



LUND UNIVERSITY  
Faculty of Social Sciences

Graduate School

Course: SIMV24

Master of Science in Development Studies

Term: Spring 2017

Major: Development Studies

Supervisor: Srilata Sircar

# “I Try to be Modern”

**Identity Formation Between Tradition and  
Modernity Among Young Women in Hanoi**

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This study has been carried out within the framework of the Minor Field Study (MFS) Scholarship Programme and the Travel Scholarship funded by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida). The MFS Scholarship Programme gives Swedish university students the opportunity to carry out fieldwork in low- and middle income countries, or more specifically in the countries included on the *DAC List of ODA Recipients*, in relation to their Bachelor's or Master's thesis.

Sida's main purpose with the Scholarships is to stimulate the students' interest in, as well as increasing their knowledge and understanding of development issues. The Minor Field Studies provide the students with practical experience of fieldwork in developing settings. A further aim of Sida is to strengthen the cooperation between Swedish university departments and institutes and organizations in these countries.

# **Abstract**

Since 1986, the Vietnamese socialist state has gradually opened towards the global market. Subsequently, socialist modernity may increasingly be outrivaled by the individualistic culture associated with global capitalism which is now gaining ground in Vietnam, especially among the urban middle-class who can easily access it. Proceeding from a post-colonial feminist framework, this thesis aims to investigate how development and globalization affect identity formation in Vietnam. This issue is approached by looking at how young women are navigating between competing discourses, through exploring how their perceptions of the women's role are influenced by constructions of "modernity" and "tradition". The empirical analysis is founded upon semi-structured interviews with young unmarried and university educated women living in Hanoi. The study has a constructivist grounded theory approach, thus the empirical material has continuously been guiding the direction of the research.

The findings show that the participants understand modernity as related to individualism, development and globalization. Simultaneously, tradition is understood as an obstacle to development, in line with colonial discourse. This may be considered problematic since the participants are identifying as both modern and traditional, hence regards one part of their identity as unsolicited within the globalized capitalist modernity. This notion illustrates that the colonial constructions which are enforced in contemporary development discourse are interfering with the participants' understanding of their role and possibilities. However, identity formation between contrasting discourses may open a space for agency and resistance, as the women have the possibility to renegotiate their respective subject-positions through accessing a variety of discourses and thereby create new understandings of what "modernity" might be.

*Keywords:* Modernity; Globalization; Development; Post-colonialism; Vietnam; Identity; Women's Role

*Word Count:* 19 997

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Sida and Högskolan Kristianstad for the Minor Field Study scholarship, without which I had not been able to travel to Vietnam in the first place. My sincere thanks also to my supervisor at Lund University, Srilata Sircar at the Department of Human Geography, who have provided insightful feedback throughout the research process. To my field supervisor Huong Nguyen and the staff at the Department of Anthropology at Hanoi University: thank you for hosting me and sharing your profound knowledge about the research area. You have been of great support both before and during this study, not least in helping with all the paperwork associated with my scholarship— and visa application.

To Bi and Be, my forever research partners, thank you again for your hospitality, inspiration and friendship. My stay in Hanoi would not have been the same without you. To my family and my boyfriend, who have been hearing my endless talk about Vietnam for a couple of years now; thank you for listening! Above all, thanks to the study participants who have open-heartedly shared their time and thoughts with me. It has been a pleasure to get to know you all!

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# 1. Introduction

This is a study about how understandings of “tradition” and “modernity” influence identity formation and perceptions of the women’s role among young women in Hanoi, Vietnam. Patriarchal structures are strong within the Vietnamese society as Vietnam has been influenced by the Confucian tradition. This culture has further been successfully integrated in the politics and strategies of the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) and thereby strengthened and stabilized (Chircosta 2010). However, as capitalism has entered Vietnam after the opening towards the global market, so has identities, values and lifestyles which stand in stark contrast to the traditional Vietnamese society and socialist constructions of modernity (King *et al* 2008). This disparity is increased by the institutionalization of traditional women’s roles through the political strategies of the CPV (Schuler *et al* 2006). Further, as collectivist ideals can be found in Vietnamese tradition as well as within socialism as an ideology, this notion can be claimed to be firmly rooted in the Vietnamese society (Rydström & Drummond 2004, 7). Hence, the individualism of capitalist modernity stands in opposition to ideals that are established in both culture and politics, which renders it controversial in more than one sense.

Within these contrasting discourses, the construction of gender roles is also different. In this study, I am interested in how the role of women is affected by the rapid development that is currently taking place in Vietnam. In the traditional society compared to in the modern society, women hold different roles – not necessarily in relation to men, but in relation to the self, the collective, and the surrounding world. In the Vietnamese society, based upon Confucianism and contemporary socialist discourse, the women’s role lies mainly within the private sphere, caring for her family and the collective good (Chircosta 2010, 126). However, the individualist ideals which are dominating in the globalized modern society (Arnett 2005) may lead the women’s role in a new direction, caring more for herself and her own fulfilment. This dialectic, between tradition and competing modernities, is what this study is about.

