minority group is woven into daily life including interacting with children and having romantic relationships. Fitzgerald (2010, p. 380) argues, however, that representations of marginalised social groups do not necessarily follow a linear progression and that the representation of some groups might even revert to a previous stage before moving on to the next stage. While Clark's theory originally portrayed how the social system of power is used against members of racialised minority groups in the US, this theory can also be applied to members of sexual minorities in order to understand the workings of the sex and gender system in other societies (Siebler 2010, pp. 325–326). This allows me to frame a hypothesis that representations of LGBT people in Vietnam follow a similar pattern in moving from 'non-recognition' to 'respect', in the context of rising LGBT social movements and globalisation.

Another approach to studying representation is through the three periods devised by Berry (1980, p. 238) including (1) Stereotypic Age, (2) New Awareness, and (3) Stabilisation, based on the portrayal of African Americans on television in the US. In the Stereotypic Age, African Americans are characterised in stereotypical roles. In the New Awareness period, African Americans appear in supporting or sometimes leading roles with positive qualities. In the Stabilisation period, African American characters' portrayals are more realistic and diverse in their personal problems and lives. Raley and Lucas (2006, pp. 24–27) applied both Clark and Berry's models to assess portrayals of gay and lesbian characters in American TV shows. They conducted content analysis of nine prime-time TV shows and employed a quantitative method to detect a variety of indicators such as the number of bisexual characters on TV for 'non-representation', gay-themed jokes for the 'ridicule' stage/'stereotypic' period, interaction with children and having romantic relationships for the 'regulation' and 'respect' stage and the 'new awareness' period in combination (Raley & Lucas 2006, pp. 24–27). The third period of Berry's framework is measured by the appearance of gay and lesbian characters as the sole focus of the programme (Raley & Lucas 2006, p. 27). In my study, however, I refrain from using quantitative methods because of the unique nature of movies and the small number of LGBT-made web series as opposed to TV shows. Nevertheless, by providing a close reading of a small number of movies

and series in the social context of Vietnamese media, this chapter will consider whether representations fit in the proposed periods/stages based on the themes found in the movies and series. At the same time, I will investigate the relationship between positive representations and greater social and political acceptance of LGBT individuals.

The models/frameworks outlined above were established in the Anglo-American cultural framework. It, however, remains a question of whether these models fit in cultures and societies with distinctive political and social systems and understandings of gender and sexuality. For example, it would be naive to simply assume that same-sex marriage and a public wedding ceremony form a happy ending for members of the LGBT communities in different parts of the world and represent social progression. This is because the ideas of sex and gender, marriage, wedding and family are interwoven and might be viewed differently in different cultures. The process of globalisation has undeniably exercised influence on the images of queer sexualities and cultures in the worldwide mediascape through the commodification and consumption of queerness (Cruz-Malavé & Manalansan 2002, p. 1). Cruz-Malavé and Manalansan (2002, p. 6), however, point out that globalisation does not equate with Westernising cultural homogenisation, given the rapid growth of gay networks in Asia and other non-Western regions. Peter Jackson's study of queer in Thailand corroborates this idea by showing the development of Thai vernacular queer culture supported by the emergence of vernacular print and electronic media and urban middle-class political and cultural ideas (Jackson 2011, p. 8; see also Jackson 1997). Bangkok queer culture was found to be much more influenced by Asian queer cultures than Western cultures (Jackson 2011, p. 196). In other words, local cultures are subject to the influence of various sources such as neighbouring countries and not only from dominant Anglophone cultures.

The circulation of media products across different cultures is one factor that promotes such influences. Iwabuchi (2001, p. 73) referred to the notion of 'cultural proximity' to explain the success of Japanese TV dramas over American programs in neighbouring countries such as Taiwan. According to Iwabuchi, it is the sense of coevalness, or sharing and living at the same time, that has enabled Japanese TV dramas to be able to 'offer their fans a concrete model of what it is to be modern in East Asia, something which American popular cultures can never do' (Iwabuchi 2001, p. 73).

Chris Berry (2001, p. 213) points to significant differences in the representations of homosexuality between Anglo-American models and East-Asian models. He argues that there are two dominant ways of representing gay identity in East Asian cultures, which is either 'a problem within the networks of kinship obligations that constitute the family and bind the individual into it' or 'something lived in marginal spaces' (Berry 2001, p. 213). While Anglo-American mainstream films until recently typically defined gay identity as outside of the blood family, contemporary East Asian cultures prioritise family identity where gayness is registered and mapped. While in Anglo-American independent films by and for members of the queer communities, homosexuality tends to be located and defined by alternative communities, the East Asian equivalents tends to

locate and define homosexuality in a marginal space of isolation (Berry 2001, pp. 223–224). That is to say, for the Vietnamese context determined by the influence of Confucian values, homosexuality and the family are not separated but need to be considered within the framework of traditional family values including marriage, reproduction to continue the family lineage and filial piety.

In alignment with Berry's argument, Romit Dasgupta (2009, p. 17) touches on the fact that the relationship between queer and the family in Asia does not need to be one of binary opposition. Dasgupta presented some diverse family forms from visual culture where queer subjectivities and relationships can find expression within the confines of conventional family structures. He then suggested that in some circumstances such as legal and violent threats against homosexuality in many societies, queer individuals may find engaging with varying imaginings of the family to be better off than being exiled from it (Dasgupta 2009, p. 5). As such, these studies can enlighten the non-normative family configurations as represented in Vietnamese media.

The study of representations serves the purpose of understanding what meanings representation conveys. Dyer (1993, p. 1) argued that representation partly reflects the way that social groups are treated in real life such as 'poverty, harassment, self-hate and discrimination'. This, however, does not necessarily mean to seek truths and realities or to discuss positive or negative images in representations. Instead, representations function to reveal normative beliefs that may help to answer a range of questions. What images, narratives and languages are used to convey the meanings of homosexuality in Vietnamese movies and TV shows? Why are certain stereotypes of homosexual representations perceived as positive or negative? Is homosexuality treated as a problem and what solutions are proposed to the issue? How might the narratives of homosexual characters be told differently? These questions pose challenges to queer media studies by problematising the assumption of progressive linear chronological representations of homosexual people in the media. That is to say, before criticising 'negative' stereotypes and celebrating the 'positive' and 'normalised' appearance of homosexual people in Vietnamese movies and TV shows, we may need to take a step back and consider the cultural meanings that these representations have been conveying.

As I explore the patterns in media representations, the concept of framing is useful in studying the power of media texts. Entman (1993, p. 52) explains that:

> To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more
> salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem
> definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment
> recommendation for the item described.

Framing theory suggests that texts can include and highlight some bits of information and omit others in order to guide the audience's belief systems and affect their responses. The frames can include certain keywords, language, narratives and stereotyped images which reinforce certain facts or judgments. According to Edelman (1993, p. 232), ideology and prejudice are two main

factors that decide the choice of frames or categories. The study of frames thus can shed light on how media make use of these elements to tell stories that reflect dominant ideologies and cultural assumptions about a certain issue at a certain period of time.

Content analysis informed by the concept of frames can determine textual meaning by identifying frames and measuring the salience of pieces of information in the text. This is the method that I will rely on to study the representations of homosexual characters in movies and series in this chapter. I would like to consider how discourses of homosexuality at different stages reflect social perceptions and attitudes towards gender and sexuality. I build on Clark's model with reference to queer theory, framing theory and social constructivism to approach representation. I will employ the narrative approach to analyse the plots which pertain to the homosexual characters and their relationship to other characters in the narrative. Then I use a close reading of specific scenes of the films to reinforce the narrative approach. Specifically, I study the performances of the characters such as their dress codes, behaviour, manners and language to determine the frames in which the characters are constructed. Overall, the method will inform the hypothesis of the shift from invisibility to visibility of homosexual characters in movies and series and the progress within these representations.

4.2 Homosexuality in Vietnamese media

In chapter 3, I reviewed alternative terminologies on sexual identities in Vietnam and discussed the emergence of such terms as '*pede*' and *đồng tính luyến ái* in the French colonial period. It is not until the early 1990s or *Đổi Mới*[28] [Renovation] period in Vietnam that reports of homosexuality were found in cultural texts including sex education manuals and newspapers (Tran 2014, p. 8). Blanc (2005, p. 669) noted that the concept of homosexuality was not well established in Vietnam due to the rapidly changing homosexual patterns and practices which are yet to be fully captured in the Vietnamese language. She found that while homosexuality existed, only gay men who had sex in a passive way and lesbian women who had sex in an active way identified as homosexual. The study of queer terminology in Chapter 3 also points to the reference of homosexuality as the reversal of gender norms. Blanc thus pointed out that the understanding of homosexual identity as gender inversion leads to the invisibility of homosexuality in Vietnam (Blanc 2005, p. 664). Khuat, Le and Nguyen (1998, p. 297) agree with this view and further argue that the most important reason for the invisibility of homosexuality in Vietnam is that it does not attract the attention of the most influential religions in Vietnam including Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism. This contrasts with the fierce opposition from some versions of Christianity and Islam in some other countries. It is only recently when homosexuality has been more visible in Vietnam that social attitudes have become more pronounced towards homosexuality. Some people started to condemn homosexuality as against Confucian morality and family values. In fact, historical materials in Vietnam hardly touch on this phenomenon, possibly

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[28] Ibid.

not because of moral issues but because it was invisible back then (Khuat, Le & Nguyen 1998, p. 299).

Tran (2014, p. 8) suggests that the coverage of homosexuality in Vietnamese media in the 1990s could be related to Vietnam's 'open door' policy[29] in the Renovation period. Also, the emergence of the global HIV/AIDS epidemic during this period gave rise to anxieties about sex and sexuality. Men who have sex with men (MSM) were targeted in some HIV/AIDS prevention initiatives such as the Mid-Term Strategic Plan outlined by the National Committee on HIV/AIDS Prevention and Control in 2004 (Khuat, Le & Nguyen 2009, p. 117). Change in media institutions and content during this period also contributed to the visibility of homosexuality. Vietnamese cinema is quite a newly developed industry. Before the *Đổi Mới* era, most films were produced by the state to celebrate the heroism of the resistance against the French colonisers and then the US army (Vo 2008, p. 73). After *Đổi Mới,* in the early twenty-first century, Vietnamese commercial films started to thrive and more films were made to reflect the tastes and trends of urban movie-goers (Duong 2007, p. 166). Among the films and series featuring homosexuality in my archive, the earliest ones include the movie *Những cô gái chân dài* [Long-legged Girls] by director Vũ Ngọc Đãng (2004) and the series *Thế giới không đàn bà* [A World without Women] (Vu, MT 2004) (under the popular TV franchise *Cảnh sát hình sự* [Criminal Police], which was adapted from the prize-winning novel *Một Thế Giới Không Có Đàn Bà* [A World without Women] of Bùi Anh Tấn (2000). The fact that homosexual characters started to appear in films and TV series as well as being reported in newspaper articles in the post-renovation period shows that they have surpassed the 'non-representation' stage in Clark's model. Hypothetically, they would move onto the 'ridicule' stage or start the 'stereotypical age' in Berry's framework, which will be examined in the following section.

4.3 The 'otherness' of homosexuality

The two movies which I have chosen to study from the supposed 'ridicule' stage/'stereotypic' period are *Trai nhảy* [Bar Boys] (Le 2007) and *Để Mai Tính* [Fool for Love] (Nguyen, C 2010). Both movies are about a relationship between a local heterosexual working class man and a Vietnamese gay man returning from overseas (*Việt kiều*[30]). The relationships are carried out in exchange for material gain. The two movies were shot in Saigon, the most dynamic city in Vietnam and an ideal place for a clash between different classes and cultures. Both movies were released during the early era of commercial films in Vietnam and they share many similarities in

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[29] The 'open door' policy encourages the free market, which enables Vietnamese people to access information from outside Vietnam more easily. At the same time, concerns have been expressed about the incompatibility between foreign and domestic cultures. Anxieties about the influence of foreign cultures are essentialised in national campaigns against 'social evils' which refer to behaviours that are deemed immoral such as gambling, alcoholism, drug abuse, prostitution and homosexuality. Tran (2014, p. 8) reported that Ho Chi Minh City's Policy kickstarted its coverage of Vietnam's open door policy by publishing an investigative report on homosexuality in 1987.

[30] *Việt kiều* is term used by domestic Vietnamese people to refer to ethnic Vietnamese who live overseas.

their plots. The similarities may suggest certain patterns of representation in films and TV shows during this period of time. Most importantly, gay characters in these movies fit perfectly in the two negative stereotypes prescribed by some Vietnamese groups as quoted from the beginning of this chapter: 'sad, unhappy and closeted gay or trans people; or feminine and sexually outgoing gay or trans people' (Megson 2015). The stereotypes communicated to the public through media will provide insights into the patterns of representation which shape social perceptions of homosexuality in Vietnam.

In *Bar Boys* and *Fool for Love*, the gay characters are among the characters but not the main protagonists. The stories are told from the perspective of the protagonists, who are single heterosexual Vietnamese men. Tuấn in *Bar Boys* strives to make ends meet by working as a street masseur every night. He has a crush on a girl who passes by his house every morning to sell *chè đậu* [sweet bean soup]. They usually flirt when Tuấn buys her soup. Tuấn says to her that he wants to eat her soup for the rest of his life. Dũng in *Fool for Love* is a rest-room attendant at a five-star hotel, coming from a similar working class background to Tuấn. He falls head over heels for Mai, a girl whom he happens to meet while cleaning the female rest room to cover for a female co-worker who got sick. He then follows her taxi to a bar where they chat, drink, dance and finally kiss on the way home. When his co-worker tells him that Mai broke up with her boyfriend and left the hotel to go to the coastal city of Nha Trang, he quits his job at the hotel and catches the coach to Nha Trang to find her. The narratives show that the protagonists in these two movies both demonstrate a clear sexual desire towards a person of their opposite sex.

Tuấn and Dũng's economic and social positions, however, prevent each of them from pursuing the girl of their dreams. Tuấn uses his hard-earned money to generously buy many serves of her sweet soup. He tries to impress her by lying that he works as a doctor at a rehabilitation centre, which ironically relates to his job as a street masseur. Other than that, he cannot proceed any further in the relationship. His massage job is so low-paid that he sometimes can only afford to buy a bread roll without meat for dinner. Similarly, Dũng confides his frustration to his co-worker that only rich men can get a girl like Mai. His co-worker bluntly tells Dũng that he is in no way compatible with her. In patriarchal Vietnamese society influenced by Confucian beliefs, the economic burden is usually placed on males. The male head of a family is metaphorically referred to as 'the pillar of the household' or the primary breadwinner of the family. Thus the heterosexual protagonists' economic situations pose challenges to their masculine identity and their chance of getting the girl they want. The first turning point of the movies is then introduced when the protagonist meets the homosexual character, who not only turns the focus of the plots towards his homosexual relationship with the protagonist but also the position of the protagonist in their heterosexual relationship.

4.3.1 Homosexuality and urbanisation

The gay character Tony in *Bar Boys* appears right after the scene when Tuấn shares his plain roll with a penniless co-worker who bitterly chews the tough roll while trying to find other ways to

change his miserable life. Leaving the frustrated friend with his own thoughts, Tuấn continues his journey to find a customer. Tony comes across Tuấn in the street and poses as a customer who wants a massage at home. Tuấn follows Tony home and soon realises that Tony is a rich *Việt kiều* who has just got back from abroad. At first, Tuấn quotes him 50 thousand dongs (equal to 3.3 US dollars)[31] which is higher than his average charge of 30 thousand dongs. To Tuấn's surprise, Tony pays him 50 US dollars instead and even offers to 'monopolise' Tuấn, which means Tuấn will only massage Tony with a monthly salary of 5 million dong (equal to 333 US dollars) and a promise of promotion if he performs well. Tuấn happily seals the deal without hesitation.

In *Fool for Love*, after the phone conversation with the co-worker, Dũng, who is looking for Mai in Nha Trang, trudges along the pier to the beach in desperation. The next scene shows him wistfully stirring his cup of coffee under coconut trees. Suddenly, he hears a high-pitched voice shouting 'Thief, thief, help me, thief!' from afar. Dũng runs after the thief and successfully recovers the Louis Vuitton bag for Hội, its owner. Impressed by Dũng's bravery, Hội asks if Dũng can drive and tells Dũng that he has just fired his chauffeur and would love to hire someone whom he can trust. At first Dũng refuses his offer. However, when Hội tells Dũng to find him at the Sheraton hotel in case Dũng changes his mind, Dũng realises that the Sheraton is also the hotel where Mai is working as a singer and thus accepts the job offer.

