

# FACTORS INFLUENCING ENGAGEMENT IN PREMARITAL SEX AMONG VIETNAMESE YOUNG ADULTS: A qualitative study

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Please quote this paper as:

1. Dinh, T. H., van Teijlingen, E. (2019) Factors influencing engagement in premarital sex among Vietnamese young adults: a qualitative study, *International Journal of Adolescent Medicine & Health* (**accepted**). <https://doi.org/10.1515/ijamh-2018-0201>  
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/30995205>

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## **ABSTRACT**

Premarital sex, associated with higher risks of sexually transmitted infections and induced abortions, is a growing phenomenon in many traditional societies. This qualitative study aims to generate a grounded theory on factors influencing premarital sex engagement among Vietnamese young adults. Ten in-depth interviews and three focus groups were conducted and analysed using constant comparative analysis. Sampling, data collection and analysis happened simultaneously until theoretical saturation was achieved. The resulting grounded theory is constructed around six themes: (i) desire as the 'direct cause'; (ii) facilitators; (iii) social changes; (iv) media; (v) peer and (vi) absence of family. The latter four themes are 'indirect causes' that influence through 'desire' and 'facilitators'. The theory suggested a need for a reliable source of sexual health information to be tailor-designed for young people. The stigma around sex needs to be reduced to allow for more open discussions on sex and sexual health.

**Keywords:** adolescence, Asia, sexual behaviour, media, internet, family, peer

## INTRODUCTION

Sexual health is an important public health issue globally<sup>1</sup>. In Vietnam, adolescent and young adults' sexual health has been highlighted in recent years, as national data indicated a rising trend of sexual engagement in this population<sup>2,3</sup>. Especially, concerns were raised over premarital sex and its potential health consequences i.e. sexually transmitted infections (STIs), unwanted pregnancy and induced abortion<sup>4-7</sup>.

Indeed, abortion rates in Vietnam are among the highest in the region, with unmarried young people accounting for around 20% of the total number of recorded abortions<sup>8</sup>. The actual number is expected to be considerably higher, given the large number of undocumented abortions performed at private clinics<sup>5,9</sup>. Meanwhile, knowledge of contraceptives and STIs of this population is generally poor<sup>2,4,10</sup>. This indicates an urgent need for policy makers and stakeholders to focus attention on this population.

In the field of sexual and reproductive health care, qualitative research is considered particularly useful for its ability to examine complex social phenomena, which can ultimately be used to inform health policies<sup>11</sup>. Hence, an understanding of the factors influencing young people to engage in premarital sex, from their own point of view, would prove to be valuable. However, qualitative research in this subject in Vietnam remains scarce.

Premarital sex has been described as deeply embedded in committed love and marriage intention<sup>4,12,13</sup>. Whilst a study on urban Vietnamese youth raised another motivation of sexual relationships 'based on needs', referring to financial and materialistic purposes<sup>14</sup>. The influence of internet on the development of sexual identities and practices in young people has also been considered<sup>15</sup>. Relationships between a range of other factors and youth's engagement in sex have been reported, including age, experience of domestic violence, and early sexual debut<sup>16</sup>.

Although limited, these studies have provided some insights on factors relating to premarital sex among Vietnamese youth. However, there seem to be no study that has looked into these factors in a comprehensive and systematic way. This study sets out to explore young Vietnamese adults' perception of the influences to their engagement in premarital sex, using a grounded theory approach.

## **METHOD**

The study was conducted using the grounded theory method<sup>17</sup>. Purposive and theoretical sampling was used. A preliminary screening was conducted to identify eligibility through a set of criteria. The initial inclusion criteria were: being Vietnamese; aged between 18 and 24 and having voluntarily engaged in premarital sex. The age criterion was chosen based on 18 being the legal age in Vietnam and 24 being the oldest age using the World Health Organization's definition of 'young people'<sup>18</sup>. The final sample consisted of 18 people and was heterogeneous in terms of age, sex, education, occupation and residency.