### **1.1. Aim and Research Question**

The aim of this study is to explore how young Vietnamese women, confronted with contrasting discourses and ideals, are navigating in their role and identity. The purpose is to discuss the effects that modern capitalist globalization, understood as “global culture” (Paolini, 1999, 57), may have on local perceptions of (female) identity. With a post-colonial and constructivist approach, I am interested in how constructions of modernity and tradition influence women’s perception of their role, possibilities and struggles in contemporary Vietnam. Hence, the women’s role is here used as a lens to investigate social processes associated with the modern capitalist society, in connection to globalization, development and culture. Circulating around the experiences of young university educated and unmarried women in Hanoi, strongly influenced by both modernity and tradition, this study is guided by the following research question:

- How do constructions of “tradition” and “modernity” influence identity formation and perceptions of the women’s role among young educated and unmarried women in Hanoi?

## 2. Historical Context

Vietnam has experienced severe economic and societal changes during the last century, which will here only be described briefly. Between 1887 and 1954 Vietnam was colonized by France. During this time, a Marxist and nationalist anti-colonial movement grew in Vietnam. After colonization, Vietnam was divided into two states – the communist Vietminh governed the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in the Northern part of the country, and the anti-communist State of Vietnam was declared in the Southern part. Conflicts arose between the two states, and the US amongst others took side with the South, while China and the Soviet Union fought with the North in “The Great American War”, as it is called in Vietnam. Eventually, Northern Vietnam was victorious, and through the “Reunification” of 1975, the whole country as we know it today was united under communist flag (Hägerdal 2005). For 11 years, Vietnam was under socialist rule. In 1986, however, the national congress decided to start the process of *doi moi* – “renovation”. Since then, Vietnam has opened towards the global market and now pursues a “market-oriented socialist economy under state guidance” (Beeson & Pham 2012, 542). This means that Vietnam is still formally a socialist state, and the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) is present on all levels of society (Hayton 2010).

Since the *doi moi*, Vietnam has undergone rapid economic development. The state maintained their dominance over the economy for several years after the *doi moi*, but in 1999 the private sector was set free as the CPV passed the Enterprise Law which allowed private companies to register. In 2007, Vietnam became a member of the World Trade Organization (Hayton 2010, 8f). Between 1995 and 2005, the average growth rate in Vietnam was 7 % (Beeson & Pham 2012, 539). According to the World Bank, the annual growth rate was in 2016 still as high as 6 % (The World Bank 2017), and Vietnam is in 2017 estimated to have the highest wage trend in the world, on an average of 7,2 % (Veckans Affärer 2016). In the beginning of the 1990’s, the percentage of the population living in extreme poverty was higher than 50 %. In 2012 that number was down to 3 %, and Vietnam is now defined by

the World Bank as a lower middle-income country (The World Bank 2017). However, even though the market and foreign investments are flourishing the state controls much of the economy by having state-owned enterprises and joint ventures with foreign investors. There is a close cooperation between the Party and the private sector through an elite made up of Party members and their friends and families (Hayton 2010, 16ff). Further, the inequality is increasing within the country, both between rich and poor and between rural and urban areas (King *et al* 2008, 791).

With this background in mind, I will now turn to the literature review. It investigates how the women's role have been constructed throughout the turns in Vietnamese history, following the dominating discourse for the time being. As we will see, these constructions have often been serving political purposes.

### **3. Literature Review**

While there is a wide selection of literature problematizing the Vietnamese women's role with both large and small perspectives, for this review I have chosen that which examine the constructions of the women's role in traditional, colonial, socialist and post-*doi moi* Vietnam. This serves the purpose of understanding the background to how tradition, ideology and modernity may be understood in relation to contemporary female identity formation. Among the key references are "Following the Trail of the Fairy Bird – In Search for a Uniquely Vietnamese Women's Movement" (2010) by philosopher and historian of religion Alessandra Chircosta, which offers a historic review of the Vietnamese women's movement and its influences. Literature describing the language and practices surrounding women's ideals in socialist Vietnam has also been reviewed, such as "Constructions of Gender in Vietnam: in Pursuit of the 'Three Criteria'" (2006) by social anthropologist Sidney Ruth Schuler and others, as well as "More than 13 Million: Mass Mobilisation and Gender Politics in the Vietnamese Women's Union" (2013) by development researcher Gabi Waibel and sociologist Sarah Glück. For connections to colonialism, historian Nhung Tuyet Tran's "Woman as Nation: Tradition and Modernity Narratives in Vietnamese Histories" (2012) has been useful. In general, the literature introduced here investigates how the women's role has been/are being constructed within traditional, colonialist and socialist discourse as well as within capitalist modernity. My contribution to the field is a post-colonial constructivist reading of how the combination of these discourses are contemporarily influencing female identity formation in the young Hanoian middle-class<sup>1</sup>, in the light of the increasing impact of globalization and development. Founded upon a combination of historical reviews of the Vietnamese

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<sup>1</sup> As many conclude, defining the "middle-class" in Vietnam, or anywhere else for that matter, is not an easy task. As it is a "class-in-the-making", its shape and forms of expression are constantly transforming. One might however often find some common ground when speaking of the middle-class, referring to factors such as political competence, education, importance of private property and individualism, as well as a certain market capacity (King et al 2008, 788ff). Though vague, this is the how the "middle-class" will be treated within this study.

women's role and contemporary understandings of the same, my minor case study hence offers an insight in the struggles of identification that come with contrasting ideals and influences.