Both gay characters in the two movies identify as *Việt kiều* [Vietnamese soujourners]. The contextualisation of homosexual characters as coming from overseas adds a touch of foreignness to homosexuality. The term *Việt kiều* has certain negative connotations. The most common denotation of this term is those who fled the country right before and after the end of the Vietnam war to settle in developed countries in North America, Australasia and Europe. These people were deemed traitors by the Communist government. After the open-door policy, however, *Việt kiều* were allowed to return and they appeared to have higher socioeconomic status compared to local Vietnamese. However, regardless of *Việt kiều*'s performance of Vietnameseness such as their appearance, manner and language, they are still alienated and not considered by local Vietnamese as belonging to the country (Nguyen 2018, p. 124). In addition to these two movies *Bar Boys* and *Fool for Love*, I found *Việt kiều* homosexual characters in two other TV series *Ngũ quái Sài Gòn* [Saigon Five] (Nguyen 2006) and *Bước Chân Hoàn Vũ* [Steps of the Universe] (Nguyen 2009). It is worth notng that in all of these movies and TV shows, there are no local Vietnamese gay men. A fair number of *Việt kiều* gay men among the very few Vietnamese movies and TV shows during the 2000s indicates that homosexual people were imagined as outsiders who are deprived of national identity.

The association with the urban also affirms the otherness of homosexual characters as lacking Vietnameseness. During the post-renovation period, there was an emergence of commercial films which address sensitive themes of prostitution, sex, drugs, crimes and HIV/AIDS. Lê Hoàng, the

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[31] This is based on the conversion rate in the original English subtitles of the movie.

director of *Bar Boys* is well-known for such depictions. One of his most successful movies at that time is the box-office record breaking film *Gái nhảy* [Bar Girls] (Le 2003), which features the life of two females from different backgrounds who both end up in prostitution. In these films, the city is depicted as a place where large income gaps lead to moral deterioration, especially of young people coming from rural areas. Drummond (2005, p. 163) claims that unlike rural society which is "the only purveyor of legitimate Vietnamese culture', urban society is distant and lacking Vietnamese characteristics. The *Việt kiều* homosexual characters Tony and Hội embody urbanisation and modernity where there are many temptations. For gay characters who come from the country, the city is the only place that embraces them. The main character Khôi in *Lost in Paradise* comes to Saigon because his family in his hometown found out that he was homosexual and disowned him. He sees Saigon as a 'paradise', where 'there are opportunities for everyone'. His family sees homosexuality as morally wrong and refuses to tolerate it. In the movie *Cầu vồng không sắc* [Rainbow without colours] (Nguyen, QT 2015), the homosexual couple Hùng and Hoàng live in the peaceful highland area of Da Lat. As soon as they come out to each other, they decide to move to Saigon, where they can find a community of people like them and thus can be accepted. The city thus becomes a gathering place for outcasts who fail to fit into the heteronormative society. In other words, homosexuality is represented as distant from the rural, the cradle of Vietnamese culture, and is thus peripheral to Vietnamese society.

4.3.2 Homosexual characters in a relationship

Homosexual characters are not only outcasts in Vietnamese society but also in relationships. They are portrayed as the third wheel in a love triangle with the main protagonists. On the one hand, thanks to the material support, the protagonists seem to approach their desired girls more easily. Tuấn uses the money Tony gave him to lavishly buy 20 serves of sweet soup, which is double his usual transaction and bravely demonstrates his intention to 'monopolise' the girl. As a chaffeur, Dũng uses the sports car of his boss to give Mai a trip around the city. On the other hand, they are subject to the control of their gay bosses. They do not dare to reject unwanted flirtations for fear of losing their jobs. These representations challenge the conventional understandings of intimacy, which uphold a relationship that is heterosexual, married, monogamous, procreative, in a relationship and non-commercial.

Rubin (1993, p. 13) proposed a sexual morality system called 'the charmed circle of sexual behaviours' which demarcates sexual behaviours into 'good sex' and 'bad sex'. This 'charmed circle thus creates both normalised groups—those with 'good sex'—and marginalised groups— those with 'bad sex'. Media representations play the role of enforcing 'the charmed circle' by drawing lines between 'good sex' and 'bad sex'. Rubin's model is applicable to Vietnam in the sense that sexual activities are perceived to serve the utmost purpose of reproducing and preserving the human race (Khuat, Le & Nguyen 2009, pp. 127–128). Thus, behaviours which conform to heteronormativity such as being marital, procreative and non-commercial fall within the 'charmed circle' while homosexual activities are marginalised as 'bad sex'. In the case of these

two movies, gay characters whose sexuality falls outside of the charmed circle are placed further away on the bad side of the line by having sex acts portrayed as promiscuous, casual and commercial.

In *Bar Boys*, Tony poses a threat to Tuấn's heterosexual relationship. Tony asks Tuấn to accompany him to a nightclub instead of a massage session. He forces Tuấn to drink until Tuấn gets dead drunk and passes out in Tony's arms on the dance floor. The next scene shows the sweet bean soup girl calling out about her wares in front of Tuấn's house, expecting him to appear and buy her soup as usual. She is left disappointed when nobody responds to her. This scene is woven between the scene of Tuấn on the dance floor and the following scene which shows him waking up the next morning in horror when he finds himself naked next to Tony in bed. The homosexual relationship between Tuấn and Tony disrupts Tuấn's heterosexual relationship with the girl and results in the panic and distress of the protagonist.

After the unexpected homosexual experience with Tony, Tuấn quits his job. Their later encounter happens when Tuấn comes to Tony's house to borrow money in order to help his two roommates who were hurt in an accident. Realising Tuấn's kind-heartedness and being aware of Tuấn's inability to pay off the debt, Tony offers to give Tuấn the money. Feeling touched by Tony's generosity and his loneliness, Tuấn invites Tony to hang out with him before Tony's flight to Thailand the next day for gender reassignment surgery. When Tuấn returns home, he meets the sweet bean soup girl who announces to him that she will quit selling sweet bean soup and will start her job as an apparel factory worker from tomorrow. The promise with Tony slips Tuấn's mind and he asks the girl out to celebrate. The narrative frames Tony and the girl as two opponents competing for Tuấn's attention as they both will have a significant event tomorrow. The priority which Tuấn gives to the young woman can be understood as the sexual hierarchy where heterosexuality dominates in Vietnamese society. At the same time, the competition between a gay man and a heterosexual woman for the attention of a heterosexual man points to the perception of homosexuality as a form of transgender or gender inversion.

As Tony does not see Tuấn coming, he goes to Tuấn's house and finds out that Tuấn is at the cinema. The conflict between heterosexuality and homosexuality climaxes when Tuấn, Tony and the woman appear in the same place in the ending of the movie. When Tony arrives at the cinema, a romantic scene of a Vietnamese movie between a heterosexual couple is being played on the screen which can be read as a popular representation of the ideal. Tuấn and his girlfriend watch the movie and try to reproduce the image. Tuấn's arm is wrapped around the woman's shoulders and they happily lean against each other. In the half-light of the cinema, Tony slowly comes and sits next to Tuấn. As soon as he settles down, the romantic song in the soundtrack of the previous scene immediately turns to a siren. 'Catch her!', a character in the movie shouts, and the rapid melody suggests a chase on the screen. A thrilling sound comes as Tony turns to look at Tuấn. A close shot from Tony's viewpoint shows Tuấn's face frozen in panic. In this scene, Tuấn is like prey falling into the clutches of Tony, the predator.

The depiction of these three people comes up against what is shown on the screen. Three characters form a love triangle which breaks the norm of a monogamous relationship. A series of juxtaposed images between the girl and Tony is featured. Being unaware of the appearance of Tony, the girl coyly leans her head on Tuấn's right shoulder. He slightly uses his hand to push her head back. Then Tony leans his head on Tuấn's left shoulder. Again, Tuấn pushes his head back. A close shot downward shows Tuấn's right hand holding fast to the armrest when the girl puts her hand above his. The camera slightly turns to the right, showing the same scene with Tony's hand sliding beneath Tuấn's hand. Tuấn's face is covered with sweat. The appearance of Tony replaces the romance and happiness between Tuấn and the young woman with horror and anxiety.

Figure 2 Tuấn stucked in a triangle relationship

Source: *Trai nhảy* [Bar Boys] (Le 2007).

The background melody's tempo starts to rise faster and faster, making the scene more dramatic. A medium shot shows the girl and Tony leaning on Tuấn's shoulders at the same time. Bass instrumentals are added to the melody, which dramatises the scene when Tony puts his hand on Tuấn's shaking thigh. Meanwhile, the girl slightly rubs her head on Tuấn's shoulder. The movie screen features a couple hugging each other under the rain, suggesting the climax of intimacy soon to happen with a kiss. In the audience seats, Tony attempts to place a kiss on Tuấn's neck. Tuấn manages to endure Tony's first attempt. However, on his second attempt, Tuấn can no longer remain controlled. He stands straight up and screams loudly, pushing both the girl and Tony away from him. From the perspective of the protagonist Tuấn whom the audience is invited to identify with, the physical intimacy between the two male characters is not represented as being natural, affectionate and loving but as being abnormal, horrid, and creepy. It disrupts the normative heterosexuality so that Tuấn has to immediately respond to it. Tony thus can be read as an abject figure, which is defined by Kristeva (1982, p. 4) as 'disturb[ing] identity, system, order' and 'not

respect[ing] border, positions, rules'. Tuấn's bodily reactions, including standing up and screaming, demonstrate his intolerance of the physical intimacy which he experiences with another man and frames it as perversion. The interaction between Tuấn and Tony constrasts dramatically with the image of the two heterosexual couples, one on the screen and another including Tuấn and the girl, whose relationships come across as romantic and acceptable.

A similar pattern where heterosexuality prevails and excludes homosexuality can be observed in some other films. In *Fool for Love*, after failing to seduce Dũng many times and being aware of Dũng's sincere love for Mai, Hội decides to take the high road by helping them to connect and wishing them well in their relationship. Khoa in *Những cô gái chân dài* [Long-legged Girls] (Vu, ND 2004) or Cầm in *Chơi vơi* [Adrift] (Bui 2009) develop a secret feeling for their same-sex friend. They, however, remain silent and forever are bystanders of the protagonists' relationships. The homosexual characters in these movies are unable to secure a stable, monogamous, non-commercial, married and procreative relationship. That is to say, by depicting homosexual characters as deviating from heterosexual norms, the representation marginalises and pathologises their behaviours.

4.4 Homosexual stereotypes

Homosexual characters are commonly portrayed in either of two stereotypical roles: miserable closeted gay men such as Tony and risible openly gay men such as Hội. On the one hand, stereotypes are negative images or ideas of gay men which are repeatedly represented based on social perceptions of this social group. On the other hand, stereotypes consolidate and in some cases distort social ideas of homosexual people. In this section, I consider the two stereotypes in film texts to see how they connect with social understandings of gay men in Vietnam.

Tony in *Bar Boys* is depicted as a closeted gay man. *Bóng kín* [closeted gay men] are masculine looking and dressing homosexual men who hide their sexual orientation and identity. The character is played by actor Đức Hải, who is well-known as a male model in Vietnam. This is the first time for him to appear on screen. As a model, Đức Hải demonstrates masculinity through his height and solid build and a slight touch of moustache and beard on a chiseled jawline. Thus, the audience is unable to tell if Tony is a gay man based on his appearance alone. The secret of Tony's sexual deviancy is utilised as the thrilling parts of the film.

The idea of 'otherness' is reinforced as homosexual characters are represented as monstrous in movies. Robin Wood suggested a 'basic formula' for American horror films, which is 'normality is threatened by the Monster' (Wood 2003, p. 71). Wood defines 'normality' as 'conformity to the dominant social norms' such as the heterosexual monogamous couple, the family, and the social institutions which protect them. Meanwhile, the Monster is the embodiment of the 'other' which resists the identity and sexuality governed by social norms (Wood 2003, p. 71). When movies portray homosexual characters as monsters, they serve the purpose of affirming heterosexuality as a hegemonic standard. Dyer points out that,

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> Where gayness occurs in films, it does so as part of dominant ideology. It is not
> there to express itself, but rather to express something about sexuality in general as
> understood by heterosexuals. Gayness is used to define the parameters of
> normality, to suggest the thrill and/or terror of decadence, to embody neurotic
> sexuality, or to perform various artistic-ideological functions that in the end assert
> the superiority of heterosexuality (Dyer 1978, pp. 15–16).

When Tuấn first arrives at Tony's house, he comes across a variety of abnormalities. The camera switches to Tuấn's viewpoint and shows three photo frames on a table showing Tony in intimate poses with three different guys, two white and one black before the Eiffel Tower, an Egyptian pyramid and the Venus de Milo. Once again homosexuality is associated with the international/non-Vietnamese. Tony gives an unsatisfactory explanation that these men are his step-brothers. As Tuấn and Tony enter the bedroom for the massage, the camera slowly pans over a series of three medium square photos on the bedhead and one large vertical photo on the wall, which depict nude male bodies in different poses. When the camera finally stops at the lower part of one of the nude male bodies, a spine-chilling melody resounds to open up the massage session. By using the thrilling sound to support Tuấn's doubts of Tony's sexual behaviour and their physical interactions throughout the massage session, the film frames homosexuality as being monstrous and abnormal.

As opposed to Tony, Hội identifies as a *bóng lộ* [openly gay man] who comes out and presents himself as a woman. *Bóng lộ* are very easy to spot because of their effeminate gestures and feminine appearance. Hội is played by actor Thái Hoà, who actively works in comedies. In addition to his gay role as Hội in *Fool for Love* and the sequel *Để Hội tính* [Let Hoi decide] (Nguyen, C 2014), he also collaborated with the same director of *Fool for Love* Charlie Nguyen in the movie *Cưới ngay kẻo lỡ* [Love puzzle] (Nguyen 2012). In this movie, he plays the role of a man who has to cross-dress in order to befriend the woman with whom he has unrequited love and who rejected him in the past. Recently, he acted in the film *Hồn papa da con gái* [Daddy issues] (Ochiai 2018) in the role of a father who has his body switched with his daughter's. In these movies, the exaggerated contradiction between effeminate gender expression and masculine appearance is played for laughs.

The gay character Hội is depicted as highly effeminate and flamboyant. In the first encounter with Dũng on the beach after Dũng successfully retrieves the bag for Hội from the thief, Hội immediately strikes Dũng as a weird man for possessing a high-pitched voice and deploying effeminate hand gestures. Hội is usually seen in colourful and flowery shirts. He later imposes this dressing style on Dũng as a makeover, which is portrayed as a comedic scene. When Hội and Dũng walk past a girl in a sexy pink dress, Hội utters his admiration, which however is not for the girl but for the dress, implying that Hội is craving to wear the dress himself. He is offended when Dũng pays a compliment on his wristwatch as looking masculine. These portrayals focus on the effeminacy and femininity of the gay character Hội, which highly contrasts with his male identity and thus generates laughter.

Another stereotype of homosexual characters is the depiction of them as being vain and promiscuous. Throughout the movie, Hội constantly flirts with Dũng and tries to have physical contact such as touching, inviting Dũng to sleep with him in the same bed or snatching Dũng's bath towel to reveal his lower parts. There are a few scenes in which Hội turns out to be a wholehearted and serious person such as when he has a heart-to-heart conversation with Dũng in a sauna room about his gay ex-boyfriend who left him for another man or when he is sad after witnessing the ex-boyfriend dancing with his new boyfriend. These impressions, however, are soon obscured by comedic situations. When Dũng consoles Hội by offering his shoulder for Hội to lean on and wraps an arm around Hội's shoulders, another man enters the sauna and quickly leaves in embarassment, believing that they are a homosexual couple. The laughter emerges when the straight character Dũng is confused by another male's intimate behaviour and when he lands in an embarrassing situation such as being mistaken for a gay man.

