

The Influence of Internalized Homophobia on Vietnamese Gays' Partnering Processes

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the connection between internalized homophobia and the partnering process among gay people in Vietnam. It explores their criteria for finding a committed partner, which is based on perceptions of gender roles, gender expression, and sex roles. It shows that their concepts of an ideal type of partner and relationship are rooted in what they have learned and internalized in a heteronormative environment, which devalues androgynous gender expression and gender nonconformity. It also explores the use of dating applications among Vietnamese gays and how this partnering method can lead to internalized homophobia and discrimination within the LGBTQ+ community. This study expands upon current understandings of LGBTQ+ people in Vietnam and their relationships with each other and contributes to the library of queer studies in Asian, Confucian regions.

Keywords: internalized homophobia; Vietnam; LGBTQ+ community; heteronormativity

they should be (i.e. heterosexual) and how they experience their sexuality (i.e. homosexual or bisexual) (Herek 2004, 6-24). Internalized homophobia attributes LGBTQ+ people with negative stereotypes, stigma, and prejudice about themselves and their queerness based on the social and cultural norms of heterosexuality and heteronormativity. LGBTQ+ people subconsciously turn those ideas inward, believing that they are true. It is commonly experienced through the process of identity exploration and self-acceptance (Cass 1979, 219-35). In addition to experiencing negative mental health consequences, victims of internalized homophobia might even experience the extreme form of internalized negative social conceptions, or "sexual orientation rejection" (Meyer and Dean 1998, 160-86). Most importantly, internalized homophobia forces LGBTQ+ people to conform to a socially stigmatized identity that, at the same time, results in self-hatred and discrimination towards other LGBTQ+ people.

This research sheds light on the influence of internalized homophobia on the partnering process of Vietnamese gay people by taking into account their ideal types of partners. It also demonstrates the nuances of how Vietnamese gay men embrace their sexual orientation and gender identity within a heteronormative environment, as well as their journey to feeling validated within the LGBTQ+ community.

Being Gay in Vietnam: A Heteronormative World

In a survey conducted in 2010 by the Vietnam Institute for Studies of Society, Economy and Environment (iSEE), 87% of the participants did not understand the concepts of LGBTQ+ and the equal human rights that they should garner within society (Nguyen 2020). However, compared to neighboring countries in the Southeast Asian region, such as Singapore, Malaysia, or Indonesia, Vietnam is often perceived as a better environment for LGBTQ+ people to live as there are no legal mandates that are actively discriminatory against homosexual people and homosexuality (Bloomberg News 2015).

Before discussing being LGBTQ+ in the Vietnamese heteronormative world, it is

Kien contacted me through his Instagram when I posted there to recruit participants for this research. He is a 26-year-old gay man living in Hanoi. Kien comes from a small village, a three-hour drive away from the city, where his childhood was full of prejudice from people who said he was too girly and had arguments with his father about how he acted. He was bullied at school for being "different" from other boys. Every time he was told he was not masculine enough, Kien recounted that he tried his best to cover his real personality:

In my high school years, there were a lot of tears every night. I felt uncapacious, I hated myself for not being the same as everybody. I didn't know who I am. Society put a label on me and the village where I came from; everybody seemed to be affected by the traditions from the past and patrilineal culture. I had a crush on a guy in high school, but I couldn't let him know because I was afraid that he would hit me.

His experiences in the past have led him to believe that being gay is not right, and he used to try to shape his appearance and gender expression to conform to society's expectations of manhood. In a heterosexist environment like Vietnam, "compulsory heterosexuality"—the ideology that heterosexuality is assumed and enforced—affects LGBTQ+ people heavily, making it harder for them to come out and live authentically as themselves. It also creates unnecessary hierarchies based on masculinity and femininity (Rich 1980, 631-60). As a consequence of being socially stigmatized, a gay man can have internalized homophobia.

"Internalized homophobia" refers to the inner conflict between what people perceive

important to define “heteronormativity.” The term, made famous by Michael Warner (1991, 3-17), argues that it refers to a normative belief that sexuality and marriage should happen between two people of the opposite sex. Gender identity, on the other hand, refers to how we define ourselves in the continuum of genders. It can be the same as one’s assigned sex at birth or different from it (Stoller 1964, 453-57). Sexual orientation is about who we are attracted to. It can be “straight”—which means you are attracted to heterosexual people, “gay”—attracted to men, “lesbian”—attracted to women, or anything in between. Sexual orientation is a spectrum, and living in a heteronormative world makes it harder for that spectrum to be fluid. This is especially the case among gay/homosexual men, as they have to conform to the norms of masculine heterosexual expression, behavior, appearance, and morals. This can make them feel like being homosexual goes against social norms and they become unable to acknowledge their sexual orientation. These psychological challenges can lead to internalized homophobia.