To lay ground for my empirical study, I further turn to a discussion about the middle-class (youth) culture after *doi moi*. Here, “Professional Middle Class Youth in Post-Reform Vietnam: Identity, Continuity and Change” (2008) by among others sociologist and anthropologist Victor T. King, “Globalization, Consumerism and the Emergence of Teens in Contemporary Vietnam” (2015) by Dr. in social work Huong Nguyen, as well as different writings by anthropologist Mandy Thomas can be found among the main references. By connecting this perspective to research on the contemporary women's role, such as “Femininity and Sexual Agency Among Young Unmarried Women in Hanoi” (2008) by health researcher Trang Quach, and “Finances, Family, Fashion, Fitness and... Freedom? The Changing Lives of Urban Middle-Class Vietnamese Women” (2012) by anthropologist Ann Marie Leshkowich, I am approaching the objective of the study.

As already noted, my research investigates different constructions of the women's role and the influence of capitalist modernity on identity formation. Further, by proceeding from post-colonial theory, the analysis sheds light on how post-colonial power structures render identity formation challenging as they contribute to creating a hegemonic “global culture”, which leaves little room for alternative understandings of modernity. This vantage point will be discussed in the next chapter.

### **3.1. Constructions of the Women's Role as a Modernization Tool**

Historically, the Vietnamese society has been influenced by Confucian thought. Within the Confucian tradition, a patriarchal ruling system saturates all societal units, on both micro- and macrolevel. The family or household, as well as the state and the world at large, are according to Confucianism supposed to be governed by a strong male leader. The woman is within Confucian tradition bound to follow the “Four Virtues”; to have a beautiful appearance, modest behavior, polite way of

speaking and master household work. These ideals are to some extent still defining femininity in the Vietnamese context (Rydström & Drummond 2004, 7ff).

A recurring colonial practice was to construct the colonized women as bearers of the indigenous tradition, hence letting them embody the backwardness of the colonies (Loomba 2002, 169). The French colonialists were successfully using the image of the “subordinated Confucian woman” to legitimize their “civilizing project”. By understanding the Vietnamese women as victims in need of emancipation from Confucian tradition, the French thus justified the colonial modernization imperative (Tran 2012, 411ff). According to Chircosta, years of colonial education were internalizing colonial inferiority in the Vietnamese people, especially in the women who were experiencing a double oppression – from the colonial power and from the traditional Confucian patriarchy. As a result of this inferiority, Chircosta claims, French women were idolized by the women of the Vietnamese middle-class. Hence, a feminist movement took form among them which was similar to the Western and particularly French one – an uprising against the Confucian subordinated and family-oriented women’s role while, Tran argues, based upon colonial constructions of the same (Chircosta 2010, 128ff; Tran 2012, 411f).

As the Vietnamese socialism began to grow in the 1930’s, so did a socialist feminist movement which was disregarding the “bourgeois” feminism that had been growing among the Vietnamese urban elite during colonization. Instead, a feminist discourse based upon the ideas of colonial emancipation and anti-capitalism was shaping the construction of the women’s role (Chircosta 2010, 130). For the socialist movement, women became a symbol of anti-colonialism through at the one hand preserving “traditional Vietnamese values”, and on the other hand standing for socialist progress and modernization. The woman was hence portrayed as a mother of the nation; her feminine morality and “natural” virtues of self-sacrifice and faithfulness, derived from Confucian ideals, fitted well with the socialist struggle for emancipation through nationalism (Pettus 2005, 8f). When CPV was established, in 1930, they founded a mass organization called “The

Vietnam Women's Union" (VWU), which were handling the "women's issues" on all levels of society. The organization, currently combating falling membership rates, is today still active with the same objective – to proclaim the standpoints of the CPV to women all over Vietnam, and to implement CPV's policies and strategies regarding women (Schuler *et al* 2006, 284).

In socialist Northern Vietnam after colonial emancipation, and later in the whole country, women were enjoying increased rights such as the right to vote, have equal wages, and the right to divorce, abortion and education (Chiricosta 2010, 133). The ideal woman in socialist Vietnam was a nationalist heroine who combined taking care of her family with combating imperial powers and working towards building the nation (*ibid*, 132; Schuler *et al* 2006, 386). Moreover, while the family unit was already cherished within Confucian tradition, the woman's role as a mother was enhanced within socialist discourse. The notion of motherhood became connected to breeding the nation, and regarded as an important factor in the socialist nation building project. Due to socialism, marriage and motherhood have thus become even more synonymous with Vietnamese femininity than it already was, researchers Helle Rydström and Lisa Drummond argue (Rydström & Drummond 2004, 9f). Hence, Confucianism and socialism were merged to form the modern women's role within the socialist nation-building project, a fusion that is still present in Vietnam.