The context which shapes humour is important in understanding the meaning of a joke. Within Humour Theory, the three theories including Superiority Theory, Incongruity Theory and Relief Theory are usually considered to explain the reasons why people laugh at a joke (Mills 2009, p. 76). The Superiority Theory suggests that people laugh at those whom they feel superior to. Mills (2009, pp. 77–82) points out that some cultural texts are constructed to invite mass audiences to laugh 'at' rather than 'with' minorities and social groups as a way to assert their social power. Thus masculine men may laugh at 'sissy' characters such as Hội for his failed masculinity. The Incongruity Theory surmises that people laugh when they are surprised by confounded expectations (Mills 2009, p. 82). The homosexual Hội is laughable because his effeminate behaviours and manners do not conform to the norms of gender expression for males, which are to look and behave in a masculine manner. The central idea of the Relief Theory is that laughter helps alleviate anxieties of repressed thoughts and ideas (Mills 2009, p. 88). The audience might laugh at Hội's flirtations with Dũng as a relief from the anxiety about the physical intimacy between two people of the same sex. Together, these three theories account for the jokes about homosexual people and issues created by the movie.

There might be different types of homosexual stereotypes, which are either pathetic or comedic. The most important function of stereotypes is to create sharp boundary definitions which protect those who are valued and considered acceptable and exclude those who are not (Dyer 1993, p. 16). Stereotypes thus work to pathologise marginalised social groups. No matter how the stereotypes are approached, they work to affirm the marginalisation of the sexual minority group in society as either threatening predators or ridiculous buffoons. Both stereotypes turn them into monsters, as noted by Benshoff (1997, p. 2) that 'monster is to 'normality' as homosexual is to heterosexual'.

4.5 Conclusion

The representation of homosexual characters as minor characters in early Vietnamese movies and TV shows in the post-renovation period brought them from invisibility to visibility in media. The

portrayals of gay characters as foreign queer *Việt kiều*—national outcasts—and outsiders in a triangle relationship—social outcasts from heteronormativity—suggest that homosexuality is rendered as being outside the norm. This contributes to the devaluation of homosexual people. Referring to Clark's and Berry's models of representation, 'ridicule' is the stage in which minorities are dehumanised and degraded and the 'stereotypic age' is the period in which minorities are portrayed in a stereotypical way. Content analysis of the two gay characters, Tony in *Bar Boys* and Hội in *Fool for Love*, shows that the stereotypical representation of homosexual people as threatening or ridiculous places them in the 'ridicule' stage of Clark's model and the 'Stereotypic Age' of Berry's model. The commercial success of the two movies suggests that these homosexual stereotypes are accepted by popular audiences.

The comedic gay character Hội was still popular when he reappeared four years later as the protagonist in the sequel *Để Hội Tính* [Let Hoi Decide] (Nguyen, C 2014), which broke box-office records as soon as it was released. There is also, however, a part of audiences who started to raise critical voices against the representation of homosexual characters in a stereotypical and distorted way. When *Để Hội Tính* was released in 2014, Vietnamese LGBT groups thrived and Vietnamese social and cultural contexts had also changed a lot compared to the previous decade. In the 2010s, some movies were created which reflected these changes. The question is whether they proceeded to the 'respect' stage and the 'New Awareness' period. In the next chapter, I will consider a pair of movies during this period to see how they responded to the shifting understandings of homosexuality in contemporary Vietnamese society at that time.

Chapter 5: Adding colours to a rainbow

In the 2010s, homosexuality emerged as a popular theme for movies and TV shows in Vietnam and also gathered the attention of the public. The gay movie *Hot boy nổi loạn và câu chuyện về thằng Cười, cô gái điếm và con vịt* [Lost in Paradise] (Vu 2011) was one of the most popular movies to feature gay men as main characters on screen. It was considered successful in terms of both revenue and quality. The award-winning director, Vũ Ngọc Đãng, reported an impressive box office of over VND 20 billion (equal to around 1 million US dollars), which overtook the revenue of a more mainstream movie at the same time *Cánh đồng bất tận* [The Floating Lives] (Nguyen, PQB 2010) which earned nearly VND 20 billion. *Lost in Paradise* was then selected to be premiered at the Toronto International Film Festival in September 2011 and was shown at the Vancouver International Film Festival and the Busan International Film Festival. It is also the first Vietnamese film to have international distribution rights acquired by a foreign film sales organisation (Smith 2011). In addition to its commercial success, the movie was reported to have gained approval from the LGBT community for avoiding stereotypical representations of homosexual and queer men as effeminate and ridiculous and for rather portraying them in an empathetic and humane way (Tuoi Tre News 2014).

Similarly, the movie *Yêu* [Love] (Viet Max 2015) which features a romantic relationship between two women was also a box office hit, earning nearly VND 12 billion (USD 545,000) within the first three days of screening (Vietnam News 2015). In the same year 2015, Vietnamese moviegoers were deeply moved by the death and permanent separation of a gay couple in the melodrama *Cầu vồng không sắc* [Rainbow without Colours] (Nguyen, QT 2015). The film received positive feedback from audiences and film critics for its dealing with homophobia and family tragedy in the Vietnamese context (Vietnam News 2015). Such representations can be seen as a major shift from the demonised and stigmatised images of homosexual people in earlier Vietnamese films and TV shows, as we have seen above.

As destigmatised representations of homosexual individuals in these movies were well received by public audiences, the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) rights movement in Vietnam has thus achieved quite a few accomplishments. Across 2012 there was a series of events in metropolitan centres to promote LGBT rights. These included such events as the VietPride celebration in Hanoi, the World Press Photo award-winning exhibition 'The Pink Choice' from Ho Chi Minh City-based artist Maika Elan (also known as Nguyen Thanh Hai), and LGBT flashmobs organised around the theme of 'Love is Love' in Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi and Danang (Nguyen 2019, p. 1). Also in 2012, LGBT activists joined in the process of reviewing the *Law on Marriage and Family* initiated by the Ministry of Justice. They lobbied for the consideration of same-sex marriage (Vietnam Ministry of Justice 2012). As a result, although same-sex marriage remains unrecognised in the current *Law on Marriage and Family* of 2014, there was the lifting of an administrative fine on same-sex wedding ceremonies as listed in Clause 5, Article 10 in the old

Law on Marriage and Family of 2000 (The National Assembly 2000, 2014). In the following years, some same-sex couples were reported to have celebrated their relationships with the blessing of family and friends (Lien Hoang 2015; Tuan Son 2018; Tuoi Tre News 2014).

The increased visibility of homosexual people in Vietnamese society and mainstream media could be perceived as society's growing acceptance of non-normative gender and sexualities. The LGBT films mentioned above such as *Lost in Paradise*, *Rainbow without Colours* and *Love* were screened in cinema complexes nationwide, which shows that their target audience is not limited to people of the LGBT community but also includes the general public. The positive reception of these films reflects significant shifts in societal, legal and cultural contexts in Vietnam, which traditionally did not support homosexuality.

In this chapter, I examine the portrayals of homosexual characters in recent films which are considered as positive and progressive. I argue, however, that such representations consolidate the conventional ideology of heteronormativity. The de-eroticisation of homosexual couples in these films downplays homosexuality and fails to challenge the social stigma against same-sex desire. Also, homosexuality is represented through the lenses of homophobia and tragedy, which upholds and sustains heteronormative assumptions and institutions.

I will conduct a textual analysis of the two movies *Cầu vồng không sắc* [Rainbow without Colours] (Nguyen, QT 2015) and *Yêu* [Love] (Viet Max 2015). Both movies were produced in the same year, 2015, which is during the prime of LGBT rights movements in Vietnam. They are the first films of the amateur directors, Nguyễn Quang Tuyến and Việt Max, who were originally known as a film producer and a hip-hop choreographer respectively. Both films feature couples as protagonists, a gay male couple in *Rainbow without Colours* and a lesbian couple in *Love*. In these two movies, each couple's relationship is challenged by their family when it is discovered.

Rainbow without Colours is a melodrama which narrates a family tragedy caused by homophobia. The developing romantic relationship between a man and his adoptive brother is forcefully rejected by their mother, leading to one's death and the other's mental illness. In an interview with Saostar, an online news portal, the director Nguyễn Quang Tuyến revealed that he initially assumed only the role of a producer and a screenwriter for the film, which is his usual position. Through discussions with many potential directors, he found that most of them wanted to steer the film into the comedy trend (Saostar 2015). He, however, expected to 'dig deep into the [homosexual] characters' inner feelings rather than featuring their entertaining looks without a clear message' (Saostar 2015). For that reason, he took on the role of the director and funded his own film to steer clear from the external impact of sponsors on the content of the film. In addition to the director, who is considered an amateur, the protagonists—the homosexual couple—were also played by two amateur actors, Nguyễn Thanh Tú who is known as an MC and Vũ Tuấn Việt who is known as a model. Such amateur factors enable the movie to escape conventional representations of homosexual charaacters. The new images were successful in arousing emotions and the sympathy of audience members towards the characters as reported by many online

newspapers (Duong Cam 2015; Phan 2015; Thanh Nguyen 2015; Tu Lan 2015). *Rainbow without Colours* also competed in First Films World Competition at the 2015 Montreal World Film Festival, making it the second Vietnamese film to be selected for this competition section. That is to say, despite being produced by an independent studio, the film still achieved commercial success and recognition for its quality. The main message of the film is that 'Homosexuality is not a disease' as a strong opposition to social stigma and homophobia.

Being more light-hearted compared to *Rainbow without Colours, Love* gives some hope for queer couples to be accepted by their families. The movie's screenplay is adapted from the Thai gay movie *Love of Siam* (Sakveerakul 2007) which is about a gay romance between two teenage boys. The director Viet Max, however, stated in an interview that he decided to feature a lesbian couple instead because of the high visibility of gay couples in Vietnam at the time (Ta 2015). Similar to *Rainbow without Colours*, the production team of *Love* comprises young and fresh faces who were yet to have any remarkable achievements in the movie industry. The lesbian couple are played by Chi Pu, a popular teen idol and Gil Lê, a pop singer. In real life, there are rumours about the strong bond between the two young celebrities, although they neither accept nor reject these rumours. Nevertheless, the couple is supported by their fans who gather in several social media groups of more than a thousand members. The film won the Golden Apricot Blossom Award[32] for Best Movie in 2015 while the actress Chi Pu was nomiated for Best Actress at the same award and Gil Lê was nominated for Most Popular Actress at the Green Star Awards.[33] Featuring 'love' in a variety of relationships—friends, husband and wife, parents and children, heterosexual and homosexual relationships, the movie ultimately communicates the message 'Love wins'.

While mainly concentrating on these two film texts, I will refer to other films and drama series in the same period where relevant. I will draw on feminist and queer theory to demonstrate how representations in these films relieve anxieties over homosexuality as a threat to heteronormativity and work to resolve inherent conflicts between homosexuality and family.

5.1 Destigmatisation of homosexuality through normative gender roles

Earlier movies (before 2012) as analysed in Chapter 4 commonly feature effeminate gay men who signify their homosexuality through gender inversion behaviours and dress code. Examples include the characters Miss Hội in *Để Mai Tính* [Fool for Love] (Nguyen, C 2010), Tony in *Trai nhảy* [Bar Boys] (Le 2007), Mary Sẹo in *Ngũ quái Sài Gòn* [Saigon Five] (Nguyen 2006), and Lâm in *Những nụ hôn rực rỡ* [Vibrant kisses] (Nguyen 2011). Several gay characters in films of the period after 2012 identify as masculine gay men. Examples include Lam, Khôi and Đông in

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[32] Golden Apricot Blossom Award is an annual award organised by *báo Người Lao Động* (Labourer newspaper) since 1995 to honour artists who have made positive contributions in the cultural and perfomance field in Vietnam.

[33] The Green Star Awards aim to honour artists and movies and TV shows that have had outstanding performance in the year since 2014. The award was organised by the TV channel TodayTV in cooperation with tạp chí *Thế giới điện ảnh* (Cinema World Magazine).

Hot boy nổi loạn và câu chuyện về thằng Cười, cô gái điếm và con vịt [Lost in Paradise] (Vu 2011), Hải and his bisexual lover Trung in *Lạc giới* [Paradise in Heart] (Phi 2014), Hùng and Hoàng in *Cầu vồng không sắc* [Rainbow without Colours] (Nguyen, QT 2015), Nam and Huy in *Con ma nhà họ Vương* [Never Trust a Stranger] (Vu 2015), Đức and Khánh in *Sài Gòn Anh Yêu Em* [Saigon, I love you] (Ly 2016). They are portrayed as having qualities traditionally associated with masculinity such as short haircuts, muscular bodies, and following masculine dress codes.

Still, there are also effeminate gay men featured in these movies. These characters, however, are more likely to be subject to stigmatisation than gay men who adhere to masculine conventions. In *Rainbow without Colours*, there is a scene where Hoàng, Hùng and Lan, their younger sister, go swimming and meet a stranger who swims in the same pool with them. The stranger approaches Lan when she leaves the pool to order orange juice for her brothers. With a slight overseas-Vietnamese accent, he introduces himself as Jason. The camera follows Lan's sidelong glance at his wet body, which presents 'six-pack' abdominal muscles and hairy firm thighs. His virile appearance immediately mesmerises Lan. As soon as he grabs the orange juice from the waiter, however, Jason offers to pay for them and brings them to Hoàng and Hùng who are still in the pool, leaving Lan confused. Meanwhile, Hoàng struggles to teach Hùng how to swim but without success. Jason offers to teach Hùng instead, which makes Hoàng think that Jason is trying to impress Lan.

Jason stands behind Hùng and grabs his arms to show him the movements. With intense background music, the camera goes underwater to depict Jason's hands groping Hùng's swimming briefs. When they change position for Hùng to stand behind Jason, another underwater close-up shows Jason placing Hùng's hands onto Jason's private parts. Realising Jason's motive, Hùng swings his arms out of Jason's hands and quickly leaves the pool. Jason shakes his head in disappointment and utters: 'Oh my god! We are sisters!'.

The character Jason in the scene described above is constructed in a similar way to the character Tony in *Trai nhảy* [Bar Boys] (Le 2007) and Hội in *Để Mai Tính* [Fool for Love] (Nguyen, C 2010), who are from overseas, sexually harass other men and have their homosexuality marked as 'effeminate'. Although Jason disguises his gayness with a masculine presentation, his last utterance that 'we are sisters' affirms the association of homosexuality and gender inversion. Assuming the role of a villain, Jason's representation again consolidates the stigmatisation of feminine characteristics in male bodies. The link between femininity and deviance can be explained through the concept of hegemonic masculinity, defined as 'the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women' (Connell 2005, p. 77). In other words, the cultural norms of masculinity maintain the patriarchal status of men and women and make those who possess feminine characteristics inferior to those who possess masculine characteristics. That is to say, the masculine performances of the protagonists Hùng and Hoàng normalise them in a heteronormative

society.

The stigmatisation of non-conforming gender expression can also be observed in a recent film *Sài Gòn Anh Yêu Em* (Saigon, I love you) (Ly 2016). Similar to ensemble movies like *Love actually* (Curtis 2003), the film tells the stories of many people, including a gay couple Đức and Khánh and a gay man Mỹ Mỹ who lives with his single mother. For fear of homophobia, Mỹ Mỹ's mother makes him disguise his effeminacy by wearing a fake moustache and pretending to be a strong man, which places pressure on Mỹ Mỹ. Meanwhile, the other gay couple who are more masculine are featured as comfortable with their identity. The film does not bring up the issue of homosexuality with this couple but makes it a private and non-dramatic relationship. Although Mỹ Mỹ and his mother learn to embrace his effeminacy by the end of the movie, the struggle they have gone through with his non-normative gender performance can be construed as reinforcing heteronormativity and homonormativity.

Similar to homosexual men, the marker of lesbian identity in movies is often gender-crossing performance as portrayed in characters such as the gang leaders Chị Phượng in *Những đứa con biệt động Sài Gòn* [The Children of Sai Gon's Special Task Force Members] (Long 2010), Chị Ba in *Hương Ga* [Rise] (Ngo 2014), Đông in *Tái sinh* [Reincarnation] (Nguyen, KH 2015) and Ông Nội in *Xóm trọ 3D* [The Alley of Love] (Hoang 2017). These characters share a similar appearance, style and manners including short hair, hippie style and audacious manners. They are depicted as criminals or convicts who stand on an equal footing with men and compete with them in terms of physical strength, leadership skills and romantic relationships with other women. The underground and prison environment which they belong to is frequently portrayed in popular media as being a site of extreme violence and aggression. The attribution of female homosexuality to a form of masculinity affirms the perception of homosexuality as gender inversion and the collapsing of sexual orientation and gender identity.