In *The Velvet Rage*, psychologist Alan Downs (2005) describes how his patients overcome the pain of being raised in a heterosexual world. He divides the route to living authentically as a gay man into three stages. In stage one, when a gay boy grows into manhood, his actions can be praiseworthy and his achievements validated by others, but they can be inauthentic to him. Downs compared the route to their sexuality with “a quest.” For many gay people, the quest can lead them to a traditional heteronormative role, which entails being the man of the family, while others can be led toward sexual conquest. Whichever way they proceed, the result is usually the same (Downs 2005). According to Downs, gay men do not believe in themselves, as the more they seek validation from others, the more unsatisfied they become. The consequence of failing to achieve authentic validation is rage and anger at not being able to live as who they are. Downs further stated that even when gay men are more comfortable with their expression of sexuality, they may have yet to deal with the internally “toxic shame” that continues to hound them; they feel inferior about their sexuality because the world defines being homosexual as something abnormal. This

is when stage two begins. The search for validation happens again at this phase, but instead of being validated by concealing their sexuality, they try to find support to affirm that being homosexual is worthwhile and deserves recognition (Downs 2005). Finally, to discover an authentic life is the last stage. Gay men decide to construct their lives as they want, with their passion and devotion, instead of being dependent on others’ validation of them. However, Downs’ work focused mostly on White middle-to-upper-class gay men who came to him for psychological therapy. Therefore, the concepts of “being gay” and “being homosexual in the heteronormative world” are specific to a Western context. Moreover, the definition of “living authentically” and the three stages of manhood are not universal. In Vietnam, gay men’s queerness and self-authenticity can be experienced and embraced differently, as defined by one of my participants:

I was born and raised in a rural area. Therefore, I did not have any knowledge about what being gay would feel like. Everything I learned when I was younger about being gay is from the discrimination and stigma of my parents. Ever since I moved to Ho Chi Minh City for university, I found myself at peace as I got to know more people who share the same sexual identity as me. I felt freedom in the city as there was no judgment. However, whenever I came back to my family home, I had to “put on a role” of a straight man, talking about getting married to a woman or some sexist jokes. I can only feel like myself when I am surrounded by my LGBTQ+ friends and when I am away from my family.—Nguyen, 22, gay man

Nam, 25, a gay man living in Ho Chi Minh City who had come out to his family, defined “living authentically” in this way:

After coming out, I felt free to express myself to my parents, dress up in any clothing style I like, and behave without having to worry about others’ opinions. It is my definition of “living authentically.” Basically, you can be whoever you want to be and feel the most “you” all the

time. Getting to know my boyfriend, who has also opened up with himself and his sexual identity, is such a blessing for me. I do not hide myself whenever I am with him, and we do not have to conceal our relationship in public.

Rather than feeling validated by others' opinions, my Vietnamese informants defined "living authentically" as feeling comfortable being themselves and having autonomy over their self-expression or sexual identities. To fulfill their authentic selves, they must learn how to disregard heteronormative and homophobic ideologies despite the persistence of heteronormative stigma.

Being homosexual in Vietnam was not taboo until the arrival of Buddhism and Confucianism (Heiman and Cao 1975, 89-95). Homosexuals and transgendered people were seen as "diseased" and living outside social norms. However, they were not criminalized. In the 20th century, under the influence of America, especially the impact of Americans' lifestyle and culture during the Vietnam War, South Vietnam was an open and friendly society with more places for homosexuals to integrate and gather. Although the authority of the Republic of Vietnam at the time disapproved of homosexual activities, Vietnamese homosexuals could meet openly and regularly in luxury restaurants in downtown Saigon (Heiman and Cao 1975, 89-95). However, compared to gay relationships, lesbians earned more empathy and acceptance within society because they could easily be perceived as a couple of friends (Pastostter, n.d.). Heteronormality in Vietnam has therefore had a particularly strong influence on homosexual men, forcing them to conform to the gender role of traditionally-designed masculinity.

Even though the LGBTQ+ movement has been populated in Vietnam with various pride events and mass media coverage, slow changes to the government policy do not align with the efforts made for equality and rights. The lack of sexuality-related curriculum in the educational system demonstrates that it takes a long time for the LGBTQ+ community to earn their freedom in expressing their sexual identities under the law. According to Kate Hodal (2020) of The Guardian, verbal and physical bullying

toward LGBTQ+ people are common within society, as people were taught at school that "homosexuality is a disease" or "mental illness," which puts pressure on students to be heterosexual.