### **3.2. The *Doi Moi* – Reconstructing the Women's Role?**

As noted above, the CPV has retained its power both within the state and the market despite the *doi moi*. However, since the renovation there have been discursive changes within the CPV and the VWU which are affecting the construction of the women's role. Many scholars claim that the CPV has since the *doi moi* been promoting a "neo-traditionalist" gender discourse, as a way of protecting traditional Vietnamese culture and values from capitalist Western influence (c.f. Chiricosta 2010; Waibel & Glück 2013; Werner 2009). According to Waibel and Glück, this has to do with the new role of the family as the primary economic unit at the market, an order that has replaced the communist co-operative system (Waibel & Glück 2013, 346). The Confucian ideals that have been going hand in hand with socialism

in the Vietnamese context are thus regaining a larger place in the state's construction of the women's role. Drummond, as well as other authors reviewed here, means that the CPV is drawing upon tradition to construct a "modern" Vietnamese female identity, channeled through for example state media and the practices of VWU (Drummond 2004, 158ff; Schuler *et al* 2006, 391f). Through in this way letting women symbolize national uniqueness, Tran argues that the CPV uses the same constructions as within colonialism to create a cultural distance to "the West" (Tran 2012, 412). Colonialist and socialist constructions of modernity thus overlap, not only in their similar belief in rationality, technology and science (Raffin 2008, 330), but also in the way they let the image of women and femininity represent authenticity and be a measurement of development and progress (Tran 2012, 425). As women are according to Confucianism responsible for the family's well-being, the Vietnamese women are now increasingly encouraged to be family-oriented mothers dedicated to keeping their families happy and raising successful children, as a result of the government's extended power over the household as an economic unit (Werner 2009, 3f). The VWU, one of the world's largest women organizations, claims to promote gender equality through improving women's status. However, some stress that the patriarchal power structure within the domestic sphere remains un-addressed by the VWU, which renders these efforts shallow as the public/private divide thus becomes more evident (Waibel & Glück 2009, 358; Chircosta 2010, 138f).

Sociologist Anne Raffin argues that post-colonial Vietnam is defined by a hybrid modernity, molded by colonial and socialist modernization imperatives (Raffin 2008, 342). However, since the *doi moi* an alternative modernity has entered Vietnam. Some research show that the younger generation of women may be turning against the traditional women's role, as well as the socialist one (Werner 2009, 163ff; Leshkowich 2012). The young generation are increasingly accessing and being influenced by global popular culture, and the market economy is shaping an individualistic middle-class in the urban centers (King *et al* 2008). While, Vietnam reporter Bill Hayton and others claim, not being politically criticized in a direct sense due to its contained influence and importance for the personal gains of

the young middle-class (King *et al* 2008, 806; Hayton 2010, 24), the CPV's discursive power may now be undermined in favor of alternative discourses, possibly leading the women's role in new directions (Quach 2008, 158).

To summarize, the construction of the women's role in contemporary Vietnam is complex. Partly drawing on colonial constructions, Confucianism and socialist modernity dominates the construction by advocating gender equality in the public sphere, while on the other hand increasingly directing women towards the patriarchal domestic arena. These two discourses are now standing against a new phenomenon – the urban young middle-class who unlike previous generations and, some argues, their rural peers, have been growing up influenced by the individualist ideals of capitalist modernity (Binh 2004, 55; King *et al* 2008, 791ff). I will now turn to a discussion about the urban middle-class youth and their culture, to approach the core of my research problem.

### **3.3. Vietnamese Middle-Class Youth Approaching Capitalism**

The economic development in Vietnam has gained particularly youth, through increased education levels, health gains and over-all better living standards (Nguyen 2015, 6f). The very existence of youth culture or the stage of “emerging adulthood” can be claimed to presuppose economic development, as prosperity means that the youth do not have to enter the labor force as early (Arnett 2005, 28). However, not until quite recently the Vietnamese youth has been researched in the context of the rapidly changing society, and this is therefore a relatively unexplored topic (Nguyen 2005, 6). The research that has in fact been conducted regarding the youth in Vietnam suggests that the young generation is increasingly influenced by other discourses than that of the CPV. Urban middle-class youth are becoming more individualistic, and more eager to fulfil dreams of career and money-making than to pay attention to the socialist project (Nguyen 2006, 8; King *et al* 2008, 805ff). Most of the studies discussed in this section have been conducted between the years 2000 and 2010, but as the rapid development that is taking place in Vietnam is continuously changing the prerequisites of youth culture as well as youth's possibilities, even these quite recent studies may be outdated in some aspects. As

an example, the percentage of internet users in Vietnam have increased from 26,6 % of the population in 2009, to 52 % of the population in 2016 – an increase with almost a 100 % in 7 years (Internet Live Stats 2016).

Mass media is a growing cultural platform for Vietnamese youth. From formerly being run, controlled and censored by the CPV, media directed at a young audience is now increasingly commercialized, and focuses more on entertainment, celebrities and shopping than on education and propaganda (Nguyen 2015, 8f). Vietnamese youth culture and identity is for the first time emerging in a direction of its own. The word “teen”, previously not existing in Vietnamese, has recently been borrowed from the West, and with it has come a commercialized teen culture (*ibid*, 10). To the younger generations, consumption of commodities as markers of status has become a new kind of identity formation (Nilan 1999, 357). As Nguyen stresses, personal value, which was previously connected to being a high-performative good citizen, has in this sense become attached to commercial values (Nguyen 2015, 11). Instead of idolizing communist leaders or being influenced by their elders, Vietnamese middle-class youth have now collected their role models from popular culture, often imported from the West or other East Asian countries. Individual interest has in this way become superior to collectivist values. Thomas argues that this may have an underlying political meaning; that it is “a way of constituting selfhood against a regime that the populace may wish to oppose” (Thomas 2002, 200f).