While effeminacy is seen as a negative stereotype for gay men, masculinity in women, however, is more tolerated. Women's gender-crossing can be widely seen in Vietnamese popular culture from pop music stars to contemporary films. While female masculinity can be interpreted as the desire to transform into the opposite sex, there are some other discourses which deflect it from being seen as a homosexual identity marker. Such discourses make female masculinity to be seen as less challenging to normative gender roles.

Representations of tomboyism can be found in some Vietnamese TV shows such as Mai Lâm in *Bộ tứ 10a8* [The foursome of 10a8] (Nguyen 2009–2010), Bảo Như in *Thứ ba học trò* [Mischievous students] (Dang 2009), Văn Châu in *Kính Vạn Hoa* [Kaleidoscope] (Nguyen & Do 2004–2008), and Đông Dương in *Vừa đi vừa khóc* [Walking, Crying] (Vu 2014). The above characters are portrayed as young women of 16 to 21 years old, in a period of transformation from adolescence to adulthood. The tomboyism of these characters is explained through the film plot to be the result of Vietnamese patriarchal tradition where men have a higher status than women and sons are valued more than daughters. As their parents failed to give birth to a son, several of these

young female characters were raised to be a replacement for the desired son. As these characters step into adulthood and develop romantic feelings for a person of the opposite sex, however, they gradually reveal their femininity, which is their true identity. Halberstam (1998, p. 6) proposed that the image of a masculine woman can be tolerated within a narrative of blossoming womanhood, which resists adulthood rather than femininity.

Women who behave androgynously can also be perceived as capable workers instead of wanting to be men (Kam 2008, p. 102). The character Út Chót in *Nàng men chàng bóng* [Masculine Lady and Feminine Guy] (Vo 2012) is portrayed as a heroic young woman who does not hesitate to help those in trouble. While chasing a villain, she meets Ẽo Ợt, an effeminate man. and then helps him to run away from his forced marriage. As opposed to masculine Út Chót, Ẽo Ợt loves to wear make up and female dress and is attracted to muscular men. He is further feminised by being portrayed as undergoing forced marriage with a woman through his parents' arrangement. Đông Dương in *Vừa đi vừa khóc* [Walking, Crying] (Vu 2014) is the sole breadwinner of the family. Đông Dương has been disguised as male since she was 12 years old because her grandmother desperately wanted a grandson. She works as a handyperson which is a manual labour job but she even outperforms Hải Minh, a man who comes from a rich family. The masculine traits attributed to these female characters prove that they are as capable as males in terms of physical work. Their masculinity does not make them failed women but is seen as efficiency and reliability. Kam (2008, pp. 102–103) argues that such representations are enabled by the discourse of 'superior masculinity' which assigns more valued gender attributes to men. Masculine attributes are perceived as ideal human attributes in a male-dominant culture.

Figure 3 Út Chót saved Ẽo Ợt from his arranged marriage.

Source: *Nàng men chàng bóng* [Masculine Lady and Feminine Guy] (Vo 2012)

One of the two protagonists in the movie *Yêu* [Love] (Viet Max 2015) which I read in this chapter is played by Gil Lê, a Vietnamese pop singer who has a large fanbase for her androgynous style. In the first half of the movie *Love*, the gender-crossing appearance and manners of the character *Tú* are justified in a conversation with her childhood friend Nhi during their first reunion after 10 years apart. Affected by the trauma of his only son's death in an accident, Tú's father gets addicted to alcohol and experiences mental illness. He starts to call Tú by the name of her lost brother. To relieve his loss, Tú pretends to be her brother – adopting masculine outfits and manners. Her masculine performance can thus be understood as a response to a traumatic incident in her life.

The discrepancy between Tú's gender expression and her biological sex, however, does not deprive her of female identity. Her masculinity is regarded as attractive by Nhi's co-worker Miến, who falls in love with her at first sight. Playing the role of a funny character, Miến is portrayed as a gender non-conformist peer of Tú. Miến is a tiny and timid man who is subjected to being teased and shouted at by a fierce co-worker. He pays a lot of attention to his appearance, which contrasts with his masculine identity. He is frequently seen meticulously applying styling wax to his hair to make himself more attractive. Miến is obsessed with polka dots and in a scene at a clothing store, the only piece of clothing with polka dots can be found in the women's clothing section. Despite his lack of masculinity, he identifies as a straight man who is captivated by strong women. The fact that Tú's masculinity is attractive to a straight man, though not a stereotypically masculine man, suggests that her gender crossing acts are well tolerated and seen as detached from her sexual orientation.

In general, representations of homosexuals in Vietnam in the past decade have striven to escape the stereotypical perceptions of gay men as being effeminate and lesbian women as being macho. Rather, homosexuality is distinguished from gender inversion. These new representations destigmatise people of non-normative desires and gender identities by diminishing any difference from heterosexual norms in terms of appearance and behaviour. For gay men, their performance of masculinity fits gender norms. For lesbian women, their masculine gender identification is tolerated within the governing power of heterosexuality through the discourse of immature femininity and gender equality. Such representations strictly adhere to the cultural superiority of masculinity. Because of the connotations of masculinity and femininity, men appearing 'effeminate' is seen as a loss of power, while women appearing 'masculine' might rather be seen as a gain in power. That is to say, representations of homosexual people which are deemed 'positive' and win social acceptance fail to challenge heteronormative ideologies. Rather, they are subject to the system of hierarchical genders which reinforces male dominance.

5.2 Homosexual relationships and the sexual value system

An effort to destigmatise homosexuality can be seen not only in appearance and manners which allow homosexual individuals to pass as heterosexuals but also in behaviours which limit displays of intimate affection. In the movies *Rainbow without Colours* and *Love*, representations of homosexual relationships focus on the romantic emotions of the couples and keep the displays of affection private.

Rainbow without Colours narrates the love story of a gay couple – Hoàng and Hùng – as they grow up together in a family with one of them being an adopted son. Their bond is constantly confirmed in the movie shots of their childhood through to adulthood, in which they claim that they want to be in an exclusive relationship These shots also demonstrate that their love has been nurtured for a long time rather than being a fleeting love. There is also a scene in which Hoàng brings up his desire to adopt a child for their future family and Hùng agrees with him.[34] This portrayal contrasts with earlier representations in which queer characters are no more than an obstacle to a heterosexual relationship and they do not have any future intentions.

Similar portrayals can be observed in the movie *Love*. This movie tells the story of two young women – Tú and Nhi – who had been neighbours in their childhood in Saigon and were separated after the family of one of them moved to a different town. They were then reunited in adulthood when one family member moved back to Saigon. At the time of their reunion, Nhi is in a relationship with a heterosexual man. Nhi, however, finds him superficial for only caring about materialistic things as opposed to Tú who has much deeper understanding and empathy with Nhi. As a result, Nhi rejects her boyfriend to be with Tú. The relationship between the two women is

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[34] Although same-sex relationships are not legally recognised in Vietnam as explained in Chapter 2 and thus the couple cannot adopt a child, one partner can adopt a child as a single person and the couple can then raise the child together.

thus not decided by material things or sex/gender but rather affection and empathy. The main message at the end of the film 'Love will always win' emphasises love as the centrepiece of relationships and obscures other factors including gender and sexuality. The discourse of love provides legitimacy to the homosexual couple just like heterosexual couples who form a relationship based on love.

The bonding of the couples is depicted in a romantic rather than erotic pairing. Scenes that portray same-sex intimacy are limited or downplayed. There is a scene in the movie *Rainbow without Colours* which shows Hoàng and Hùng in the same bathroom. Hoàng is seen sitting in a bathtub blowing soap bubbles while Hùng is standing showering. Their conversation is about Quỳnh, a female friend of their younger sister. Hoàng compares their bodies and claims that Quỳnh should be interested in Hùng, the taller and bigger man rather than himself, a short and small man. As if to illustrate that fact, Hùng jumps from the shower into the bathtub and splashes water on Hoàng. While the bathroom should be a perfect background for sexual intimacy with both characters naked and in close physical contact, their portrayals, including the conversation and the childlike water splashing game, strip eroticism out of the scene. Such representations frame the homosexual relationship as an extension of brotherhood and friendship rather than erotic relations. The depiction of homosexual couples in a non-erotic way makes homosexuality less troubling as it relieves anxiety over same-sex desire – a sexual behaviour marked as deviant.

The representation of sexual activity with homosexual characters in other films, on the other hand, is much more explicit. For example, in the popular gay movie *Hot boy nổi loạn và câu chuyện về thằng Cười, cô gái điếm và con vịt* [Lost in Paradise] (Vu 2011), there are two main scenes of around 2.5 minutes each which show Lam and his sexual partner Đông in bed hugging and kissing each other. Their naked bodies fully occupy the whole screen, regardless of the angle of the camera. The shots bring into focus their faces closely leaning to each other to have conversations and kiss. There is also a scene in which Lam flushes some condoms down the toilet and thoroughly showers his body in disgust. He then fights with his partner about the threesome which he was lured into. It turns out that the sexual activity was arranged then by his partner for money, which turns him into a prostitute. Although Lam is disgusted by Đông's behaviours, Lam still chooses to stick with Đông and works with him as a male prostitute. The 'love' Lam has towards Đông is to have someone to lean on out of loneliness and he believes that a normal person will never accept a prostitute. The representation of sex related to prostitution, lust other than love and being with multiple partners brings more attention to homosexuality as being deviant. The association of (male) homosexuality with prostitution is a common theme among films in the early decade of the 21st century.

Likewise, in another movie *Trai nhảy* [Bar Boys] (Le 2007), intimate interactions between the homosexual character Tony and the heterosexual protagonist Tuấn include a massage Tuấn provides Tony, the caress when Tony teaches Tuấn how to play the piano, the scene when they lie next to each other half-naked after a night out or when Tony holds Tuấn's hand in the cinema.

These scenes are depicted by long shots with the background of an intensive instrumental soundtrack. Their intimacy is portrayed as a satisfaction to the homosexual character and a terror to the heterosexual protagonist. The intimacy is also a commodity which is traded by Tuấn in exchange for Tony's money. Overall, there is a constant assocation between sexual deviance and social evils in mainstream discourse. Therefore, the dismissal of sexual intimacy in recent movies about homosexual people can be seen as an effort to break such stigma and to normalise homosexuality.

In the movies *Rainbow without Colours* and *Love*, the displays of intimate affection are limited to hand-holding and a kiss in a private space. The majority of the shots in both movies which feature the couples' intimate interactions are exclusive to the couple in private spaces where there are no other people around. The only intimate scene which involves many people is the kiss between Hùng and Hoàng in a halloween party in the movie *Rainbow without Colours.* The party is hosted at a gay bar in Saigon where Hoàng and Hùng make their debut performance as singers with an intention of earning their living after leaving home. The party is strictly exclusive to members of the LGBT community. Therefore, when Hùng and Hoàng's family members secretly follow them to enter the gay bar, the grandfather and the father have to cross-dress to be able to get past gatekeepers while the mother is approached and flirted at by a butch lesbian. The couple's performance is well received by the audience who swing to the rhythm and mumble the lyrics of their ballad love song. Only their family members are dissociated from the crowd, especially the mother who desperately struggles to call her son Hoàng but is gagged by the father. Buried in the romantic lyrics of the song is the disrupted conversation between the mother who claims that homosexuality is a disease and the father who objects to her outdated perception. As soon as the singers finish humming the final notes, the audience applauds and yells 'Kiss, kiss, kiss!'. Being encouraged by the crowd, the couple slowly leans in to exchange a kiss while the mother passes out in the cheering crowd.
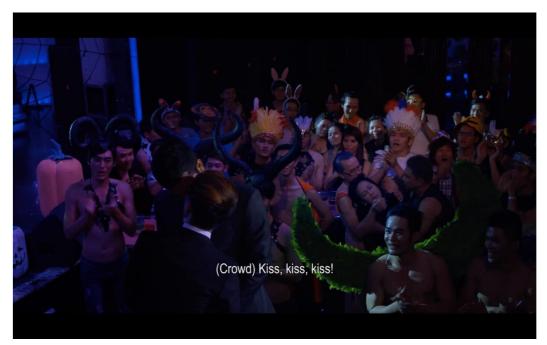
Figure 4 The couple exchanging a kiss to the cheering of the crowd while the mother passes out

Source: *Cầu vồng không sắc* [Rainbow without Colours] (Nguyen, QT 2015).

The kiss, an intimate behaviour between the homosexual couple, happens in front of many strangers who are patrons of the gay bar. The crowd that witnesses the intimacy, however, is composed of those who do not conform to heterosexual norms. Heterosexual individuals such as Hùng and Hoàng's family members are forced to break the norms by cross-dressing in Halloween costumes. The engagement of such audiences in the scene of intimacy thus constitutes a 'counterpublic', which is defined by Michael Warner as 'a scene in which a dominated group aspires to re-create itself as a public and, in doing so, finds itself in conflict not only with the dominant social group, but also with the norms that constitute the dominant culture as a public' (Warner 2002, p. 80). While the display of intimacy can be seen as a coming-out act for the two main characters, it, however, fails to bring their same-sex relationship into the mainstream public sphere. It is within a counterpublic that the homosexual couple's intimacy acts are encouraged and safeguarded, with the crowd cheering at their kiss and the father preventing the mother from ruining their moment. Counterpublic discourse, on the other hand, works to marginalise and exclude the spaces where non-normative behaviours can happen from the public sphere. As a result, the intimate scenes can still be seen as being private in contrast to the dominant public.

Representations of homosexual couples involved in a faithful, non-commercial, private and family-oriented context put them closer to the 'charmed circle'. Gayle Rubin (1993, p. 13) coined the term 'charmed circle' to refer to a sexual value system consisting of binaries of 'good sex' and 'bad sex'. Same-sex desire is one of the sexual practices which lie on the side of 'bad sex' together with other outer limits of the charmed circle such as being unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, commercial, alone or in groups, casual, cross-generational, in public, pornography, with manufactured objects, and sadomasochistic practices. Rubin (1993, pp. 153–158) also argues

that the dividing lines between 'good sex' and 'bad sex' are drawn by cultures and are not historically static. That is to say, if one's sexuality falls more on the side of that society's construction of 'good sex', it is more likely to be accepted.

The dimensions of the 'charmed circle' in Vietnamese contemporary society are quite similar to Gayle Rubin's model, with an emphasis on family values such as being heterosexual, married, monogamous, procreative and not engaging in commercial sex. Earlier movies and TV shows examined in Chapter 4 placed homosexual people far outside the charmed circle by representing homosexuals as being promiscuous and engaging in commercialised sex. More recent movies and TV shows within the latter half of the past decade including the two movies examined above have pulled homosexual characters closer to the line of acceptability with behaviours which fall inside the 'charmed circle'.

5.3 Homosexuality and the Vietnamese family

A major change in their portrayals which are considered progressive is their social position as a member of a family. Earlier commercial films and television shows portrayed homosexuals as being marginalised from family institutions. It is only in the latter half of the 2010s that queer people are represented in a family context. Homosexual protagonists are depicted as having strong bonds with their families as opposed to the image of being outcasts in earlier movies. They go through the journey of coming to terms with their non-normative sexual orientation and seek the acceptance of family members.

The notion of family is important to study because its construction reflects the relationship between individuals and the state. Kymlicka & Norman (2000, pp. 30–31) argue that citizenship consists of four aspects: legal status, identity, civic virtue, and social cohesion. In the case of gender and sexual minority populations, the notion of citizenship is intimately concerned with the right to marry a person of the same sex, the recognition of one's gender identity, the ability to participate in sexual politics, and the sense of national belonging. These dimensions intersect in the concept of family, which is regarded as an intermediary between individual and state. Individuals, or bodies, are the ground for the exercise of the state's 'biopower'[35] through conducting oneself according to a set of norms (Foucault 1978, pp. 140–141). Family is the place where individuals mark their origin, participate in the institution of marriage and engage in reproductive activity and thus have their citizenship recognised.