Patrilineal Kinship: The Man's Responsibility

As a country influenced by Confucianism throughout history, Vietnam has a strongly patrilineal cultural heritage. A preference for families to have sons persists throughout the country, especially in the North. Eldest sons often inherit the family property, as well as the responsibility of performing rites on behalf of their deceased relatives, something that women are not allowed to do. Due to the patrilocal norm, the eldest son continues to live in the natal house and care for parents in their old age, and continues the family line by having male offspring (Brown 2012). Patrilineal kinship also places pressure on women who marry the first son to produce male heirs. Having a son is thought to protect a marriage from polygyny, divorce, and even domestic violence (Bélanger 2002, 321-34).

Such Vietnamese traditions, mostly influenced by Confucian teachings, have standardized the ideal image of a man and masculinity. Men are not supposed to have a feminine appearance and must conform to the heteronormative and patrilineal family regime (Horton and Rydstrom 2019, 290-305). Judith Butler, in "Gender Trouble," stated that the configuration of power constructs the binary relation between "men" and "women." They also introduced the concept of gender as performative, which implies that humans are taking on an acting role to be seen as a "man" or a "woman." Butler strongly emphasized that within patriarchal societies, the performance of binary genders shapes the naturalized illusion of binary gender identity. These performative acts have caused "gender trouble" (Butler 1990, 33).

Discrimination toward LGBTQ+ people can make them feel ashamed about their sexual orientation and gender identity. However, each person's experience with internalized homophobia is personal. Many gay people rarely relate to the stories and journeys of

fellow gays. They are on their own, and they have no idea if their sexual orientation or traits are shared by others. Their perceptions of homosexuality are built based on their own understanding of it, which is curated by others – mostly by the heterosexual community (Moss 2001, 1315-34). The knowledge is internalized through time by gay people, constructing their mindset and systematizing their ideology about what is acceptable of a gay man in terms of appearance, behavior, morals, or other phenomena.

This heteronormative environment has a huge impact on society, especially on people's mindsets. Therefore, perceptions of homosexual people are not always positive. "The heteronormative world" that is painted by existing literature is largely informed by the views of the Western world, currently posits a certain tolerance toward gay people. However, there is a lack of research on LGBTQ+ people in Asia and from Confucius post-socialist backgrounds. This research aims to provide a more nuanced look into the Vietnamese gay community and their struggle in embracing their gender expression, queerness, and relationship with broader society. It sheds light on internalized homophobia among Vietnamese gay people through testimonials of how they see themselves in a heteronormative environment, and provides examples that show how internalized homophobia can influence their partnering processes.

Method

This research was conducted in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam. These two cities represent the North and South regions of Vietnam, which are distinct in terms of viewpoints, culture, and tolerance towards the LGBTQ+ community. The qualitative data collection and analysis included one-on-one interviews with participants who are gay, living in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, and through chats with users of the gay dating application Grindr, with the location set in the central area of both cities.

Pseudonyms were used for all participants, 15 of whom identify as gay; 7 currently live in Hanoi and the rest in Ho Chi Minh City. All are in the age range of 20 to 30 years old.

Recruitment occurred on social media, from my personal Instagram account, asking for informants. However, most of the interviewees were recruited from the Facebook groups created for the Vietnamese homosexual community by non-governmental organizations for LGBTQ+ rights.

One-on-one interviews were conducted on the video conference application, Zoom due to travel restrictions and safety concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic. Each semi-structured interview lasted from 45 minutes to 1 hour. The questionnaire was based on their knowledge of internalized homophobia, their status of coming out as well as their viewpoints towards the correlation between internalized homophobia and partnering processes. It also included their criteria in choosing partners as well as questions related to their insights into their gayhood. When the travel bans were lifted, I traveled to both cities for further research in LGBTQ+ bars, using the method of participant observation. I performed observation and short interviews through chats on the popular dating application for gay people in Vietnam called Grindr. While using dating applications as a research tool, there were certain benefits and challenges that I faced. Dating applications, to me, are the easiest and fastest way to encounter the LGBTQ+ people in Vietnam, as there are still not many communities or queer-friendly places where they meet and communicate.