However, not all would agree that the young middle-class in Vietnam have a political agenda. The issue of Vietnamese youth and their influence in society has always been a question for the CPV, which is recognizing the youth’s strategic importance for the nation-building project (Nguyen 2005, 4). The middle-class youth’s relation to the CPV is complex, as the middle-class and the state are depending on each other for both of their continued well-being. As the state is so closely connected to the private sector, gaining opportunities within the Vietnamese society requires loyalty and connection to the CPV (Hayton 2010, 23f). The government therefore holds a somewhat relaxed position regarding the youth’s

individualistic ideals and interests, as it is confident in its important role in shaping their future (Nguyen 2006, 338; Nguyen 2005, 17f). Consequently, it is “simplistic to conclude that the process of globalisation and economic liberalisation will automatically lead to political liberalisation and democratisation in Vietnam [sic]” (Nguyen 2005, 17). Career and income seem to be the top priorities for the young generation. According to previous studies they do however not seem to be on their way to form an independent political identity, even though they through their individualist practices may unintentionally have political significance (King *et al* 2008, 794;806).

What influence might then the middle-class youth culture and new forms of identity formation have on young Vietnamese women’s understanding of their position in society? Commercialism can be claimed to have implied an increased pressure on women in particular. For example, women’s magazines have intensified the focus on personal appearance and beauty, something that has not historically been given primary attention. In this way, “Vietnamese femininity and beauty are marketed as commodities” (Thuan & Thomas 2004, 145). At the same time, consumerism is frowned upon by the government (Leshkowich 2012, 110). Leshkowich argues that commercialism generally has gendered dimensions – on the one hand consumption is associated with status, but on the other hand female consumerism is regarded as an expression of unrestrained desire, and women are accused of being shopaholics and pursuing unsustainable consumption (*ibid*, 99). This becomes even more evident in a country where economic privilege has up until recently been punished and regarded with distaste (*ibid*, 95).

In some ways, one might argue that the commercial ideals of global capitalism along with the CPV’s continuous focus on the women’s role in the family are signifying a decline in women’s status in the Vietnamese society (Waibel & Glück 2013, 358). However, some claim that with increased economic mobility comes also opportunities of empowerment, at least for those who are well off. As Quach stresses, one should thus not regard Vietnamese women as victims of the social context, but as agents for social change (Quach 2008, 152). In addition to the new

forms of identity formation enabled by capitalism, increased mobility has for example facilitated women's chance of dating and meeting different partners, indicating that women in Vietnam now have better opportunities to decide who and when to marry (Thuan & Thomas 2004, 137). So, while the women's agency is limited by Vietnamese constructions of femininity, they might still have the power to redefine and expand these limits (Quach 2008, 158). Some research shows that young women in post-socialist states might actively oppose feminism, as it is so closely linked to socialist discourse (Werner & Bélanger 2002, 16). Nevertheless, the youth's increased access to media and internet opens new spheres for resisting state discourses through identity formation, even though this resistance might not be politically motivated (Thuan & Thomas 2004, 139).

To conclude, the changing economic and cultural landscapes for young middle-class women are reconstructing their position in the Vietnamese society, even though this may not be consciously done. Traditional and socialist constructions of the women's role are challenged by capitalism's individualist values. Therefore, this study investigates how young Vietnamese women are navigating between their roles and identities in relation to the influence of the competing discourses discussed above. In the forthcoming chapter, I will describe my way towards theoretically approaching this objective.

## **4. Theoretical Framework**

In this chapter, it will first shortly be described how post-structuralist conceptualizations of power and discourse are guiding my understanding of the empirical material. I will then proceed to discuss how hegemonic constructions of modernity have become synonymous with development within the globalized world order, proceeding mainly from *The History of Development – From Western Origins to Global Faith* (2008) by development scholar Gilbert Rist. It will also be explored how this narrative has lay ground for the construction of a “global culture” founded upon capitalist values and, proceeding from “Youth, Cultures and Societies in Transition: The Challenges of Growing up in a Globalized World” (2005) by psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, the implications of this for identity formation. This will be connected to a discussion about colonialism and its influence on contemporary power structures, which can be regarded as a prerequisite of establishing capitalist modernity, in both cultural and economic terms, as a hegemonic global discourse. I have used the post-colonial scholar Ania Loomba’s *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (2002) as the main reference for situating this study within the post-colonial field, due to its thorough account of the same. Subsequently, the post-colonial discussion will be put in relation to a feminist framework, building mainly upon the theories proclaimed by post-colonial feminist Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2000; 2002). Lastly, I will present post-structuralist understandings of feminist agency and resistance, which are relevant for interpreting the findings of the study.