A total of 10 in-depth interviews were carried out together with three focus group discussions, each with two to three participants, using a piloted semi-structured guide. The interviews were conducted in Vietnamese, lasting between 45 and 120 minutes and were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts underwent a grounded theory analysis using the constant comparative method<sup>17</sup> with open and theoretical coding<sup>19</sup>.

Sampling, data collection and data analysis happened simultaneously until theoretical saturation was achieved. Frequent record keeping and memo writing was maintained throughout the analytic process to ensure transparency and reliability<sup>11</sup>. The initial draft of findings was sent to participants for their validation before being finalized, and nine participants (4 males and 5 females) responded with feedback.

The study was granted ethical approval by Nha Trang Pasteur Institute's Review Committee in Vietnam and Bournemouth University in the UK. Information about the study was explained and written informed consent was sought before each interview. Anonymity and confidentiality of participants was maintained.

## **RESULTS**

Data analysis revealed six emergent themes around premarital sex: (a) desire ['direct cause']; (b) the facilitators; (c) social changes; (d) media; (e) peer and (f) absence of family. The latter four themes are 'indirect causes' that influence through desire and the facilitators.

## **DESIRE**

The 'desire' that drives youth to engage in premarital sex falls into one or more of the following subcategories:

### **Explore, experience (Curiosity)**

Curiosity is often the first factor to be named by participants. It is the desire to explore their sexuality, to experience something they have never experienced before. Curiosity plays a major role in the first times of many, although it does not cease to exist thereafter. For instance, curiosity can be refreshed with each new partner:

*"When I'm dating a girl, there's always an urge to try it for once, to know how it's like. And despite I've already done it with her, when I start dating another, I still want to try it again, to know how it's like with this girl." (Male, 22)*

### **Physical needs**

Participants acknowledge sex as a basic need, the desire to fulfil it is natural, while the levels of need are different for each individual. Some mention the enjoyment they had in their past sexual experiences as a reason why they feel the need to experience it again.

*"I do it simply because I've always enjoyed it, now it's like a hobby." (Male, 24)*

### **Show affection and commitment**

Sex is seen as a way to "express your feeling for a person". In a relationship, when one feels enough love for their partner, sex can become an act of selfless giving and a way to prove their commitment.

*"To love is to love with all you have, to give all of yourself to your lover." (Female, 18)*

### **Attainments**

Youths not only engage in sex just 'to give', but sometimes to gain something as well. It can be social acceptance, by getting recognized and accepted by their peers. It can be a sense of 'possession'. Guys mention the notion of 'conquest' when they successfully had sex with a

girl. In some cases, it goes from winning someone's body onto winning their affection and commitment.

*"I agreed to do it because I wanted to please him... I didn't want him to grow bored of me." (Female, 19)*

Furthermore, it is mentioned that some young people exploit this influence for their personal agendas, which are often financial or power gain.

### **Fill emotional gap**

Newly independent adults can sometimes feel a sense of vulnerability and loneliness, which makes them yearn for affection. Some try to compensate for this emotional gap with physical contact:

*"It was when my first boyfriend has just left me, I felt lost, I felt abandoned... That's why I started dating the second one, and probably why I agreed to have sex with him so easily..." (Female, 22)*

However, unlike the other four desires, this desire cannot be fulfilled, no matter how much sex they have, or as one participant put it, *"trying to fill a water bucket with air"*.

## **FACILITATORS**

While the reasons for youth to engage in sex come down to having a 'desire', there are certain factors that act as catalysts for this process, which are hereby called "facilitators", including:

### **Positive attitude**

The positive attitude means seeing premarital sex as normal and even good, as long as you know how to protect yourself from harmful consequences. Premarital sex is believed to have no fault, the consequences that society has attributed to it stem from the lack of relevant knowledge and ultimately from the social stigma itself.