The Construction of Ideal Types: Perceptions of Masculinity Among Vietnamese Gay Men

When asked about their ideal types of men in terms of appearance, personalities, and compatibility, most participants shared the same tendency of idealizing people whose gender expressions and behaviors are as close to heterosexual men as possible. They reported feeling more comfortable around people who are more conventionally masculine and "straight-acting" as they want somebody to protect them. Kien, a gay man whose gender expression is perceived to be gender non-conforming, stated that his first boyfriend, who was "exactly his type," "looks nothing like a gay man at the first impression:"

I still look for those who are more masculine than me because I feel that I need somebody to take care of me, making me feel loved; somebody who is determined in the way they act and speak; somebody who knows what they aim for; somebody who treasures me.

with masculine behavior and appearance. I feel unbearable to be in the same room with gay people who are too ostentatious in their appearance, wearing heavy makeup, or have over-the-top expressions when talking or walking. Sometimes I find them grotesque and trying to get people's attention.—Minh, 23, gay man from Ho Chi Minh City

Heterosexual masculinity is a key component in the development of antigay bias within any society or community. These biases are absorbed by gay people and become internalized forms of homophobia. It is a popular belief in Vietnam that to be masculine, one must be heterosexual. Any male who is not heterosexual is consequently feminine or has a desire to become a woman. Heterosexual masculinity enforces the traditional gender norms, making gay men believe that being homosexual is immoral and that they need to behave in ways that are consistent with the socially constructed ideas of a heterosexual man. Being with a person whose looks and behavior can be perceived as heterosexual is also a method for gay men to avoid the stigma and homophobia of their surroundings. For example, gay men whose gender expressions are close to heterosexual people are perceived as “friends” in the heteronormative environment rather than a couple within a romantic relationship.

Internalized homophobia can result in deriding other people whose gender expressions are more fluid or open, especially those who have come out and are proud of their gender identity or sexual orientation. Gay men with internalized homophobia tend to conform to heteronormative society's stereotypes. In Confucian environments like Vietnam, heteronormativity is inevitable. Therefore, gay men can be exposed to negative ideas about homosexuality and being homosexual, which deeply affects how they see fellow gays as their partners. Internalized homophobia affects Vietnamese gay men in their choices of partner and ideal types, as being with somebody whose appearance and personality are perceived as heterosexual can make them feel validated and accepted both in the LGBTQ+ community as well as the broader society.

Sex Roles and Gender Roles

Several gay participants maintained that they tend to keep a certain distance from androgynous people and do not feel comfortable being in a serious relationship with them. They often labelled their negative impressions of such individuals as being “too feminine.”

Another aspect of understanding perceptions of ideal types among gay men relates to sex roles. In same-sex intercourse, “top,” “bottom,” and “versatile” are the terms to describe them. The “top” is the person who penetrates, while the “bottom” is the person who receives the penetrated engagement. A “versatile” means that a person can do both (Underwood 2003,105). These self-labels not only reflect preferences during sex but also are conflated with gender and social roles, affecting the behavior and expression of gay people. These gender roles in same-sex relationships are rooted in their perceptions of heterosexual couples. The “top” is expected to be the one who upholds traditional norms of masculinity in their behavior and action, to lead the relationship with patriarchal power. The “bottom” is analogous to a woman, and is representative of submission in a gay

I feel comfortable with those who act like straight people, with manliness and enough aggression. Their clothing style or behavior should not be androgynous or too feminine. I want my partner to be someone who can protect me, not too girly to be “sisters.”—Lam, 20, gay man from Hanoi

I tend to keep a distance, sometimes I do judge people who act femininely or too much of themselves. My preference for a partner and also for a friend is someone who looks like a “normal man”

relationship. Conformity in gendered roles puts pressure on gay people in shaping themselves. However, it is crucial to note that heterosexual gender roles are also derived from socially constructed stereotypes and patriarchal norms. This is reflected in Vietnamese society through families that have been heavily influenced by Confucianism's expectations regarding gender norms (Vu and Yamada 2020). There are certain limits for both partners in a heterosexual relationship. Confucianism created a vision of women being powerless against their husbands, and they are submissive to the male's orders and have no decision-making roles in the family (O'Harrow 2021). These concepts and beliefs have been embedded in the mindset of Vietnamese people through generations, creating stratification within heterosexual couples and families. Internalizing these ideas through their upbringing and educational environment, Vietnamese homosexual people embody these socially constructed gender roles and apply them to their partnering processes. Gay people tend to alter their appearance and behavior to correspond with their preferred sex roles so that they can attract other people. Kien, for instance, identified himself as a "bottom," and therefore he feels it is hard to get along or be in a serious relationship with other bottoms:

I met my first boyfriend on the dating app. He texted me first but did not publicize his pictures because he had not fully come out at that time. He looks nothing like a gay man at the first impression, exactly my ideal type. Exactly as I have guessed, he is a top. I have always been looking for a top who has to be more masculine than me because I feel that I need somebody to take care of me, making me feel loved; somebody who is determined in the way they act and speak; somebody who knows what they aim for; somebody who treasures me.

All informants have a clear preference for sex roles in their partnering choices. First, they want to be comfortable in terms of sexual intercourse. Second, they have stereotypical expectations about the correlation between sex positions and gender roles in a relationship.