### **4.1. Power and Discourse**

The Foucauldian understanding of power which is recognized in this study indicates that power is not something that some people have access to and exercise over others, but that it is a productive force that forms knowledge and discourse (Lilja & Vintahagen 2009a, 32). This force is present in all networks of relations between individuals and in society, and shapes the constructions, norms and terms upon which they rely. The disciplinary element of power is internalized in discourses that are (re-)produced through language (Börjesson & Rehn 2009, 44ff). Within any

given discourse, some have more power to influence it than others (Lilja & Vinthagen 2009b, 78). Hence, those within hegemonic power networks have the possibility to shape the constructions of reality, through being in discursive control of disciplinary norms, behaviors and language (Lilja & Vinthagen 2009a, 34f). Structures are thus a product of the discursive assumptions that are hegemonic for the time being (Börjesson & Rehn 2009, 45). This study theoretically and analytically follow the post-structuralist view that language and discursive practices are constituted by, and are constituting, social relations and societal processes at both micro- and macrolevel (Loomba 2002, 36ff). Therefore, the analysis of the empirical material will focus on investigating what underlying assumptions can be found in how the study participants are discursively constructing their reality.

#### **4.2. Situating “Modernity”**

As this study circulates around constructions of modernity, a discussion about this concept is in its place. One way of defining modernity is as a stage occurring after tradition on a linear timeline. The European Enlightenment-ideas, which favored rationality, progress and growth, is often said to be the foundation of modernity in the Western world (Power 2008, 74). Rist argues that through the spread of Enlightenment ideas via colonialism, the Western construction of modernity defined as capitalist progress forcibly became a global objective. This view of modernity, Rist argues, is lingering in contemporary development discourse. “Development” or “modernization” has within development discourse become synonymous with economic progress, which implies intensified inclusion in an increasingly globalized capitalist system (Rist 2008, 47ff). That we through language construct a notion of “developed countries” as being *ahead of* “developing countries” further enhances the understanding that some parts of the world have not historically reached the same stage; “development” or “modernity”, as others. Hence, one can in a sense regard “modernity” as having been replaced by “development”, while the discursive mechanisms are the same – modernity/development is a condition superior to tradition/underdevelopment (Sumner & Tribe 2008, 14f). Rist argues that the quest for development and

capitalist progress has become a hegemonic doctrine during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Development thus globally constitutes an unquestioned objective (Rist 2008, 8ff). Thereby, alternative understandings and imaginations of modernity have been outrivaled by the narratives of capitalist modernity (Millán 2016, 9f).

So, “modernity” may be understood as the globalization of capitalism within the post-colonial world order (Hall 1999, 89). While globalization is often described as creating a “global culture” built upon the ideals of Western modernity, one may question where this perceived globality has its origin, who benefits from it and who can access it. Following the argumentation above, what is commonly described as the characteristics of globalization; the spread of “modern” economic and cultural systems, in fact have a Western vantage point and thus have excluding properties (Paolini 1999, 57ff). In extension, one might claim that modernity, development and globalization are all part of the same discourse – one that favors capitalist progress. Some have anticipated that local traditions and cultures will be abandoned in favor of the global culture associated with modernity – a view that can be regarded as problematic as it unintentionally prescribes globalization superior power, without recognizing the direct cultural and political community offered by the local (Tomlinson 1994). This study connects to this discussion, as it on a micro-level seeks to explore the cultural processes associated with development, defined as capitalist globalization.

Through understanding modernity as a global(ized) culture based upon capitalism, I am enabled to approach the impacts of capitalist globalization on cultural identity. Capitalism fosters individualist characteristics and values, as individual progress is the driving force of the free market (Arnett 2005, 30). The individualistic notion inherent in capitalist modernity intrinsically challenges collectivism, as the two are opposing each other. In a society transitioning from a collectivist culture to globalized capitalism the balance between collectivism and individualism is thus renegotiated, which as discussed above is the case in contemporary Vietnam. Consequently, those who are confronted with this transition must give up some collectivist values and practices in favor of individualism, a sacrifice that might be

experienced as problematic. Both individualism and collectivism have positive as well as negative psychological outcomes. While individualism can on the one hand be perceived as liberating, it might on the other result in a feeling of loneliness. Collectivism may offer a sense of safety and belonging, but also has oppressive properties (Arnett 2005, 30f).

As discussed in the previous chapter, the introduction of capitalist culture in Vietnam has changed, or extended, the youths' strategies of identity formation. Some would talk about this phenomenon as a notion of developing "bicultural identities" among youth in the globalized world. One part of this identity is informed by a "global consciousness" which allows for an understanding of global culture and practices, and the other builds upon their local culture. While the former is used to navigate within the globalized economy and global public sphere, the latter is practiced in the domestic sphere and personal life. However, as the "bicultural identities"-narrative in a sense suggests an image of the "local traditions" as stagnant, some have argued that the traditional culture and identity should instead be regarded as changing *per se*, forming a "hybrid identity" (Arnett 2005, 23f).

In summary, modernity can be regarded as both an economic and a cultural phenomenon. Further, it can be understood as either a point in time, or as a culture in parallel with other cultures. By combining these overlapping perspectives, we may understand the hegemonic construction of modernity as an increasingly globalized individualist culture based on capitalism.