In the legal, cultural and social context of Vietnam, however, there are many conflicts between the patriarchal family and non-normative forms of gender and sexualities. In *Rainbow without Colours*, there is a scene which features a conversation between two parents, in which the mother

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[35] 'Biopower' is a term coined by Michel Foucault to refer to the practice of modern states and their operation through the management of populations (Foucault 1978, 140–141; Schirato and Webb 2003, 135).

tells a story of her friend who has a gay son.

> 'Poor woman! He is the only son she has. She cried madly when she found out. I
> had to calm her down. But I don't think they [the two men] want to be gay.'
> (Nguyen, QT 2015)

The mother emphasises the fact that he is the only son, implying failure in the continuity of the family lineage that he is supposed to be responsible for. When she finds out about her son, she insists on taking him to go see a psychologist so he will forget about that 'wrong feeling'.

> 'You will have [a] girlfriend, get marriage [sic] and have kids.' (Nguyen, QT
> 2015)

As Hoàng confirms that he only has feelings for men and will not be able to love a woman, the mother is extremely upset. She expels her sons from home, which then leads to a tragic ending with Hùng dying after being hit by a truck and Hoàng falling down a waterfall and going missing. Similar to the movies and TV shows analysed in the previous section, the tragedy of the gay couple once again affirms the incompatibility between the notions of family and homosexuality, regardless of the fact that the relationship is built on love. The couple's expulsion from home suggests that 'reproduction' is heavily weighted in the 'charmed circle' of Vietnamese family values compared to other factors.

The miserable fate of the two protagonists in *Rainbow without Colours*, however, is twisted as the movie shifts its timeline. The opening scene of the movie describes its current time in a caption as 'full moon of July 2028'. The abovementioned incident happened in 2014 – 14 years before the opening of the movie. In the current time, the two parents are shown to deeply regret their behaviour in the past and they keep praying for forgiveness. The full moon of July as stated in the movie is the day of *Xá tội vong nhân* [Absolution of the dead] when wandering souls without family can be granted amnesty. On this occasion, Hùng's spirit brings Hoàng, who is mentally ill, back home to his family. The return of Hoàng signifies that after many years, the mother has changed her perception of homosexuality and can truly accept him into her family.

In the last scene of the movie seven years later in 2035, two little boys resembling Hoàng and Hùng in their childhood are playing in the garden, repeating the same dialogues Hoàng and Hùng used to have. The middle-aged Hoàng, who is supposed to have regained his memory, happily watches them in tears, adding the last colours to the rainbow on his painting. The image of the little boys symbolises the next generation but they have now seen the end of the tragedy. The rainbow in Hoàng's painting is no longer a pale and colourless one but has now become a vivid and colourful one, representing the growing awareness and tolerance of homosexual people in Vietnamese society. Given that the rainbow is an international symbol for gay identity and for diversity, the movie demonstrates an expectation of social progress in acknowledging and embracing a broad spectrum of sexual identities.

As the movie *Rainbow without Colours* was created in 2014 and screened in 2015, its 'current

time' is speculation about the future. In one scene at the beginning of the film, Hoàng is portrayed as a mad man who wanders around in a dirty white gown and a veil on his head, which makes him look like a bride. He gets garbage thrown at him by kids who shout at him: 'Crazy gay man!'. Given the prospective timing of 2028, which is 14 years ahead from the creation of the movie, it presents a pessimistic view of social attitudes towards non-normative gender and sexualities. The year 2035 when it is supposed that there will be a happy ending for homosexual people is also very far in the future.

In regards to LGBT politics in Vietnam at that time, after many years of advocacy for LGBT rights in the lawmaking process by Vietnamese non-governmental organisations (VNGOs), the year 2013 marked an important change in the political and legal environment for Vietnamese LGBT people, with the decriminalisation of same-sex wedding ceremonies through *Decree No. 110/2013/ND-CP* which replaced *Decree 87/2001/ND-CP* (Government of Vietnam 2013). This removed the fine on same-sex wedding ceremonies.[36] This is also reflected in the amended *Law on Family and Marriage* of 2014, which removed clause 5, article 10 in the old *Law* of 2000 forbidding same-sex marriage ceremonies. Despite not forbidding *ceremonies*, clause 2, article 8 of this *Law* of 2014 states, however, that the 'State shall not recognise marriage between persons of the same sex.' Changes in legislation related to homosexual relationships suggest that queer visibility in the public sphere has become less restricted. However, the non-recognition of homosexual relationships implies that anxieties over issues related to family and marriage have yet to be resolved.

It is important to notice that in addition to 'coming out' – the revelation of one's non-normative gender identity and sexual orientation, 'coming home' – the connection with one's family – is an inextricable part of the way to happiness and satisfaction.[37] In the movie *Love*, the two women share happy moments at family dinners and help out each other's families. The parents finally admit that gender/sex is just one among many other factors such as social class and wealth, which used to prevent them from getting together in the past. They thus shift from opposition to support of their daughters' love, which 'will always win'. In *Rainbow without Colours*, the salvation of Hùng's soul and the return of Hoàng to his family so that he can support the next generation can be seen as a happy ending, as the family has finally opened its arms to homosexual children.

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[36] Nghị định 110/2013/ND-CP ngày 24/9/2013 của Chính Phủ quy định xử phạt vi phạm hành chính trong lĩnh vực bổ trợ tư pháp, hành chính tư pháp, hôn nhân và gia đình, thi hành án dân sự; phá sản doanh nghiệp, hợp tác xã [Decree 110/2013/ND-CP dated 24 September 2013, issued by the Government on regulating sanction of administrative violation in the field of judicial assistance, judicial administration, marriage and family, civil judgment enforcement, enterprise and cooperative bankruptcy].

[37] While 'coming out' is popularly seen in Anglophone contexts as expressing one's identity, 'coming home' was found to be a replacement strategy for some East Asian cultures, whereby homosexual people bring their partner home and integrate into the family without addressing their same-sex relationship explicitly (Chou 2001, 36–38).

5.4 Conclusion

Major shifts in representations of homosexual people in Vietnamese mainstream media point to recent changes in social attitudes and cultural understandings of sexuality in Vietnam. As opposed to the definition of homosexuality as gender inversion, homosexual characters in Vietnamese movies and TV shows within the past decade have been portrayed as conforming to normative gender expressions such as gay men performing masculinity. At the same time, the sexual hierarchy which privileges masculinity as being superior renders female masculinity to be less subject to public scrutiny and social stigma. Popular texts in the recent decade have shown more tolerance towards homosexuality by emphasising the discourse of love. The thorough inclusion of homosexual people in the family, however, is still challenged due to unresolved anxieties over conventional Vietnamese family values, especially the reproductive function as part of filial piety.

Positive representations of LGBT people in the media, though, do not necessarily mean that sexual equality has been achieved. In other words, the sympathy of heterosexual audiences for certain types of representations does not necessarily point to a cultural acceptance of queer lifestyles in Vietnamese society. Mainstream popular texts mainly focus on how well homosexual people fit the dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions. In other words, a homosexual couple can be accepted when they are just like a heterosexual couple who are in a committed loving monogamous relationship and wish to get married and have children. Rubin's theory of sex hierarchy – the 'charmed circle' – is reflected in the concept of homonormativity, a term that Lisa Duggan (2003, p. 50) coined to refer to

> a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions but upholds and sustains them while promising the possibility of a demobilized gay constituency and a privatized, depoliticized gay culture anchored in domesticity and consumption.

According to Duggan, mainstream media has advocated for LGBT individuals to be assimilated into heterosexual culture by embracing heteronormative values in exchange for privileged civil rights. That is to say, the public recognition of homosexuality is contingent on being committed to heteronormative values. Such representations of homosexual people are considered by some to be progressive compared to stereotypical images of stigmatised queer people. These representations, however, uphold heteronormativity and marginalise other non-normative forms of gender and sexualities which lie outside that narrow set of conventions.

Chapter 6: LGBT representations in alternative media and their public reception

6.1 Alternative media

The movies and TV shows examined in Chapter 4 and 5 are distributed by traditional mainstream mass media such as television and cinema. The focus in this chapter, however, is placed on alternative media which is circulating thanks to the high degree of Internet penetration in Vietnam in the past decade.[38] The emergence of alternative media also coincides with the nascent lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, and transgender (LGBT hereafter) rights movement in Vietnam. LGBT activism included several events in metropolitan centres across 2012, such as the VietPride celebration in Hanoi, the World Press Photo award-winning exhibition 'The Pink Choice' from Ho Chi Minh City-based artist Maika Elan (also known as Nguyen Thanh Hai), and LGBT flashmobs organised around the theme of 'Love is Love' in Ho Chi Minh City, Hanoi and Danang (AFP 2012; Hanoi Grapevine 2012; Leach 2012). The tremendous gains of the LGBT movement at this time in combination with the rise of alternative media in Vietnam have helped to increase the visibility of LGBT people in the society.

Since 2012, there have been numerous independent films and web series on Youtube which feature LGBT people as main characters such as *Điều tuyệt vời cuối cùng* [The last miracle] (Ho 2014), *My Sunshine* (Chi Pu 2014), *Người luôn đi phía sau* [The one who always got my back] (Che 2014), *Bộ ba đĩ thoã* [My Best Gay Friends] (Huynh 2012–2016), *Trái Cấm* [Forbidden Fruit] (Nguyen 2015–2017) and *Tiệm Coffee cầu vồng* [Rainbow Coffee Shop] (Oril 2013–2014). Most of these series have been funded, directed, and acted in by members of LGBT groups themselves. They thus provide an alternative lens to mainstream media to explore LGBT characters, themes and situations. In addition, the Youtube platform not only makes these films and series become easily available to the public but also makes it easier for viewers to leave their comments on each film or episode. The participation in free and open public discussion of LGBT representations and topics also plays an important role in the LGBT claims of sexual citizenship, as they participate in public or counterpublic discussion.

Among these Youtube films and web series, the sitcom *Bộ ba đĩ thoã* [My Best Gay Friends] (Huynh 2012–2016) is so far the most popular. Building on increasing awareness around and interest in Vietnamese LGBT identities, *My Best Gay Friends* attracted millions of views and thousands of comments per episode (DeHart 2013). In this chapter, I examine representations of mainly male homosexual characters in *My Best Gay Friends* both through close readings of the episodes themselves and through a critical analysis of YouTube comments. In particular, I ask: how do the filmmakers and the audience make sense of homosexuality? What meanings does the representation of the same-sex wedding ceremony in the series convey? What role does family

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[38] Statistics from the World Bank Data (1990–2019) shows that the percentage of the population who use the Internet in Vietnam increased exponentially from 0.25% in 2000 to 30.65% in 2010 and 68.7% in 2019.

play in the construction of sexuality in Vietnam? Throughout, I focus on the ways that portrayals of gay characters differ from conventional gay stereotypes in Vietnamese media, and on the ways in which audiences negotiate the social construction of male homosexuality through online comments. Drawing on textual analysis and discourse analysis, I consider the performance of homosexual characters and the plot of the 13 episodes of the series *My Best Gay Friends* on Youtube. Furthermore, using the 'Youtube comment scraper',[39] I was able to retrieve 23,126 comments generated between 8 April 2012 and 9 September 2017 (I have translated them from Vietnamese into English where necessary). Due to the limited information in the profile of the commentators, it is impossible to trace their sex, gender, sexual orientation or age, except in cases where participants explicitly state their gender and sexual orientation. In this context, my purpose has not been to treat YouTube users as evenly representative of all audience members' responses. Nevertheless, they do provide opportunities to consider a diversity of perspectives around new forms of mediated LGBT identities in Vietnam. As I read through the series texts and the comments, I found three main themes that were repeated across the YouTube discussions: the construction and uniformity of gay identity; homosexuality in the public sphere; and Vietnamese family values. Building on both textual analysis and the survey of YouTube comments, I argue that *My best gay friends* can be understood as a challenge to mainstream understandings of non-normative forms of gender and sexuality in Vietnam, but that for both LGBT and non-LGBT audiences, many key issues persist around stereotyping and caricature, variation and diversity within LGBT identities, and the cultural specificity of sexuality and gender presentation in Vietnam.

6.2 Imagining homosexual men

As I have elaborated on in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 above, images of LGBT people in Vietnamese mainstream media have been found to perpetuate homophobic ideas and stereotypes (Horton 2014, pp. 963–964). In early Vietnamese films with queer themes, such as *Chơi vơi* [Adrift] (Bui 2009), *Cảm hứng hoàn hảo* [Perfect inspiration] (Le 2011), *Trai nhảy* [Bar Boys] (Le 2007) , *Lạc giới* [Paradise in Heart] (Phi 2014), *Đập cánh giữa không trung* [Flapping in the Middle of Nowhere] (Nguyen, HD 2014), and *Cầu vồng không sắc* [Rainbow without Colours] (Nguyen, QT 2015), the plots involve LGBT characters struggling with their sexual orientation, which these characters tend to keep secret. In cases where families and friends do discover this 'suppressed' secret, these stories end in tragedy. On the other hand, in movies such as *Để mai tính* [Fool for love] (Nguyen, C 2010), its sequel *Để Hội tính* [Let Hoi Decide] (Nguyen, C 2014), *Âm mưu giày gót nhọn* [How to Fight in Six Inch Heels] (Tran 2013), and *Nàng men chàng bóng* [Masculine Lady and Feminine Guy] (Vo 2012), male homosexual characters are stereotypically portrayed as 'highly feminine' and obsessed with sex, and thereby serve primarily as comic entertainment. Elsewhere, homosexual men are seen to participate in crimes such as murder or prostitution, with high profile

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[39] This tool was developed by Philip Klostermann to scrape the text, username, and date of each comment, retrieved at http://ytcomments.klostermann.ca/. The comments were collected on 10 September 2017.

examples including the television series *Cảnh sát hình sự* [Criminal Police], *Thế giới không đàn bà* [A World Without Women] (Vu, MT 2004), *Hot boy nổi loạn và câu chuyện về thằng Cười, cô gái điếm và con vịt* [Rebellious Hot Boy and the Story of Cười, the Prostitute and the Duck, also known as Lost in Paradise] (Vu 2011).

Youtube independent films and web-series, on the other hand, pose a challenge to conventional representations of queer people in Vietnam. According to director Khoa, *My Best Gay Friends* was intended to provide a positive depiction of young Vietnamese LGBT people's lives in a tolerant society (DeHart 2013). The director and most of the actors in this sitcom series are members of the LGBT community and *My Best Gay Friends* uses real names or nicknames of the actors for the characters they play, in order to create a heightened sense of verisimilitude with the everyday lives of members of LGBT Vietnamese communities. YouTube also provides a format that invites close connections between producers and consumers. Through user-generated content (UGC), non-professionals can upload content and engage in discussions that have the potential to link LGBT audiences across Vietnam (and in the Vietnamese-speaking diaspora).

My Best Gay Friends consists of 13 episodes and was produced and posted over a period of five years from 2012 to 2017. The first episode opens with the scene of a half-asleep young man, the main character Khoa, who is presented with a birthday cake from his parents. Having turned 20, Khoa's parents believe that he should move out of home, and after giving him a suitcase, they kick him out. Sitting on the pavement, a leaflet falls onto his face, listing requirements for a potential housemate.

> *Bot.*[40]clean, free from infectious diseases, tidy. Being capable of doing housework
> and cooking is an advantage. Must have no boyfriend and must not let boys stay
> overnight under any circumstances.
>
> (Episode 1, Huynh 2012–2016)

In the following scene, Khoa arrives at the advertised apartment, and accidentally witnesses a fight between the apartment owner Rie and his polka dot-clad soon-to-be ex-tenant. Rie is throwing away the other person's belongings, and the fight scene shows two *bots* playing tug of war over a piece of clothing:

> Rie: Oh, is this shirt mine?
>
> The ex-tenant: But I don't want to give it to you [*bà*][41] anymore!
>
> Rie: Are you kidding me? You [*bà*] said you gave it to me the other day. Why are
> you [*bà*] acting like this?

---

[40] Bot is an abbreviation of the English term 'bottom' – used to indicate a male who plays a passive role in a gay relationship as opposed to a top who plays a dominant role.

[41] Bà is a second-person pronoun which addresses the other person as a female subject.