Especially on dating applications, they often cite their preference frankly on their bio. Ultimately, there is no "natural" connection between gender roles and sex roles, as the participants often assume (Tortora et al., 2020). Such presumed associations are the direct consequence of social stigma in a heteronormative environment and the lack of exposure to homosexuality from a young age. These factors make gay people believe that they should follow the structure and traits of heterosexual romantic relationships. Therefore, the common gender roles of men and women dominate the inward beliefs of gay people, leading to the perception that sex roles can be perceived as social roles in romantic relationships.

Internalized homophobia is thus the result of embodying a stereotypical "correct way of being," made and passed on in the heteronormative world. It has led to discrimination against certain types of gay people. Internalized homophobia makes it harder for gay people to live authentically as themselves, and the partnering process becomes more challenging as they have to find someone who has their preferred sex roles and gender roles.

Coming Out

Coming out is often considered a defining moment in a LGBTQ+ individual's life. Coming out can also be understood as the state of having embraced one's sexual orientation, gender identity, and being open about them with others. The experience of coming out is distinct for every individual. It can be affected by various factors such as upbringing, environment, and perceptions towards one's sexual orientation. The presence of internalized homophobia also plays an important role in the decision to come out (Kahn 1991).

I use the phrase "fully come out" for those who have revealed their sex and gender identity to everybody, including their families, and the term "partially come out" for people who have not told their families but have been open in their other relationships: friends, partners, co-workers, etc. When asked if coming out is an important factor required in the partnering criteria, there were two groups of

ideas among my participants: Those who have fully and partially come out (group 1) would ask their partners to also come out or at least have the intention of coming out in the near future, while those who have not come out and a small group of “partially come out” individuals (group 2) mentioned that they do not require their partners to be open with their sexual and gender identity.

Group 1 indicated that as they are open with their sexuality, and it is comfortable for them to be in relationships with someone who does the same. They do not want to be in a discrete relationship. If their partner has not come out, they prefer somebody who intends to come out because they feel that the relationship has a greater potential for longevity. They also expressed that being in a relationship with someone who has not come out means that they also must “go back to being secretly gay,” which makes it harder for them to fulfill their sense of authentic self. Long, for example, explained the difficulties he faced while being in a secret relationship with someone who had not come out yet:

I do not feel comfortable dating someone who is still “in the closet” as I have publicized my sexual identity; I have the right to express my feelings and behave like myself – a gay man in public. Being in a discrete relationship makes it harder for me as I have to ensure that my behavior and expression, or my actions will not go beyond the boundaries when we are in public. At the same time, we have to act like a couple of male friends when we are outside. All romantic actions or our true feelings can only be disclosed when we are in a private space.—Long, a 22-year-old gay man in Ho Chi Minh City

Group 2 showed less intensity and pressure towards coming out while looking for their partner as they have not fully accomplished this themselves. They respected the long and tragic process of acceptance and revelation; therefore, they understood their partners’ choice of not coming out. They also stated that they feel comfortable and emotionally stable in a discrete relationship. However, a small proportion of individuals in group 2 said that

while there is no pressure to tell each other’s families about their relationships, they should be open among their close friends so they can feel more “comfortable.”

These two contradictory standpoints demonstrate the level of ease members of each group feel about their gender identity and queerness within their specific environment; in this case, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City. The differences in how society perceives the LGBTQ+ community puts pressure on young gay men, forcing them to make the choice of whether to come out or not. Some feel that being with someone who has come out is wrong or will not be validated within the context of mainstream society. Therefore, they prefer clandestine relationships or relationships with those known only in a small circle of friends and relatives.

Hanoi has undergone many changes in its regime and political system, as well as in culture and traditions. As residents of the historic capital of Vietnam, however, Hanoians are still very much influenced by traditional ideas, especially Confucianism and hereditary customs. Therefore, gay men in Hanoi face many prejudices, and pressure to adhere to mainstream gender norms. Many interviewees, for instance, stated that they attempted to alter their appearance and attire to conform to the conservative settings in Hanoi’s public spaces, where verbal and physical aggression towards LGBTQ+ people is common. Coming out in a feudal and Confucius-influenced society is considered a difficult process. A group of Hanoi participants mentioned that they have not fully disclosed their sexual orientation to their families because most of them are not financially self-sufficient. This means that if their families reject them or expel them, they will have nowhere to go. As Kien said:

I am still a student. I have not had a stable job. If I came out to my father as a gay man, he would beat me to pieces and expel me out of the house. A family from the North like us is still affected a lot by tradition and even religion. I cannot see the future of me after coming out, but the suffering is unbearable.