### **4.3. Post-Colonial Positioning**

This study is based on the recognition of a post-colonial world order upheld within globalized capitalism. I understand colonialism and capitalism as interconnected, as imperialist colonialism can be regarded as foundational for the expansion of European capitalism, and vice versa (Loomba 2002, 3ff). Hence, I regard the unequal power relations within the capitalist world order as a material precondition for, as well as consequence of, European colonization. However, following theorist

Jorge de Alva's arguments as presented by Loomba, I do not only see post-colonialism as a material condition situated after colonialism, but also as a legacy influencing global power relations through discursive practices, language and knowledge production. This way, de Alva connects post-colonialism to post-structuralism. This interpretation of post-colonialism renders it a more wide-ranging theoretical framework, allowing the researcher to move beyond colonialism and the relation between the colonized and the colonizer *per se*, to instead focus on subordinating practices inherited from colonialism in a larger perspective and include for example the globalization of capitalist culture (Loomba 2002, 12f). Understanding post-colonialism from a post-structuralist perspective with a Foucauldian view of power means acknowledging that the discourses recreating colonial constructions are not only imposed top-down by hegemonic power-holders, but instead upheld by everyone within the discourse. Post-colonial discourse thus becomes internalized, (re)produced and practiced by agents on all levels of the post-colonial power structure (*ibid*, 41).

By constructing the colonized subject as barbaric and uncivilized, colonizers could legitimize colonization as a “civilizing mission” (Eriksson *et al* 1999, 29). These stereotyping constructions are thoroughly discussed within postcolonial scholarship, starting with post-colonial theorist Edward Said's *Orientalism* in 1978. Said means that the colonial discourse has not only been constructing the colonized subject, but also the colonizer. By continuously creating the colonized “Other”, the colonizers were implicitly also constructing themselves as the opposite. Hence, colonial “binary oppositions” such as civilized/uncivilized, progressive/backwards, modern/traditional and so forth were created, where the formers were granted higher status (Loomba 2002, 44ff). The binary oppositions thus promote a kind of identification based on what one is not – the self cannot be defined without the Other. Subsequently, the colonial Other must *stay* different, to function as a point of reference for the colonizer (Eriksson *et al* 1999, 26ff). These lingering colonial constructions do not only impact how the former colonizer/superordinate thinks about the formerly colonized/subordinate and vice versa, but also how these agents think about themselves. In this sense the post-colonial can be regarded as influential

for identity formation and perception of the self, as initially claimed by theorist Franz Fanon (Loomba 2002, 142ff). The colonial identity has been further explored by scholars such as Homi Bhabha and Stuart Hall, who investigate the issue of “colonial hybridity”. In different ways, they refer this hybridity to how othering practices are internalized in the colonial subject to create a hybrid identity – on the one hand desiring to identify with the colonizer, but on the other hand being restricted by the perception of the self as representing “otherness” (*ibid*, 176ff). Both Bhabha and Hall mean that the otherness is in fact constitutive of identity formation, as the colonized subject is consistently regarding the self as the Other; as different in relation to the hegemonic power-holder (Bhabha 1999, 121f; Hall 1999, 233).

Colonial constructions of “the Other” also have gendered dimensions as the colonialized subject has been described in terms similar to those commonly used to stereotype women, such as “irrational”, “aggressive” and “sexually promiscuous”, thereby creating a masculine/feminine division between the colonizer and the colonized (Loomba 2002, 47;107). The othering practices of colonialism thus correspond with those within patriarchy, and colonialism can be regarded as symbolizing masculine dominance (Nandy 1999, 184) Connecting to the discussion in the previous section, collectivism is within colonial discourse seen as both a female feature and a practice of the colonized subject (Loomba 2002, 163). In the binary opposition individualism/collectivism, individualism is thus constructed as a masculine and Western value, while collectivism becomes disparaged. Further, the female colonial subject has continuously been constructed as a victim of barbaric patriarchal dominance, as we saw in the example of the French colonial rule in Vietnam. Hence, the civilizing mission of colonialism has been legitimized through the notion of “saving” the women of the colonized countries (Erikson *et al* 1999, 23). As we will see in the next section, contemporary Western feminism risks repeating this narrative.

As was explored above, modernity can be understood as economically and culturally connected to the globalization of capitalism. On this account, a

postcolonial reading of modernity might suggest that colonial constructions are recurring in how “development”, commonly defined as capitalist expansion, is regarded as a global objective. This creates binary oppositions between global/local, modern/traditional, developed/underdeveloped and so forth, which, following the argumentation above, may impact perceptions and identities on both sides of the opposition. To investigate the impacts of constructing modernity as globalized capitalism from a post-structuralist and post-colonial perspective will be foundational for the analysis in this study.