Rie suddenly notices the presence of Khoa and lets go of the clothing, leaving the ex-tenant falling onto the ground and yelling in a high-pitched tone. Rie kicks his ex-tenant and tells him to get lost, and after the ex-tenant gives a quick warning to Khoa, he leaves by shouting at Rie '*Đồ bóng tiện tì!*' ['You ignoble faggot!']. The term *bóng* is often understood as being demeaning and is used in this situation to express the anger of the ex-tenant towards Rie. At the same time, a laugh track is inserted right after the ex-tenant's monologue implying the ironic situation as he also identifies as a gay man.

The main characters in *My Best Gay Friends*, who identify as *bot*, assume certain traits of stereotypical '*ẻo lả*' [sissy] characters. They adopt characteristics strongly identified with femininity in Vietnamese popular culture, such as slim bodies, high-pitched voices, obsession with clothes and appearance, and 'gossipy' personalities, as suggested by the Vietnamese title of the series, *Bộ ba đĩ thoã,* which translates directly as 'The Bitchy Trio'. When *bots* talk to each other, they refer to each other using '*bà*', '*con*', '*má*', '*chị*', '*cô gái*',[42] pronouns indicating 'sister' and/or 'girl' in Vietnamese. A laugh track is inserted many times in scenes where the characters show their effeminacy or bitchiness. There are seven *bot* characters featured in the series and all of them share similar stereotypical characteristics of a 'sissy' gay male. The characters are represented as being familiar with beauty products. In Episode 4, before Khoa's first date with his online boyfriend, his two housemates Rie and Nhat give him a makeover with a manicure, mud mask, earwax cleaning and a painful procedures such as moustache shaving, eyebrow plucking, blackhead nose stripping and leg hair waxing. A scene in Episode 7 shows Khoa putting on a cherry red lipstick in the university restroom, when Van, his rival in love (Van has a secret crush on Thanh), approaches Khoa furiously and asks if Khoa and Thanh are dating each other. Khoa naively explains that they are just friends, but Van threatens Khoa: 'I really like him. So if anyone intends to steal Thanh from me, I will…'. Van then turns to the mirror with his eyes wide open and slowly scratches his fingers on the mirror, creating a screeching sound. Supported by a laughter track, the scratch invokes what is pejoratively labelled as a 'catfight' between two women in stereotypical popular culture, with the ongoing implication that 'feminine' conflicts are trivial compared with 'masculine' ones. Such fights between *bot* gay men to gain the attention of masculine males are frequently depicted throughout *My Best Gay Friends*. In Episode 8, Nhat tries to make friends with a man who lies on the pool chair next to him. As the latter's bottle of sunscreen runs out, Nhat offers him his own sunscreen and secretly admires the stranger's tanned arms and thighs. Nhat's daydream is interrupted by the appearance of the man's *bot* boyfriend, whose face suddenly turns dark once he realises that his poolside boyfriend is using Nhat's sunscreen. Close shots of Nhat and his *bot* rival's face show them quickly exchanging menacing looks. Nhat looks away jealously and wonders how a nice guy could be in a relationship with 'that

---

[42] Vietnamese pronoun use varies according to age, gender, the relationship between participants and the context of use. Normally the pronoun clearly dictates the gender identity of the person mentioned and it can be used for all persons (first, second and third). This contrasts with the female pronouns bà/con/má/chị/cô and male pronouns ông/thằng/ba/anh/chú.

bitch'.

Effeminate characters are commonly played for laughs in Vietnamese mainstream media. Flamboyant Miss Hội in the comedy movie *Để mai tính* [Fool for Love] (Nguyen, C 2010) was so popular that Hội moved from a secondary character to the main protagonist in the film's sequel, *Để Hội tính* [Let Hoi Decide] (Nguyen, C 2014). The scornful fashion designer Danny in *Âm mưu giày gót nhọn* [How to Fight in Six Inch Heels] (Tran 2013), the vulnerable cleaner Lâm in *Những nụ hôn rực rỡ* [Vibrant Kisses] (Nguyen 2011), and the devious madams in *Gái nhảy* [Bar Girls] (Le 2003) and *Gái Nhảy 2: Lọ Lem Hè Phố* [Bar Girls 2] (Le 2004), are all represented in the form of gender 'inversion', wherein male homosexuality is marked through the adoption of typically 'feminine' characteristics. Khuat, Le and Nguyen (2009, p. 321) explain that the deep root of stereotypes and prejudices against homosexuality in Vietnam can be attributed to the binary gender system, in which 'two sexes' are believed to complement each other. Furthermore, in many Vietnamese contexts, the most significant purpose of sexual activity is reproduction for the purpose of carrying on the family line. Failure to perform the expected gender roles and reproductive norms disturbs these norms and can lead to stigmatisation. Khuat et al. (2009, pp. 301–302) also point out that due to the conflation of sex, gender and sexual orientation, Vietnamese mainstream media tends to portray homosexual men as being feminine and homosexual women as being masculine.

In the YouTube comments for *My Best Gay Friends,* the diverse choice of vocabularies for gender and sexual identities, and the homophobic insinuations of particular word choices, suggest widespread disagreement about the links between 'effeminate' masculinities and gay Vietnamese identities. While the English title of this web-series is *My Best Gay Friends*, some YouTube commentators believe that the term 'gay' should not be used for effeminate men. As I have indicated above, *bot* is a commonplace term used within LGBT discourse in Vietnam:

> hình như đều là Bot đúng hok?nghe nói có nhận xét rằng các bạn dẹo quá mức, nhưng riêng mình: không dẹo thì làm sao là Bot dc ha..^^
>
> [It seems that all of the characters are Bot, doesn't it? I saw some comments saying that you guys are too effeminate, but in my opinion, you can't be bot without effeminacy.]
>
> (se hyun, 5 years ago)[43]

However, rather than *bot*, many commenters use the vernacular term '*pê đê*' [pederast], a more derogatory term for homosexual males. Vernacular terms such as *pê đê* and *bóng* are frequently used to refer to a male homosexual who also has feminine attributes, and the degree of emphasis around these attributes determines whether he is a *bóng kín* [closeted shadow/closeted gay man] or

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[43] Youtube does not indicate the exact dates of the comments but only expresses the timestamp approximation rounded to number of days, months or years. As most of the comments were around the time the series were published in 2012 and the comments scraping was done in 2017, the timestamps are shown as '5 years ago'.

a *bóng lộ* [open shadow/open gay man]. One YouTube user explains that the reference of the term 'gay' is reserved for 'mature' and discreet or closeted men, whose appearance and behaviours conform to normative forms of gender expression:

> Pêđê là bóng lộ nhìn la biết , Gay thì kín , nhìn ko ai biết như Ricky Martin , Cao thai sơn
>
> [Pêđê is 'bóng lộ' [open gay men], whom you can tell by looking at them. Gay men are closeted ones that no one can tell such as Ricky Martin or Cao Thái Sơn [a Vietnamese male singer]
>
> (Tu Anh, 5 years ago)

As this comment obliquely indicates, fine-grained distinctions are frequently made between acceptable and unacceptable versions of homosexuality and effeminacy, such that distinct varieties of homophobia can be detected in YouTube comments. For example, sceptical attitudes toward 'effeminate' male characters can be seen in many YouTube comments:

> mình thực sự là ko có thành kiến với gay. nhưng mình rất dị ứng với những cử chỉ \"ẻo lả\", rồi đàn ông con trai với nhau mà lại xưng hô là \"bà nọ\", \"bà kia\". nếu những người bình thường vào đây xem thì sao, họ lại càng có thêm nhiều những ác cảm về giới tính thứ 3. dù sao cũng chúc các bạn có 1 bộ phim thành công.
>
> [I really have no prejudice against gay people. But I have an antipathy to 'effeminate' manners, and the way you boys call each other 'sister'. What if a normal person watched this show? They would have a stronger aversion to the third gender.[44] Anyway, I wish you guys would have a successful series.]
>
> (Việt Hưng Cao, 5 years ago)

This commentator explicitly refers to normal (heterosexual) people, thus rendering homosexuality as 'not normal'. The link between *pê đê* and explicit homophobia is complex. For example, there are some *My Best Gay Friends* viewers who are seemingly sympathetic to the need for LGBT representation, but who nevertheless distinguish effeminate *pê đê* identities from what they consider to be more legitimate homosexual identities:

> Làm ơn đi mấy cha ơi mấy cha mà GAY cái gì cái này là PÊ ĐÊ ..... (theo tiếng Pháp đấy) Gớm quá đi dẹo dẹo là mún ói ..... Gay người ta chín chắng chỉ là 2 đứa con trai thích nhau thôu còn cái này là biến thái mẹ nó rồi
>
> [These guys are not GAY, but PÊ ĐÊ .....(a term derived from French). Their effeminacy is disgusting. Gay men are mature. They are just 2 guys falling in love with each other while these people are perverted.]
>
> (Tô Nguyễn Đăng Khoa, 5 years ago)

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[44] The third gender/the third world [giới tính thứ ba/thế giới thứ ba] is a vernacular term to signify non-normative forms of gender and sexualities.

Furthermore, while *pê đê* is generally understood to have negative connotations, it is worth noting instances where *pê đê* is distinguished from even more derogatory terms, such as those linked to perversion:

> chính xác đây là những người muốn làm con gái luôn nhưng kẹt ở thể xác trai nên gọi là pede. Nhưng biến thái thì là ko phải từ dành cho họ.
>
> [In fact these people want to become women but got stuck in male bodies, so they are called pede. However, perversion should not be a word for them.]
>
> (Jesse Me, 5 years ago)

To understand these wide variations in the use of the term *pê đê* (and adjacent terms, such as *bot* and *bóng*), we need to understand the perceived relationships between gender and sexuality in the Vietnamese context. The comment that they are 'women but got stuck in male bodies' needs to be understood in the context of cultural understandings of sex, gender and sexual orientation, as I explain below.

In the Vietnamese context, the gender/sex construct known as *giới tính* broadly intertwines biological sex, social gender, sexual orientation, and spiritual or karmic gender[45] (Newton 2012, p. 200). In this context, there is a widespread cultural understanding of homosexuality as coextensive with gender inversion, such that Vietnamese media representations commonly link homosexual males to effeminacy. Although this association can also be found in some Anglophone contexts, it is worth noting that English loanwords such as *gay*, *les* [lesbian], *bi* [bisexual], *trans* [transgender] do not entirely capture these valences around *bot, bóng kín, bóng lộ* and *pê đê*, which each combine sexual orientation with a concept of gender identity. Vietnamese non-governmental organisations (NGOs) often prefer to translate international LGBT terminology in order to combat negative slang terms such as *pê đê* (Newton 2014, p. 256). At the same time, this does not mean that the use of humour around 'male effeminacy' for the *bot* characters in *My Best Gay Friends* is necessarily harmful. The concept of masculinity can be understood, following Judith Butler (1988, p. 520) as a 'stylized repetition of acts' that many men learn to perform, regardless of their sexuality. For this reason, the proposition implicit in many YouTube comments that 'acting straight' would be preferable to male effeminacy can reify hegemonic masculinity and reinforce misogyny and could further marginalise gay men who do not conform to these expectations (Clarkson 2007, p. 205). While the stereotype of effeminate *bot* is usually perceived to be negative, it can nevertheless challenge dominant heteronormative norms around masculinity in Vietnamese society, a function that becomes clearer when we consider the contrasting term, *top*.

6.3 'Top' and the politics of same-sex marriage

While effeminate *bot* gay men are the main characters of the web-series *My Best Gay Friends*, the series also represents non-effeminate gay men, known as *top*. *Top* is also an English loanword

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[45] Ibid.

which refers to gay men who play an active role in a male homosexual relationship. A scene in Episode 4 features the first date between Khoa and his online boyfriend, who identifies as *top*. On location in a coffee shop, the slow-motion alternating shots of Khoa sitting at the table and his boyfriend entering the coffee shop deliberately contrasts with the 'feminine' Khoa, wearing peony lip balm and a flamingo pink shirt, and the masculine *top* boyfriend wearing a beret, a striped top and a pair of grey jeans. Responding to this scene (and others), Youtube users explain the terms *bot/top* to each other, with a general consensus that a homosexual relationship is constituted of one masculine/husband/dominant partner and one feminine/wife/submissive partner.
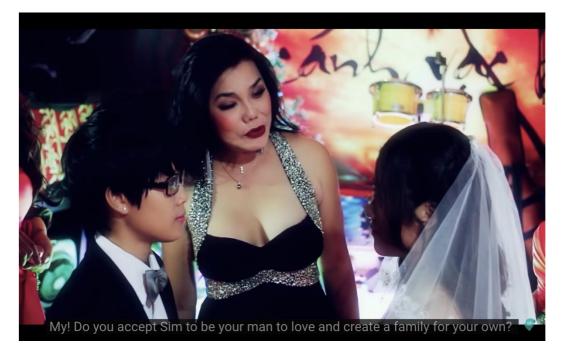
> Bot có ngĩa là vợ đó pn , top là ck pn hĩu chưa ????
> [Bot plays the wife role, top plays the husband role. Do you understand?]
> (doremon u, 4 years ago)
>
> Trong quan hệ Gay, Bot là con gái - Top là con trai :D
> [In a gay relationship, bot is a girl - top is a guy.]
> (EndY Lill, 4 years ago)

This heteronormative logic of female and male 'roles' in relationships shapes a range of relationships in *My Best Gay Friends* – most notably the wedding ceremony of My and her partner Sim in Episode 9 of Season 1.

My, the long-haired feminine partner, is dressed in a white wedding dress and a white bridal veil. Sim identifies as a 'trans-guy' or 'trans-man', has short hair and wears a black suit. While this seems like a heterosexual coupling of male and female, these characters also subscribe to the idea of '*đám cưới đồng tính*' [same-sex marriage], perhaps to indicate the potentially queer aspect of the relationship. The wedding ceremony is organised in a restaurant with the participation of their friends and family, but the event is interrupted by two restaurant staff, who say that the wedding ceremony between two persons of the same-sex violates the law and thus needs to be terminated. The couple change the location to another restaurant owned by Khoa's friend (a gay man), and after the couple exchange rings, the celebrant declares: 'I now pronounce you husband and wife.'. This relatively lavish episode was filmed despite some obstacles. In a meeting with fans, the creator Khoa talked about his restricted budget during the creation of the show (dangkhoadeptrai 2016), and this drove him to contact the transgender singer Cindy Thai Tai to ask for sponsorship in renting her wedding boutique for the filming. At the same time, she also stars in Episode 9 as the wedding boutique owner and the celebrant of the wedding ceremony and joins a cast for the episode that represents various forms of gender and sexuality, including *bot* and *top* gay men as friends (dangkhoadeptrai 2016, 31:16).

Figure 5 Sim and My exchanging wedding vows

Source: *Bộ ba đĩ thoã* [My best gay friends] (Huynh 2012–2016).

At the time when Episode 9 was produced in early 2013, the National Assembly of Vietnam was considering the legalisation of same-sex marriage (Zaimov 2012). In the former *Law on Marriage and Family* of 2000, the National Assembly of Vietnam forbade marriage ceremonies between people of the same sex (clause 5, article 10) (The National Assembly 2000), and the act of '[m]arriage between persons of the same sex' was subject to a fine of between VND 50,000 and 100,000 (2.5 to 5 US dollars), although this has since been removed (clause 1, article 8, *Decree 87/2001/ND-CP*, Government of Vietnam 2001; see also Morgan 2013). This decree criminalised same sex marriage *ceremonies*. At the time of writing same-sex marriage is still not recognised in Vietnam. In the heat of the debate on same-sex marriage in Vietnam, *My Best Gay Friends* helped to accentuate the issues facing the LGBT community. The narrative that 'love does not discriminate' links homosexuality to other causes of discrimination such as race, age or religion and thus allows heterosexual audiences to view homosexual people as disadvantaged:

> hay quá à \nđây gọi là tình yêu ko phân biệt giới tính \ntuổi tác \nvà tiền bạc
>
> [Great! This is love regardless of gender, age and money.]
>
> (Pham Nguyen Qugnh Giang, 1 year ago)
>
> Nếu tình yêu là sự bình đẳng về giới tính tuổi tác, thì hy vọng một ngày nào đó ko còn có chữ đồng tính, bê đê, gay, les trước những tình cảm đẹp. Tập này ý nghĩa lắm.