This positive attitude also comprises an increasing awareness of the existing gender inequality. Both male and female participants think it is unjust that women are traditionally more condemned for premarital sex, they advocate the idea that women should be treated

equally. Furthermore, some even view sex before marriage as beneficial, as a way to test the two partners' compatibility, which can determine the likelihood of a happy future marriage.

*"If you don't try, how can you know that you're compatible? I know some couples who married then divorced soon after because of it." (Female, 23)*

### **Circumstantial factors**

Sex is more likely to happen with the "right place, right time", when the couple find themselves in "the ideal situation", it can either be planned or spontaneous:

*"Somewhere comfortable and preferably romantic, with no pressure on time."  
(Male, 19).*

Additionally, many admit that it is more likely for sex to happen when they are under the influence of alcohol or other substances.

*"We were at a friend's party where we had a lot of beer, it was late and we were drunk so we rented... a motel room, and it just, um... happened" (Female, 21).*

### **Partner**

The partner can influence them in different ways. Girls tend to agree to sex if they trust their partner, believing that they will not get hurt, or that the partner is serious about their relationship.

In other cases, the partner may actively encourage them, for example, guys reported their girlfriends using subtle gestures:

*"Women make hints like wearing sexy clothes, drinking more, or asking you to go out at later hours." (Male, 20)*

Sometimes this encouragement furthers into persuasion. Girls reported that the concept of sex as "to show love and commitment" can be used by boys to their advantage to persuade girls for sex.

## **SOCIAL CHANGES**

Along with the recent economic growth came various social and cultural changes. The influx of foreign cultural influence has gradually loosened the general public's attitude towards premarital sex. The perceived improved public attitude in turn affects the view and behaviour of young individuals.

*"Now I know there are more supporters of the idea, I feel more relieved, because if someone finds out I've done it, it isn't a big deal anymore." (Female, 18)*

## **MEDIA**

The social changes are mostly reflected through media, which is the main channel where young people learn about the increasing trend and the improved public attitude. Meanwhile, with the pervasive appearance of sex across all of its forms, the media is a major trigger to curiosity and physical needs in youth.

*"You can see it (sex) on the internet, on social media, and movies, books and all. They make you curious." (Male, 22)*

When youth seek to learn about sex, the internet is their primary source thanks to its convenience and anonymity. However, they reported that the information found online is often unverified, inaccurate or insufficient. This is of concern as youth are faced with the risk of misinformation, which can ultimately lead to risky behaviours.

*"On some forums, there exist one side that support condom use and another strongly against it. The latter even think that men don't have to care about using protection, only women do." (Male, 19)*

## **PEERS**

Many acknowledged that peers can impact their views on premarital sex. Peer pressure also plays a role in influencing their behaviours. Interestingly, it does not only come from friends but also from anonymous members of online communities.

*"In online discussions someone would say something like "You've been dating for 3 months and you haven't done it? You're such an amateur." (Male, 18)*

Youth's curiosity and physical needs can be invoked through interactions with peers. Especially male participants reported that their curiosity can be triggered by the discussion about sex with their male friends. Meanwhile, their physical need can be induced by the revealing style of fashion of their female peers, which is attributed to foreign cultural influences.

### **ABSENCE OF FAMILY INFLUENCE**

As most parents are said to hold the traditionally disapproving attitude towards premarital sex, they are cited as the main factor that deters youth from it. However, as modern society progresses, parents and family are gradually losing their influence by providing less care, supervision, support and guidance. As young adults start living independently, the physical absence of family creates opportunities for sex to happen.

*"Since I live in a different city, I'm not under the supervision of my family anymore, so I have much freedom in terms of, like, space and time. If I were living with them, I'd probably have to find a hotel." (Male, 19)*

Along with this is the decline of parents' involvement in their life. This results in less mental and emotional support from family, which can contribute to youth's emotional gap.