In comparison to traditional Hanoi, Ho Chi Minh City is more "open," with a wider range of gay nightlife and LGBTQ+ scenes. With the arrival and integration of foreign tourists and expats, Ho Chi Minh City adopted greater tolerance and acceptance towards the LGBTQ+ community. Many participants describe it as a "no judgment" city, where they may feel comfortable expressing their queerness and gender expression in public, or even going on a date as a homosexual couple, without fear of being judged by others. Pop culture is one of the key indicators of friendliness toward the LGBTQ+ community in Hanoi. LGBTQ+ people have opportunities, even though there are not many, to express themselves on the mass media in Ho Chi Minh City, gaining understanding and sympathy from a part of the public.

However, during my interviews, gay participants in Ho Chi Minh City still face disfavor from their families. Hoang, a 30-year-old male, said that his mother does not accept his long-term boyfriend as she expects him to conform to heteronormative norms, which means he should get married and have kids with a woman. However, when it comes to seeing other LGBTQ+ people in the media, Hoang's mother does not seem to have such harsh reactions.

Differences in culture and social viewpoints thus affect how gay men in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City view the coming out process. In many instances, internalized homophobia informs the development of a sense of negativity toward oneself. As many have been exposed to antigay bias throughout their lives, some wish to conceal their sexual orientation (Hafeez et al. 2017). This can result in unnecessary stereotypes about outness, which can lead to internalized homophobia, as it makes gays deride people who are proud of their same-sex orientation. One of the most popular stereotypes about gay people who have come out is that they are usually androgynous, or "queer," as they tend to be more open with their gender expression to the public. Oftentimes, Vietnamese gays who have come out are mistakenly perceived to be feminine, which can lead to discrimination against them by those who have not come out. This

correlates with the pressures associated with the proliferation of the ideal types of masculinity among Vietnamese gay men, as mentioned above.

Dat, a 22-year-old gay man from Ho Chi Minh City, faced criticism, stereotypes, and erroneous assumptions from fellow gay people after mentioning that he came out to his family. While using dating applications, he received comments such as "coming out means you can be feminine-acting." Some people he met on these applications feel "pressured" to be with someone who is publicly gay as they have not yet disclosed their sexual identity; they do not want others to find out about them being gay if they go out with him. Dat expressed his concerns about finding a partner in the future as he feels there are more discrete gays who care about other people's opinions than those who love him for who he is and they do not care if he has come out or not. Similarly, Tuan, a 25-year-old gay man in Hanoi, expressed his concerns after having come out and becoming publicly gay:

I have never thought that being an openly gay man, it would be a burden for me to find a partner in Hanoi. Most of the people I have met after I mentioned that I had come out to my family, their first reaction was admiration and asked me if I could keep the relationship in secret, as they have not come out yet. Moreover, they stereotyped me for being "free" to express my queerness all the time, which they cannot do. Some men even told me not to be "too much gay" when I went out with them.

Therefore, having fully come out does not necessarily mean that gay men can live authentically due to certain internalized homophobic perspectives from fellow gays in their community.

In contrast, the state of having "fully come out" can also affect how LGBTQ+ people see themselves and others. They take on the pride of being openly gay and view others who have not come out with the initiative of asking them to be more open with their queerness. All five openly gay men (group 1) prefer to be with

someone who is comfortable with embracing their sexual identity and behavior. As mentioned above, they prioritize those who have already come out while finding partners or encourage their partners to accelerate their final decision to be openly gay. However, for most informants, coming out is a difficult task and requires time and consideration. They need to truly accept and tolerate their gender identity, and deal with their families and consequences, as well as the community among them.

Ultimately, as the heteronormative Vietnamese society “allows” gay men to conceal their sexual orientation as a way to protect themselves from stigma and discrimination, it is mutually understood among gay men that coming out is not an essential component of their gayhood. It is thus alright (among gay men) to have discreet relationships. However, as discussed above, this can have deleterious consequences for individuals. While for many of my participants, coming out is still not an important factor in finding a partner, being in a secret relationship might affect the quality or duration of a relationship, especially if a couple has to be careful about gender identity in public and cannot fully be themselves.

Internal Discrimination within the Gay Community, Dating, and Dating Applications: Safe spaces but not for all

“Are you top or bottom?”, “Masc4masc,” “Looking4now,” and many more. These are the common phrases that are seen on dating applications such as Grindr (exclusively for gay, bi, trans, and queer people) and Tinder (for both heterosexual and the LGBTQ+ community). These phrases, which the users put on their profiles, reflect the preferences and expectations of the person who is using the applications to look for their partners. They position others into boxes (top, bottom, masculine, etc.) and gendered roles, which can become a hurdle for many if they do not fit others’ criteria or preconceptions.