[If love is about the equality in gender and age, then I hope one day there will be no such terms as 'homosexual', 'bê đê'[46], 'gay', 'les' in beautiful love. This episode is very meaningful.]

(Hà Xù, 4 years ago)

In an interview featured by *Asia Calling*, the creator Khoa argues that his show allowed people to explore the LGBT world and inspired many young LGBT people in Vietnam to gain the confidence to come out, especially to their parents (KiniTV 2013). The wedding ceremony, in particular, can be read as a challenge to both legal and social constraints around same-sex relationships, and perhaps for this reason, received positive comments from many viewers:

hay quá....... mơ ước có 1 cái đám cưới như vậy, dù cho có bị phạt 1tr hay 5tr cũng bằng lòng :)

[Great… I wish I would have such a wedding ceremony. I would be pleased even if I were fined 1 million or 5 million dongs (equal to 50 to 250 US dollars).

(Kha Vương, 4 years ago)

bộ sống ở thế giới thứ ba là mang tội sao mà không được yêu không có được cái quyền hạnh phúc,dị tính chỉ được số đông ,lấy cái đông ăn hiếp cái yếu ,lấy cái vô lý để bắt nạt những người yếu thế,hỏi thử cái xã hội này công bằng chỗ nào

[There is no reason why belonging to 'the third world' is guilty and thus has no right to love and to be happy. Heterosexual people are just the majority picking on the minority, using irrationality to bully disadvantaged people. Then on what basis can this society be deemed equal?]

(Tran Van Can, 4 years ago)

At the same time, these comments were accompanied by more vitriolic contributions to the YouTube discussions:

2 bà ô môi màu mè thấy ớn.\nko tiền cũng đua đòi làm đám cưới, suy nghĩ đúng kiểu trẻ trâu.\ncứ sống với nhau là đc rồi.

[Such two snobbish dykes! Having no money but insisting on organising a wedding ceremony. Such a childish thought. It would be fine to just live together.]

(Lê Toàn, 3 months ago)

This commentator does not explicitly oppose homosexual relationships (although this may be implied). However, they believe that a wedding ceremony is not necessary and that My and Sim should just live together and keep a low profile; that is to say, much like the narrative presented in the episode itself, a lesbian couple is asked to keep their intimacy more 'private' in relation to a heteronormative public sphere.

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[46] Another variation of the term pede [pederast].

Although Episode 9 received much praise for its political message, the same-sex wedding ceremony raises concerns about the restriction of visibility of non-normative forms of gender and sexuality in the public sphere. On the one hand, the marriage of a woman and a trans partner could be seen as challenging existing structures of gender and sexuality. On the other hand, by adhering to heterosexual ideals of a loyal relationship with one masculine partner and one feminine partner, the representation of the same-sex wedding ceremony embodies the heteronormative logic of masculine and feminine complementarity (also implied in many *bot/top* narratives. In 'Thinking Sex', Gayle Rubin (1993, p. 153) describes a sex hierarchy in which 'marital, reproductive heterosexuals are alone at the top erotic pyramid'. This creates a charmed circle of 'good, normal, natural, and blessed sexuality' and the outer limits of 'bad, abnormal, unnatural, and damned sexuality' (158). Throughout *My best gay friends*, there is no sexual scene between any couple, except for the 'stolen' kisses of two couples in the final episode. In this regard, homosexual relationships are de-eroticised to the emotional connection between the characters.

An important scene in Episode 9 features the appearance of My's mother, who comes to attend her daughter's wedding ceremony. Although she is not happy about the wedding ceremony, she still expresses her support for the couple's 'true love'. The attendance of the mother represents another important aspect of LGBT life, which is family acceptance. Above, I discussed the meaning of same-sex relationships in the public sphere. Because marriage and family are bound together, in the following section I will explore the meaning of family values for homosexual relationships and LGBT people in general.

6.4 Homosexual people in the Vietnamese family

Family is highly valued in Vietnamese society, and family-centred Confucian ideology has been the foundation of Vietnamese discourses on sexuality (Khuat, Le & Nguyen 1998, p. 57). In this context, a son is perceived to be important to the family lineage and is expected to reproduce and maintain connection to the ancestors (Blanc 2005, p. 664; Horton 2014, p. 965). Similarly, a daughter or daughter-in-law's filial duty relates to her ability to produce sons and to demonstrate morality (Horton 2014, p. 965). In many East Asian societies, the family-kinship system is the basis of a person's identity rather than erotic object choice, as is often assumed in Anglophone contexts (Chou 2001, p. 27). When a son or a daughter is engaged in a homosexual relationship, they are often perceived to have abandoned the filial duty of continuing the family line. Chou (2001, p. 36) therefore suggests 'coming home' as a replacement for 'coming out', which is the process of identifying oneself with the LGBT community and disclosing that identity to others. 'Coming home' is a strategy whereby homosexual people integrate their partner into the family by introducing them to the family without addressing their same-sex relationship explicitly (Chou 2001, p. 38). Newton (2012, pp. 206–207) studied the meaning of the term 'coming out' among Vietnamese lesbians and found that some lesbian respondents would answer 'no' to the question 'Have you come out yet?' to specifically refer to whether or not they have disclosed their identity

to their immediate families. That is to say, home or the family shapes homosexual identity and plays an important role in homosexual lives.

My Best Gay Friends makes explicit efforts to change perceptions of queer couples in relation to familial norms. The wedding ceremony of My and Sim ends on a happy note: My's mother appears at the ceremony to express her forgiveness. After the wedding ceremony, she manages to convince My's father to accept their daughter's relationship. The three main characters in *My best gay friends* have come out and have been accepted by their parents. In a phone call with his mother in Episode 4, Khoa's mother calls him to ask about his first date with his online boyfriend and mentions that she would like him to find a good boy who can love and treat him well. In the wedding ceremony in Episode 9, Nhat's mother refers to him as 'daughter' instead of 'son', and pays compliments to his cross-dressing bridesmaid. She also takes him home to stay with her in order to control his obesity for fear that he will not find a husband (Episode 12). There is no conflict between the characters and their parents over their sexual orientation or gender expression. The range of relationships in the series pressents 'serial monogamy' whereby they end one monogamous relationship with the previous partner and move on to another partner. In the final episode, they all find love or the promise of love. Khoa kisses his shy schoolmate on New Year's Eve under the fireworks. Rie is kissed by his boyfriend who has to fly to Thailand for his family's business as a promise that he will come back. Nhat, the remaining gay man in the trio, accidentally bumps into a handsome guy at the airport before he vanishes, which might be a teaser for a new season of the series in the future. Overall, a happy ending for the characters is a monogamous relationship and the family acceptance of their sexualities. This differs from some of the movies discussed above in chapter 4, where homosexual characters are often estranged from their families.

There are, however, lingering anxieties about same-sex relationships in many YouTube comments on *My Best Gay Friends* concerning the issue of reproduction as filial piety.

> tôi không phải người đồng tính hay left ,chỉ bình thường như bao người khác,cũng ủng hộ mọi người sống thật với giới tính của mình nhưng không đồng ý đám cưới đồng tính điều đó làm suy thoái giống nòi,giá như có thuốc gì đó điều chỉnh lại giới tính ban đầu thì tuyệt ,ko phải đám cưới trong clip này đâu nha, ý mình nói là ở ngoài đời

> [I am not gay or les[47], just a normal person like anyone else and I also support people to live true to their sexuality. However, I don't support same-sex marriage because it will deteriorate the race. I wish there were some kind of medicine that could adjust their 'giới tính' [gender/sex/sexuality, in this case is closest to the meaning of sexual orientation] back to their original one, which would be great. I don't mean the marriage in this series. I mean in real life.]

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[47] The original comment can be roughly translated as 'I am neither đồng tính [homosexual] nor left [mispell of les]. The commentator conflated 'homosexual' with 'gay', and misspelled the term les [lesbian].

(phuc nguyen trong, 4 years ago)

As in other comments noted above, the use of the words 'normal' for heterosexuals renders homosexuals as 'not normal', despite the superficially supportive tone.]

nhà thằng Rje đoản hậu ghê. có 2 cái súng thì tịt ngòi. đáng tiếc thay cho 2 bác ghê... không đẻ đc là hiếu bất hiếu nhất\n\nthua

[Rie's family is so unfortunate. There are 2 guns which cannot fire. I feel sorry for their parents. Being unable to reproduce is the most filial impiety. I give up.]

(Phong Trương Hùng, 5 years ago)

The anxieties over homosexuality are backed up by the lack of marriage and family as a foundation for a relationship. Homosexual relationships are thus viewed as fleeting and having no future.

đã là gay thì làm gì có tình yêu thích thì yêu chụm lại ko thích thì rã ra đã vậy còn dẫn đến các *tệ nạn xã hội* như vừa rồi tình yêu của gay chém giết…

[Love is not for gay men. They get together and then separate. It also leads to *social evils* such as recent murdering cases of gay men.]

(Trúc Lân, 4 years ago, emphasis added)

The term *'tệ nạn xã hội'* [social evils] in the quoted comment is compatible with the official campaign launched by the Vietnamese government in the post-renovation period ('*Đổi mới'*) from the mid-1980s onwards.[48] The term 'social evils' is a vague category, which refers to behaviours that are seen to have bad consequences for families and society, such as drug and alcohol use, gambling, prostitution, domestic violence and homosexuality (Rydstrøm 2006, p. 284). A study conducted by the Institute for Studies of Society, Economy and Environment (iSEE) and the Academy of Journalism and Communication (2010, p. 17) found that the media in Vietnam portray homosexuals as having a 'corrupt personality and morality' in an obviously biased way. Twenty-nine per cent of the sample newspaper articles from 2004 to 2008 referred to crimes in many forms, from stealing, robbery, to murder and trafficking. In this context, homosexual relationships have been commonly represented as purely physical and erotic connections, rather than expressions of intimacy, friendship, or love. The celebration of the same-sex wedding ceremony is a response from the filmmakers to this perspective. As discussed above, the same-sex couples in the series adhere to the 'good sex' notions of monogamy, loyalty and emotion. Although the female couple Sim and My are having financial problems, they insist on celebrating their wedding ceremony in order to 'make this relationship meaningful and durable' (Episode 7, 21:14). In the absence of legally-recognised same-sex marriage, a same-sex wedding ceremony represents the wish to affirm and consolidate the relationship. In other words, the celebration of the relationship allows homosexual couples to form a family, which is the foundation for the

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[48] On Đổi mới, see Rydstrøm 2006, p. 283.

prosperity of their relationship. Bringing the visibility of same-sex marriage into the public sphere is also important in claiming sexual citizenship (Maree 2016, p. 16).

6.5 Conclusion

> t/c của mấy bạn dễ thương thật..nhờ film này mà mình thay đổi hẳn suy nghĩ về TGT3 ^^
>
> [Your personalities are lovely. Thanks to this series, I have changed my thoughts about 'the third world' [non-heterosexual people].
>
> (Pehi Komi, 4 years ago)

The Youtube web-series *My Best Gay Friends* has increased the visibility of LGBT people in Vietnam and contributed to a change in attitudes towards the LGBT community. The recent growth of social media has provided young people with tools to explore and shape their identities in new ways and to overcome the restrictions of conventional media. Instead of miserable gay men, audiences are now exposed to representations of homosexual people who proudly identify as gay and lesbian. This visibility motivates us to rethink the ways of imagining homosexual people in Vietnamese society. At the same time, the characterisation of gay men with 'feminine traits' for comedic relief is still quite common in media texts, and points toward the tenacity of certain heteronormative understandings of gender identity in Vietnamese society. As noted above, the conflation of gender identity, gender expression and sexual orientation in Vietnamese culture continues to produce an understanding of homosexuality as gender inversion and perversion. Furthermore, while *My Best Gay Friends* made important contributions to public debate at a crucial time during political deliberations around the *Law on Marriage and Family,* binaristic gender roles in same-sex marriage may be viewed as a way to assimilate homosexual couples into heteronormative society, especially with the emphasis placed on one 'masculine' partner and one 'feminine' partner, and with the strong moral weight placed on marriage and monogamy. While *My best gay friends* does point to ways in which new forms of media can provide opportunities for enhanced LGBT representation, future engagements with queer visibility in Vietnam need to take into account the ways that familial institutions – marriage, reproduction and 'filial piety' – both promise new sites for inclusion but may also foreclose more difficult conversations around gender and sexual diversity.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

7.1 Discussion

Over the past decade, the visibility of members of the LGBT community in the public sphere in Vietnam has significantly increased. Positive changes in legislation, social awareness and cultural representations have allowed more discussion on issues relating to LGBT rights. In this thesis, I have examined such changes in chronological order and their intertwined connections over 15 years from 2004 to 2019. Through studying the cultural texts and evidence and placing them in the Vietnamese legal, cultural and societal contexts, I aimed to seek answers to the research questions that I raised in the Introduction to this thesis. The ultimate goals of this research were stated in the Introduction (Chapter 1), as follows:

The goals of this research are:

- understanding the visibility, characterisation and representation of LGBT characters communicated to the public, based not only on time frame but also in cultural, political, economic and global contexts;

- analysing social debates prompted by LGBT representations and mapping social attitudes using the evidence of social media posts;

- understanding the role LGBT media has played in the development of more visible LGBT politics in Vietnam.

Among major changes within the LGBT movement in Vietnam, the most remarkable changes can be attributed to reforms that have made the law more LGBT-inclusive. In Chapter 2, I listed all of the legal issues for homosexual people and transgender people in Vietnam and changes in the legislation to tackle those issues. The two major changes in legislation in Vietnam include the amendment of the *Law on Marriage and Family* of 2014 and the *Civil Code* of 2015.

In the previous legislation, Article 10 of the *Law on Marriage and Family* of 2000 listed forbidden forms of marriage which include marriage 'between persons of the same sex' (Clause 5) (The National Assembly 2000). In the amended *Law on Marriage and Family* of 2014, same-sex marriage was removed from the list of forbidden acts related to marriage and family institutions (Article 5) (The National Assembly 2014). In the same law, Article 8 Clause 2, however, states that 'The State shall not recognize marriage between persons of the same sex'. This implies that same-sex marriage is no longer sanctioned as in the cases explained in Chapter 2 where homosexual couples' wedding ceremonies were interrupted and subject to a fine from the local authorities. At the moment, homosexual couples are allowed to organise a wedding ceremony at either their own home or a public wedding venue such as a hotel or a restaurant. Same-sex marriage, however, shall not be registered with local authorities and thus has no legal validity. Nevertheless, that same-sex wedding ceremonies can legally occur in public can be seen as

contributing to bringing LGBT visibility into the public sphere, which is an important aspect of sexual citizenship. Although social attitudes toward the LGBT community in Vietnam have become more progressive, the legalisation of same-sex marriage is still subject to careful consideration in future amendments. If same-sex marriage were to be legalised, there would need to be a revision in all relevant regulations such as the family register, determining the marriage relationship, ownership and distribution of property, and the father-mother and child relationship. For couples who do not opt for marriage, the recognition of same-sex civil partnerships with relevant rights and responsibilities of the partners also needs to be considered.

In 2015 the National Assembly of Vietnam revised the *Civil Code*, in which there is a new regulation regarding *chuyển đổi giới tính* (transgender) beside an existing regulation on *xác định lại giới tính* (sex reassignment). According to the old *Civil Code*, sex reassignment surgery was only available to those who had congenital sex defects or were of unidentifiable sex which was thought to need medical intervention. The introduction of the concept of *chuyển đổi giới tính* (transgender) shows that Vietnamese legislation has started to recognise transgender individuals who have a gender identity different from their biological sex. The revised *Civil Code* states that those who have completed the transgender process, which is understood as undergoing gender reassignment surgery, have the right and responsibility to have their family register and identity in alignment with their new gender. This legal change is a momentous turning point for the LGBT community in Vietnam to open up the way for further changes to bring about equal rights for transgender individuals.

The implementation of such law reforms to realise homosexual and transgender people's rights, however, is pending further legal documents to guide the detailed implementation of the legislation in the future. A report conducted by a Dutch organisation for LGBT people called COC[49] Nederland states that during the 14th term of the National Assembly (2016–2020), due to many changes in personnel and priorities for policy development, LGBT rights was not considered as a priority topic to be discussed in the parliament (Kara et al. 2021, p. 24). To be specific, the draft of the *Law on Transgender* was not submitted to parliament for discussion and approval to give priority to other more relevant laws such as the Law on Social Insurance, health care issues for children and drug administration laws (Kara et al. 2021, p. 24). In the absence of legal support and health care quality for transgender people, the majority of them would choose to travel abroad to have gender reassignment surgery, according to a survey on transgender needs in Vietnam (Pham et al. 2019, pp. 10, 31).