*"Because they're away from their family, they're deprived of affection so their mentality is easily weakened, making them susceptible to 'sweet enticements' by others." (Female, 22)*

This situation stems from the lack of communication between both sides. Participants reported they rarely have in-depth discussions with parents about matters most relevant to their life. Among which, sex is the topic least discussed, the embarrassment of parents due to their traditional view prevents them from talking about it with their children. On the rare occasions that such topic arises, the conversation is always brief and one-sided, in which parents would warn youth against it. When youths have a contradictory view, the parents' opinion is said to have virtually no effect on them, as youth would remain consistent with their own opinion.

Furthermore, some parents still view young people as merely children, what the parents think they know are far from what they actually know. Because of these gaps, young people's views and behaviour are becoming less influenced by their family.

## **DISCUSSION**

From these findings, a grounded theory was generated explaining these factors and their relationships (Figure 1). Within the limit of this paper, priorities will be given to discussing three important factors and their relationships, namely *Social changes*, *Media* and *Absence of family influence*.

[INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE].

The social changes in recent decades have impacted the country at societal, family and individual levels. The importation of foreign culture, which is more permissive towards premarital sex, has shifted the traditionally conservative attitude of the general public over time. As a result, more young people are likely to engage in premarital sexual relationships. This concurs with observations by previous studies<sup>20,21</sup>. It is likely that the more the trend grows, the lesser the social stigma would eventually become.

The shifts in the country's social and cultural atmosphere are both reflected and influenced by the media. Moreover, the study found that the media has a powerful impact on youth's sexual perceptions and behaviours. The pervasive portrayal of sex in media affects youth through influencing their attitude and invoking their curiosity and desires. This effect was previously demonstrated with the case of pornography<sup>22</sup>. A positive association between media and sex-related knowledge, attitude and behaviours was also found among young people in Hanoi, Taipei and Shanghai<sup>23</sup>. Especially, the internet is the main channel where youth can actively learn about sex, thanks to the freedom, ease of access and anonymity that it provides. However, it has emerged from this study that youth appear to have difficulties in finding reliable sources of information on sex and sexual health online.

Meanwhile, youth are faced with several barriers to discussing this topic with parents. First, the stigma traditionally associated with premarital sex caused a substantial lack of discussion between them. The embarrassment of parents was cited as a cause to their apprehensiveness<sup>24</sup>. The absence of an open conversation inhibits parents from understanding youth's perspective. This consequentially created a significant gap between their views. The larger the gap, the less young people are influenced by their parents' view.

Secondly, the recent social changes have transformed the family dynamic in modern time. With economic growth, many parents are leading busier lives and having less time for their children. At the same time more young people start to live independently, away from their family. The combination of the lack of communication and the decline in parental involvement has weakened their influence. This observation is comparable with those of previous studies, suggesting it to be a trend happening over time<sup>5,6,20</sup>.

Furthermore, being unable to discuss with parents about sex caused youth to seek other sources of information and become more dependent on them, especially the internet. This study suggests that both parents and these sources might be held accountable for failing to provide youth with sufficient, reliable and practical knowledge on sex and sexual health.

Many factors identified above concur with previous findings<sup>20-22,24-26</sup>. However, this appears to be the first empirical study to offer a grounded theory that locates these factors in a comprehensive way. Furthermore, the findings are comparable to those of other geographical settings, for example from Shanghai and Taipei to a more traditional society like Nepal, suggesting the theory's transferability<sup>23,28</sup>.

Nonetheless, there are certain limitations. For example, due to the limited available resources and timescale, the study could not include participants aged 15 to 17, although this group is included in the definition of 'young people' by World Health Organization<sup>18</sup>. However, the strength of the final sample is its heterogeneity by different criteria, allowing for the commonalities to emerge. A further strength is the quality and depth of the data collected. Moreover, the qualitative researcher was of a similar age as the participants, which helped establish a dynamic of being equal during the interviews. This may have helped participants to be more comfortable and open, allowing them to give rich, in-depth responses.