Grindr, established in 2009, is the most popular gay mobile application in the world (Horvat 2016). Its location-based feature

attracted users because they can talk with different people within their geographical area, which is a convenient way to find a disposable meetup or hookup. Grindr is perceived to be akin to a gay bar but potentially scarier and more complicated (Kapp 2011). While people go to a gay bar to meet others who share the same sexual orientation as them, with Grindr, they can stay at home and see if their neighbor is gay or not, or even ask for sexual intercourse with them. Because of its popularity and its special location-based feature, Grindr is the most popular app for gays in Vietnam. It is also a place where ex-pats meet locals. In many ways, the foreign culture of hookups or one-night-stands is learned and practiced by Vietnamese people via Grindr or other international dating apps. The application itself has gradually become a significant aspect of Vietnamese gay culture.

Most informants chose to use dating applications to find their partners, as they mentioned that there are not many LGBTQ+-exclusive activities or places for them to network. Moreover, dating applications make it easier for them to initiate conversations, as they feel comfortable talking about themselves, their sexual orientation, types, and interests. By chatting and getting to know each other before meeting in real life, gay men feel safer and can build a certain amount of trust in others. Moreover, compared to social activities and hangouts organized for LGBTQ+ people, dating applications can keep them from disclosing their actual identity (as they do not have to use real pictures). It is understood among users that people on the apps belong to the LGBTQ+ community. Therefore, for those who have not come out, they have a safe place, and many informants said that dating applications increase their reach and grant them opportunities to find LGBTQ+ partners.

Another reason that participants gave for being on the application is sex, which Grindr makes more accessible and easier than ever. They can choose a person who is also interested in having sexual intercourse with them without having to go to gay bars.

Informants who completely detest the application said that they try their best to avoid using dating applications to find partners. The

most common reason is the judgmental and negative attitudes that these dating applications bring about. As they are picture-driven, people's bodies and images are the focal points. According to my informants, for Vietnamese gays, the archetypes of shirtless and muscular torsos are the most common representations on various apps. They are glorified by others for being masculine, regardless of their chosen sex roles (top, bottom, versatile). Feminine appearance is discriminated against, as they are deemed to be too effeminate and passive. These preferences correlated with the ideal types that gay people mentioned above.

Khanh, a 20-year-old gay man in Hanoi, told me about his experience while using Grindr: "I try to avoid those bodybuilders and masculine-looking men because I think they have heteronormative viewpoints, and they tend to be judgmental." He also became a victim of body-shaming on Grindr, with criticism from fellow users as effeminate, "girly and skinny:"

I recognized Grindr is not a place for me as there was too much negativity and discrimination. However, it is difficult to stop using it as I want to socialize with other gay people and find a partner eventually. I also have tried to change my behavior, worked out, and changed my clothing style so that I can be more like a man. I used to think that this would help me get better exposure to other people on the app. However, I felt afraid that if one day I found a partner, he would not love me for who I really am but for the person I pretended to be.

Through Khanh's experiences of forcing himself to change to fit constructed stereotypes within the gay community on Grindr, we can see how internalized homophobia can lead to discrimination towards other gay people. This often makes dating applications an unsafe place for Vietnamese gays to fully express themselves. Through their choices of images, the users visually showcase themselves and judge each other. Users tend to be obsessed with looks and judge others by their pictures on the apps, often labelling others as too "masculine" or "feminine." Through a few lines on the chat function, a person can make simple

assumptions and stereotypes about another, according to their expectations of how a "top" and a "bottom" should behave. The labels of "masc" (masculine), "femme," or "straight-acting," among others, cause anxiety among gay people about their appearance and behavior. This can lead them to conceal their queerness to fit in the expectations of fellow gays. It can make the partnering process easier, but in the long term, they will not have ownership of their sexual identity and they often absorb the negative stereotypes of internalized homophobia.

Commitment in Gay Relationships

Internalized homophobia is thus a barrier to a genuine and non-judgmental homosexual partnership. The higher the level of internalized homophobia that a gay person has experienced, the more negative their relationship's outcome can be. Herek, Meyer and Dean (1998) state that the unfounded beliefs that LGBTQ+ people are incapable of intimacy or sustaining long-term, stable relationships contributes to prevailing stigmas around being homosexual. Moreover, same-sex relationships' longevity is strongly affected by heterosexism and sexual prejudice.

However, the data collected from my interviews departed from Herek, Meyer and Dean's explanation. More specifically, participants in group 2 (those who have partially come out or have not come out) stated that being in a long-time and serious romantic relationship with a man puts pressure on them to open up about their relationship and sexual identity at some point in the future. This means they have to disclose themselves as gay and acquire acceptance from others (family and other circles). Therefore, they often choose to engage in disposable hook-ups or they have discrete "friends with benefits" arrangements to avoid facing this revelation. The self-devaluation that gay men absorb (under internalized homophobia) impacts how they view and act in a relationship with another person. They often feel "wrong" to be in a relationship with a same-sex person. Their partner is akin to a mirror who always reminds them about their sexual orientation, which does

not fit with the socially constructed beliefs and ideology in Vietnam.