In summary, the decriminalisation of same-sex marriage ceremonies in the Law of Marriage and Family 2014, the lifting of fines imposed on same-sex wedding ceremonies and the recognition of transgender individuals in the *Civil Code 2015* demonstrate the enhanced visibility of LGBT people in the public sphere as well as the efforts of the Vietnamese government to reduce

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[49] Cultuur en Ontspanningscentrum (Center for Culture and Leisure).

discrimination against homosexual and transgender people. Vietnamese legislation has evolved to become much less harsh on the LGBT community. Nevertheless, there has yet to be a comprehensive law to create a supportive and protective environment for LGBT people in Vietnam.

In Chapter 2, I also discussed the important influences of international organisations, Vietnamese non-governmental organisations (VNGOs) and civil society on the legal and social changes related to LGBT issues in Vietnam. The rapid growth of these organisations has contributed to bringing the LGBT movements in Vietnam into the global arena. Through the efforts to lobby for law reforms, the prominent Viet Pride events, the establishment of grass-roots LGBT groups, and the pro-LGBT cultural products (films, web series, photography and art exhibitions, and film festivals), these organisations have successfully achieved their mission of changing social perceptions of LGBT people in Vietnam. In my opinion, the most significant change to social attitudes towards homosexual and transgender people is the change in the understanding of notions of gender and sexuality. Vietnamese NGOs (VNGOs) such as iSEE and ICS have continuously communicated new approaches to these notions to minimise the stigma and allow non-normative forms of gender and sexuality to fit better to gender and sexual norms in Vietnam. The understanding of gender and sexuality has now been constructed through notions of LGBT and sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) as opposed to the Vietnamese traditional understanding of 'giới tính' [sex/gender/sexuality] as a term. As analysed in Chapter 3, during the initial phase of the LGBT advocacy movement, these organisations drew a clear line between 'positive' and 'negative' terms for homosexual and transgender people based on these new understandings. My analysis, however, shows that although a system of new terms was generated to include LGBT people into Vietnamese society, these terms often consolidate heteronormative and homonormative norms to which LGBT people are obliged to conform to be accepted.

Also in Chapter 3, I touched on the circulation of new terms and cultural products related to non-normative forms of gender and sexuality under the influence of the globalisation wave. Vietnam is subject to cultural influences of not only Anglophone 'models' but also neighbouring countries such as China, Japan, Korea and Thailand. These Asian cultural waves include the subcultural forms known as *BL* [Boy's Love] culture or *Đam mỹ* [Danmei/耽美/decadence] which feature male homosexual love in the form of manga, fiction, films and web series. It is noteworthy that the Vietnamese Publishing and Printing Department criticised these and issued an official ban on the publication of what they understood as deviant and same-sex romantic and gay themes, especially content from Chinese fiction which was deemed to be unsuitable for Vietnamese *thuần phong mỹ tục* [pure tradition and beautiful customs]. This, however, proves the strong influence of East Asian cultures in addition to the dominant Anglophone cultures. The circulation of LGBT-focused cultural content from Asia and the Euro-American centres has contributed to driving changes in the cultural representations of LGBT people in Vietnam within the past decade.

I examined the changes in cultural representations by closely reading selected movies and series in chronological order in Chapters 4, 5 and 6. I relied on models of representations of ethnic minority groups developed by Clark (1969, p. 20) and Berry (1980, p. 238) to study the shifts in representations across stages/periods and their relationship with legal, societal and cultural contexts. My hypothesis was that representations of LGBT people would progress over time in a way that reduces discrimination and stigma against homosexuality, include LGBT people in society, and demonstrate social progress. Thereby, in Chapter 4 I studied movies and TV shows during the first decade of the 21st century when Vietnamese society still held prejudices against homosexuality. In Chapter 5 I read movies and TV shows in the latter half of the 2010s when the LGBT movement in Vietnam had a certain influence on improving the social awareness concerning LGBT people. In Chapter 6, I put the focus on alternative media, a channel of cultural representations in a counter-public parallel to mainstream media, in order to seek a different perspective on understanding and representing LGBT characters. My analysis not only shed light on the question of changes in cultural representations but also investigated the relationship between such changes and the LGBT movement in Vietnam. The activism which occurs in the counter-publics of LGBT people is shown to have challenged the heteronormative mainstream public sphere.

The most noticeable change is the significant increase in the number of movies and series about the theme of homosexuality and transgenderism over the past 10 years. During the first 10 years of the 2000s, homosexual and queer characters featured in minor roles in very few movies and TV shows (5 movies and 2 TV shows). Within the past decade or so, however, the number of films featuring homosexual and transgender characters as protagonists has increased exponentially (at least 37 movies and series in my selected collection). Along with featuring LGBT and queer characters as main characters, the way they are represented has also shifted. In the initial stage of LGBT movies and series, many of them represented homosexual and transgender characters with reference to the so-called 'social evils' such as HIV/AIDS, prostitution and crimes. LGBT characters then evolved from stereotypically deviant, ridiculous and stigmatised figures as analysed in Chapter 4 into those who fit with heteronormative social norms and deserve sympathy (in Chapter 5 and 6). In particular, thanks to the booming social media platforms, LGBT people have had more opportunities to construct their own images and raise their voices. A typical example is the Youtube series *My Best Gay Friends* (Huynh 2012–2016) which was created by and for the LGBT community. The series plays an important role in allowing the Vietnamese LGBT community to demonstrate their pride and to call for equality. Such shifts in media representation are in a similar vein to the stages of representation of ethnic minorities proposed by Clark (1969, p. 20) progressing from 'non-recognition', 'ridicule', and 'regulation' to the final stage of 'respect'. This is congruous with what Berry (1980, p. 238) identifies as three periods including the Stereotypic Age, New Awareness, and Stabilisation.

Given that representations of LGBT people have progressed towards being more positive over time, I applied queer theory to critically rethink these changes. I dug deep into the beliefs which

construct the meaning of the 'positivity' and 'negativity' of LGBT representations. Placing the films and series texts in Vietnamese cultural and societal contexts, I argue that representations are considered 'positive' when they are deemed to fit prescribed social norms and vice versa. In other words, certain expressions and behaviours are assigned to the relevant gender. Males are supposed to be masculine while females are supposed to be feminine. In addition, according to the 'charmed circle of sexual behaviours' devised by Rubin (1993, p. 13), societies endorse a group of sexual norms to distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' sexual behaviours. Another important aspect in Vietnamese society and some other Asian societies is the importance of family values in which reproduction in order to continue the family lineage is considered to be a demonstration of filial piety. All of these factors intersect and form the characteristics which are seen as being 'good' or 'bad', and thus define 'positive' or 'negative' representations. As analysed in Chapter 5, recent movies and series about homosexual couples who are monogamous, family-oriented, and who demonstrate normative appearance and behaviours are considered to be 'humane' movies and series. LGBT characters in such movies and series are deemed to be deserving of social sympathy and a happy ending. Such representations in general, however, form a rigid mould which LGBT and queer people are pushed to conform to. At the same time, images of LGBT and queer individuals who fail to fit in the heteronormative models are marginalised.

As if to resist such models, Youtube web-series such as *My Best Gay Friends* (Huynh 2012–2016), created by members of the LGBT community, raise concerns about the mismatches between LGBT identified people and heteronormative norms. They do not necessarily have to conform to those norms in order to be included and seen as 'good' LGBT individuals. In Chapter 6 I read social debates in the Youtube comment section about the representation of homosexual characters. My analysis of the reception *My Best Gay Friends* in the Youtube comments found various viewpoints on the judgement of 'positive'/'negative' images as well as 'correct'/'incorrect' understandings of sex/gender/sexuality and the meaning of the letters in the term LGBT. The series embraces the meaning of its original Vietnamese title *Bộ Ba Đỹ Thoã* [The bitchy trio], in presenting stereotypical 'bitchy', naughty and effeminate characters who self-identify as 'gay'. While there is criticism over the representation of effeminate gay characters as 'distorting' the images of homosexual people, the director, who identifies as a gay man, and some other commentators agree that the series provides 'true' portrayals of the members of the LGBT community. The series *My Best Gay Friends* acts as a response to mainstream media by providing a new form of representation from the perspective of the LGBT people themselves.

In the analysis of media representations, I placed the cultural texts in their legal, cultural and societal contexts in order to understand their relationship with the LGBT movement in Vietnam. I argue that the proliferating movies and series with LGBT themes in recent years in both mainstream and alternative media are in sync with the fast-growing LGBT rights movement in Vietnam led by Vietnamese NGOs. As analysed in Chapters 5 and 6, an evident impact of LGBT movements on LGBT representations is demonstrated in the changes in awareness and understanding of gender and sexuality, and the introduction of new terms to refer to LGBT

individuals. As the NGOs applied the notion of sexual orientation and gender identity (SOGI) to define the construction of gender and sexuality, the demarcation of LGBT images between 'positive' and 'negative' also becomes clearer. Terms to refer to LGBT people which are deemed 'positive' or 'destigmatised' such as *đồng tính* [homosexual], *gay*, *les* [lesbian], *chuyển giới* [transgender] show this separation with clear definitions of gender and sexuality. On the other hand, vernacular terms which collapse gender and sexuality such as *giới tính thứ ba* [the third gender], *xăng pha nhớt* [petrol mixed with oil], *bán nam bán nữ* [half-man half-woman] are considered 'negative' and 'stigmatised'. Such shifts in LGBT images and terms are reflected in more and more media products. So to speak, media representations of LGBT people in Vietnam are strongly influenced by the global LGBT movement and the circulation of notions of gender and sexuality from Anglophone cultures.

In summary, media developments of the past two decade in Viet are strongly linked to the LGBT politics and legal developments that have demonstrated increased tolerance towards LGBT people and the influence of international NGOs. My research findings show a significant shift from invisibility to visibility of queer discourse in the mainstream media and its affirmative representations. At the same time, I argue that such normalisation which remains within the confines of binary understanding of gender does not signify respect towards LGBT people and the progressiveness of LGBT movements in Vietnam. The research goals were addressed through an analysis with nuanced views and arguments that encompass multiple perspectives to paint a comprehensive picture of the dynamic field of sexual representations in Vietnam.

7.2 Directions for future research

My research topic about representations of LGBT people in Vietnamese media, particularly in Vietnamese movies and series, can be seen as a novel topic. There are, as yet, not very many studies on related themes. As a result, there are many issues to be explored in further studies.

There is a difference in the visibility of each element in the umbrella term 'LGBT'. In the current media environment in Vietnam, gay men are much more visible than lesbian women and male-to-female (MTF, also known as transwomen) transgender people are also more frequently represented than female-to-male (FTM, also known as transmen) transgender people. Movies and series which feature gay or MTF characters outnumber those which have lesbian or FTM characters. As I explored in Chapter 5 of this thesis, the discrepancy between biological sex and gender expression in males is more stigmatised and less tolerated than in females due to the discourse of masculine superiority. Furthermore, in Vietnamese culture, males, especially those who are the only son or the eldest son are expected to shoulder the responsibility of maintaining the continuity of the family lineage. Therefore, male homosexual relationships tend to be more strongly opposed than female homosexual ones. Media representations of burning issues regarding homosexuality or transgenderism are thus more inclined towards gay men and MTF transgender people compared to their lesbian and FTM peers. Such gaps in visibility mean that, for the

purposes of my study of the LGBT community, in general, representations of gay men and the MTF transgender community were more readily available. Representations of bisexual or queer people in the movies and series were also not available in significant enough numbers to be included in the analysis.

The LGBT community in Vietnam is not distributed evenly across the country. As stated above in my analysis of the movies and series in this thesis, the majority of the plots about homosexual relationships are set in a metropolitan context – Ho Chi Minh City in particular. Because the urban areas provide more opportunities to earn one's living and more support from LGBT organisations, LGBT people find it easier to gain information and knowledge, to connect with the LGBT community and to disconnect from rural areas where there is more prejudice against LGBT people. For this reason, these media representations of urban gay communities are not representative of LGBT people all over the country, including other small cities and rural areas.

Another area for further consideration is the rapid growth of the cinema, TV and social media industry in Vietnam at the moment. During the period I collected data from 2016 to 2020, there were numerous new movies about LGBT people such as *Thưa mẹ con đi* [Goodbye, Mother] (Trinh 2019), *Người vợ ba* [The Third Wife] (Mayfair 2018), Ngôi nhà bươm bướm [Butterfly House] (Huynh 2019) and Lô Tô [Lo To] (Huynh 2017). The discussion could be updated with reference to these newer media texts. Representations of LGBT people have become more and more diverse, providing scope for further research which goes beyond the discussion in this thesis. In addition, the LGBT movement in Vietnam has been constantly growing. In previous studies, Vietnamese NGOs were described as still struggling with enhancing public awareness of LGBT people and reducing social stigma. Nowadays, as Vietnamese society has started to show more open attitudes toward the LGBT community, these organisations have shifted the focus of the advocacy to other issues such as the inclusion of new elements including Intersex, Asexual and Queer people. In my field trip to attend the Viet Pride festival in 2018, I found that these LGBT organisations were making efforts to spread knowledge about the Queer people. For example, Hà Nội Queer is a community group established in 2015 which places a strong emphasis on queer experiences besides the popular LGBT knowledge. This group also hosts the annual Queer Film Festival and runs various activities such as Queer Hub, Queer Zone and Queer Podcast. Future studies are expected to provide an understanding of these newly created LGBTIAQ+ representations.

In summary, gender and sexual identities and media have a complex but meaningful relationship. Media images do not directly reflect reality. Media representations, however, help us to understand more about the cultural and social values, beliefs and institutions which influence our views on LGBT issues. Previous chapters have shown that representations of LGBT people were assimilated into heteronormative norms to include them in mainstream social institutions. Equality is emphasised by showing that LGBT or queer individuals are no different from straight individuals. Based on how well one conforms to heteronormative norms, their images are seen as

'positive' or 'negative, 'good' or 'bad'. On the other hand, queer theory calls into question the reinforcement of the heteronormativity and homonormativity of such 'positive' images. As a result, one media image can be interpreted differently from diverse points of view.

Nevertheless, it is undeniable that the efforts to claim equality and respect for LGBT people over the past decade are worthy of appreciation. The visibility of members of the LGBT community has significantly increased and improved. Yet, there are many limitations in the legal system and in media representations. The perception of a media image as being 'good' or 'bad' depends on each individual's viewpoint. As I mentioned in the opening paragraph of the Introduction, the rainbow nowadays is not limited to six colours. New colours have been added to the palette, such as new colour shades for the Trans, Intersex, Pansexual, Bisexual, Nonbinary, Asexual, Genderfluid, Agender, Genderqueer and Lesbian flags. Each of these colours and shades has its own beauty and meaning. As mentioned in the Introduction (Chapter 1), my ambition when I commenced this PhD project was to contribute knowledge which would help us work towards a more progressive society where non-normative forms of gender and sexualities are not treated as deviant. In the same vein, I hope that my research would lay the foundation for deeper knowledge of the LGBT communities in Vietnam and in the world in legal, social and cultural aspects through the lens of media. Based on such knowledge, programs aimed at social change for LGBT people would be aware of public concerns and social needs in order to develop rational and effective social policy and initiatives. At the end of the day, we aim for an LGBTIAQ+ community that is inclusive, strong, consolidated and forms a rainbow full of colours.

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Table 2 Box office

Film	Year	Revenue (VND)	USD equivalent
Để Mai Tính [Fool for Love]	2010	VND 18 billion	USD 0.79 million
Hot boy nổi loạn và câu chuyện về thằng Cười, cô gái điếm và con vịt [Lost in Paradise]	2011	VND 20 billion	USD 0.89 billion
Để Hội Tính [Let Hoi Decide]	2014	VND 101.3 billion	USD 4.43 million
Yêu [Love]	2015	VND 20 billion	USD 0.89 billion

Source: Various sources (Anh Tai 2015, BHD Movies 2020, Nguyen A 2017, Trong Thinh 2010)