## **CONCLUSION**

Although this is a small qualitative study, it has contributed to the literature a grounded theory that systematically explains the factors influencing premarital sex engagement in young adults. It can serve as a point of reference for health and social researchers, practitioners, parents and the general public alike. In terms of public health, it has raised a number of practical implications.

First, there is a need for a reliable source of information suited for young people. Since the internet is their main channel, sexual health promotion should be tailor-designed to suit this medium and this age group. Secondly, the stigma of talking about sex needs to be reduced. A more open discussion on sex and sexual health in a non-judgmental manner between youth and parents, as well as others, is much needed. With this, youth are less likely to resort to inaccurate and insufficient sources of information, ultimately helping them better protect themselves from sexual health risks such as STIs or unwanted pregnancy and abortion.

In the future, larger-scale quantitative studies can be carried out to test this theory, at the same time the inclusion criteria can be extended, for example to other age groups, to cover a more diverse, representative sample.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank all participants who took part in this study.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

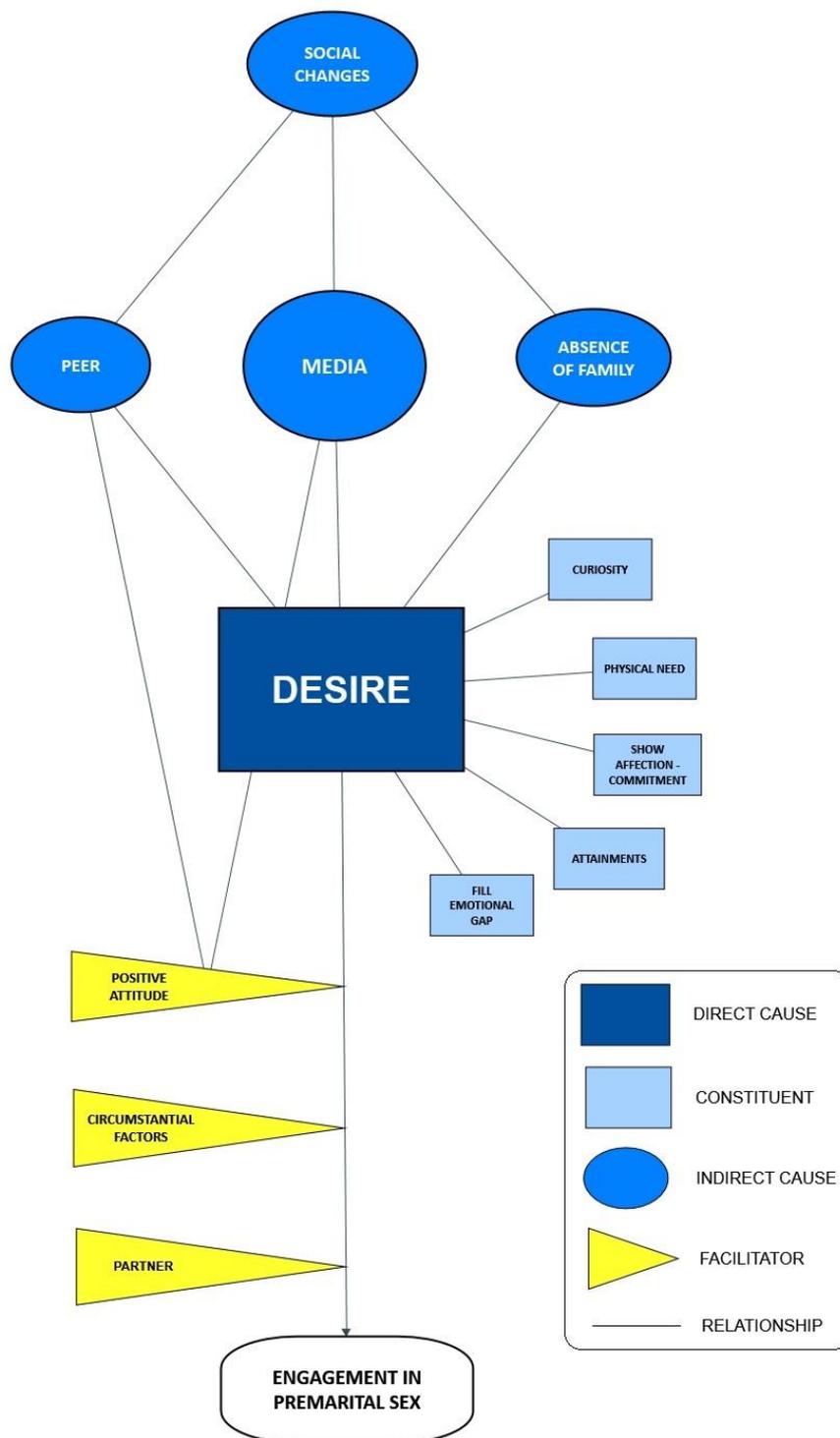
We declare no conflicts of interest.