By participating in various types of relationships, including friends with benefits and hookups, among others, those that do not require long-lasting affection can palliate their feelings caused by stigma and internalized homophobia. As Anh attests:

When I was in a relationship with my ex-boyfriend, I forced him not to reveal our relationship as I was scared of judgments and discrimination, even from my close friends. We used to choose dark or empty places in the city to meet as I did not want to be seen. I broke up with him eventually because we had a fight on whether to tell his friends about our relationship or not. Now, I am still single, and I do not want to be in any other relationships as I feel the pressure that one day, I have to reveal my sexual identity. I tend to meet people on dating applications and usually end up having sexual intercourse with them. No strings attached, no promises. These activities eased my mind because I am still in the closet.—
Anh, 25 years old, gay man in Hanoi

Another factor that can lead to internalized homophobia among gay people and their ideas of relationships is the lack of exposure to non-heterosexual identities. Vietnam is not an environment that is free and tolerant for gay people to fully represent themselves, due to traditional beliefs, censorship, and the slow progress toward having LGBTQ+ people represented in public media. Some gay people thus harbor heterosexist prejudice about same-sex relationships or about being homosexual in general. These stereotypes can result in infidelity among gay partnerships and affect the length of their commitment. Among 15 informants, 6 were in a romantic relationship, with an average length of 1 year in duration. For those who are single, 5 experienced same-sex relationships. The reasons for their breakups include “not willing to come out,” infidelity, and conflicts about their sexual expression or queerness. Some were told by their former partners to be more manly or to dress and act

straight. Moreover, bottoms were demanded by tops to be submissive and obedient. This explains how internalized homophobia and heteronormative ideology can lead to discrimination and negative stereotypes even when they are in a same-sex relationship. Gay men with internalized homophobia are thus associated with a lack of satisfaction in relationships. This can be rooted in image concerns, their expectations of partners with assigned gendered roles, sexual problems, or fears of coming out.. As long as they have a stigma about themselves and others regarding their sexual orientation and queerness, they are still under the effect of internalized homophobia – which eventually leads to the failure of relationship commitment.

Conclusion

Internalized homophobia influences the partnering process of Vietnamese gay people. The set of negative attitudes and antigay bias rooted in a dominant heteronormative environment has reinforced negative perceptions of gay men that they then internalize and direct toward themselves and others, making the partnering processes more difficult. As a Confucian and Asian country, Vietnamese society holds antipathy towards the LGBTQ+ community. Compulsory heterosexuality is expected of young men, with negative stereotypes and beliefs about homosexuality, which are later on internalized by homosexual people. This leads to Vietnamese gays' tendency to build their ideal types and partnership preferences based on the traditional viewpoints of how a heterosexual man should look or behave. They apply gender roles - which originated from patriarchal stereotypes of the heterosexual relationship - in finding their partner. This, in turn, affects their coming out process as gay men, and they cannot live authentically due to the conformity to heteronormative norms. Internalized homophobia makes it harder for Vietnamese gay people to find long-lasting relationships and commitments as they are still intimidated by their own sexual identity and are not willing to embrace it.

With the development of dating applications, the partnering processes can become more disposable and sex-focused. This leads to

further discrimination within the gay community. They judge others' physical appearance, label sex roles, and force individual requirements about gender expression on others. It makes finding a life partner difficult because gay men experience internalized homophobia and cannot accept the gender identity and queerness of others. They discriminate and react negatively to individuals who are living as they are.

Positive representations of the LGBTQ+ community in public culture play the most important role in fostering acceptance and tolerance towards homosexual people in Vietnam. Media creators should take responsibility for representing all identities accurately and respectfully. Some members of the LGBTQ+ community have been described using words like "delicate" or "sensitive." Presently, the government stays neutral when it comes to LGBTQ+ issues. But the stigma, prejudice, and discrimination faced by LGBTQ+ people in the country persist, and to tackle these kinds of attacks, the government needs to shift from being "neutral" to being more decisive. The lip service for equality and human rights in Vietnam should not stop at pledges and promises; these need to be put into action. This starts with raising awareness, with education (sex education, LGBTQ+ education), with same-sex couple representation, with breaking fundamental misunderstandings and stereotypes towards LGBTQ+ people, and with overcoming problems like internalized homophobia. Once Vietnamese gay men can feel safe and free to embrace their identity, their partnering processes will no longer be affected by antigay biases or prejudice.

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