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Figure 1. Factors influencing premarital sex in Vietnamese young adults:



## **APPENDIX 1. INTERVIEW GUIDE (ENGLISH TRANSLATION)**

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

- Introduction to the researcher and the research
- Explain study aim and objectives
- Explain informed consent, right to withdraw from the study or not answering questions
- Explain confidentiality and anonymity
- Explain recording, length of discussion, reporting and storage
- Check whether they have any questions, remind them if during the interview they don't understand anything, they are free to ask
- Check whether they are happy to continue

### **II. BACKGROUND CONTEXT**

- Self-introduction
  - Age
  - Occupation
  - Relationship status
  - Accommodation
  - Hobbies
  - Current health – physical & mental
- Family
  - Parents' occupation
  - Any siblings? Their occupations?
  - Living together with family or not?
  - Consider how is the relationship between your father and mother?
  - Consider how is the relationship between you and your parents?
  - How frequently do you chat with your parents?
  - How frequently do you chat with your siblings?
- Easing into the subject: Relationship
  - How many people have you dated?
  - How old were you when you first dated? How long was that relationship?
  - How old were you when you first had sex?
  - Ask them to think back about their first time, how it happened, in what context
  - Who was the partner? Where did it happen?
  - What were your feelings when it was over?
  - Did you continue to have sex after that time?  
\*If they seem open & comfortable: Did you do it many times after that? How many people have you done it with? Have you ever been with a sex worker?
- Exploring their attitude:
  - How do you feel about sex before marriage?
  - What do you think about the premarital sex trend among the youth? (Encourage them to elaborate)

### III. MAIN PART

- In your opinion, what are the factors that encourage youth to have premarital sex?
- What are the factors to you personally?
- Can you think of other factors that might not be true to you but to others?
- How old were you when you first learned about sex?
- Where did you learn it from?
- Do you often seek information to learn about sex yourself?
- What is your primary source?

\*If they answer “pornography”: How do you feel about it? Does it influence your view on sex and how?

- How did you feel about sex when you learned about it?
- Do you often discuss about sex with someone else? Who would they be?
- What topics do you often discuss with them?
- What do you think is their attitude towards premarital sex?
- Do they influence you and how?

\*Parents: Have you and your parents ever discussed about sex with each other?

- How would you feel about discussing sex with your parents? Does that feeling influence you and how?
- How do you think your parents feel about discussing sex with you?
- How do you think your parents feel about premarital sex?
- Do your parents know that you have experienced sex? If yes, what was their reaction? If no, why not?
- Safe sex knowledge and practice
  - Do you know about protection and contraception methods?
  - What are your sources of information?
  - Do you actively seek information about them yourself?

### IV. CONCLUSION:

- What do you think are the difficulties that Vietnamese youth are facing in terms of sexual health?
- What do you think needs to be done to address these issues?
- Any other comments you would like to add?

### V. ENDING

- Thank them for their time
- Reassuring them of confidentiality and anonymity.