#### **4.4. Anti-Capitalist Feminism**

Mohanty argues that transnational feminist scholarship in a globalized world must be built upon a notion of anti-capitalism, as the gendered aspects of the hegemonic globalized capitalism are influencing the identities and struggles of women worldwide (Mohanty 2002). In “Under Western Eyes – Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses” (2000), Mohanty criticizes “Western feminists”, in which she includes Western feminist scholars as well as urban middle-class scholars from the “Third World”, for through their analytical strategies creating the “Third World Woman” as the Other while regarding middle-class culture as the norm. The Third World Women are through the dominant colonial discourse portrayed as a homogenous group, expected to organize around similar issues defined by the Western feminist (Mohanty 2000, 303). Through these ethnocentric assumptions the Third World Woman is understood as traditional, uneducated and domestic, and discursively becomes positioned within “underdevelopment” and “backwardness”, whereas the Western woman implicitly becomes her developed, modern and liberated counterpart (*ibid*, 305). Hence, the Third World Woman is within Western scholarship and colonial discourse victimized and deprived of her agency (*ibid*, 316). Mohanty means that gender cannot be regarded as the sole origin of oppression, which is often assumed by Western feminists writing about women in the Third World. Instead, attention must also be payed to historical and political circumstances as well as to issues of race, class and ethnicity (Mohanty 2000, 311).

The construction of the Third World Woman is discussed by several other feminists, amongst them Trinh T. Minh-ha (1999). She argues that the Third World Woman is only allowed to speak *as* a Third World Woman, regarded as a representative of Third World authenticity. In line with what was discussed above, Minh-ha means that the Third World Woman is required by Western feminists to stay different, to confirm their image of what she represents. This image of authenticity is not created by the Third World Woman herself, but by hegemonic discourses which decide what is authentic or not. The authenticity is further regarded as threatened, thus the Third World Woman is supposed to defend it. When the Third World Woman speaks, she is therefore expected to express authenticity and difference, to satisfy the Western feminist (Minh-ha 1999, 222ff).

In “‘Under Western Eyes’ Revisited: Feminist Solidarity through Anticapitalist Struggles” (2002) Mohanty develops her arguments, which she means have been mistaken for implying that there can be no feminist movement across borders. She argues that feminist research must be attentive to local context *as well as* global processes. Thus, while not victimizing the Third World Woman, global feminist solidarity should reach beyond colonial discourses and target the commonalities of women instead of the differences. Mohanty means that the urgent struggle which should be uniting feminists across the world is that of anti-capitalism and anti-globalization, as the capitalist hegemony which is naturalized by globalization is currently the most stressing factor in (re)creating patriarchal and colonial structures (Mohanty 2002, 501ff). As previously touched upon, capitalism can be regarded as gendered as it enhances values that are connected to masculinity, such as self-interest, individualism and consumerism, while it disregards and diminishes supposedly feminine qualities (Harcourt 2014, 1315ff). Drawing on standpoint feminism, Mohanty hence claims that the standpoint of Third World Women “provides the most inclusive viewing of systematic power” (Mohanty 2002, 511), and they must therefore be the vantage point for investigating the processes of capitalist globalization. Further, Mohanty argues that Third World Women are no longer constructed “under Western eyes”, as was claimed in her earlier work, but rather “under and inside” the globalized capitalist discourse (Mohanty 2002, 516),

which makes the issue even more complex. This notion of transnational feminist solidarity based on anti-capitalism and anti-globalization is the basis of this study, and the motive for letting the experiences of Vietnamese women be the lens for investigating the processes that are put in play by capitalist globalization. However, for reasons already touched upon which will further be explained in the next chapter, this study focuses not on the poorest women in the Vietnamese context but on the middle-class.

#### **4.5. (Feminist) Resistance and Agency**

To summarize and connect to the literature review; the discursively dominating narratives in Vietnam – Confucian tradition, colonialism, socialism and capitalism, all have gendered and patriarchal dimensions. Does this imply that even if the hegemonic discourse is changing, women will always have a subordinate position in society? No, that would be to deprive women of their agency, as Mohanty and post-structuralist feminists righteously claim. As everybody is part of creating and recreating discourses, logically there must be room for changing the same through expanding discursive frameworks. Hence follows a brief discussion about agency and resistance.

Presupposing a Foucauldian view of power as a network of relations within discourses, resistance researchers Mona Lilja and Stellan Vinthagen argue that resistance does not necessarily have to be intentional or deliberate. Instead, resistance is any form of practice that has the potential to change an existing power structure – intentional or not (Lilja & Vinthagen 2009b, 48ff). Lilja and Vinthagen claim that resistance is not simply a *reaction* to power, but it is a productive force that goes hand-in-hand with the same (*ibid*, 52f). They further discuss the issue of agency, referring to an individual's capacity to act within a power structure. As discourses are creating norms and identities the subject is consistently re-defined. The subject can then either repeat the norms within the discourse, or if possible use its agency to resist and recreate them (Lilja & Vinthagen 2009b, 54ff).

The idea of agency has been drawn upon by poststructuralist feminists, who mean that one's "subject position" within a given discourse allows for more or less agency (Lilja & Vinthagen 2009b, 55). They criticize the concept of agency on the basis of rational choice and mean that agency can also be based on "irrational" or unconscious desire. If agency is presupposing rationality, a binary opposition is created between agent/rational and non-agent/irrational which resembles the male/female dualism. However, feminist scholar Bronwyn Davies suggests, a feminist and poststructuralist must deconstruct this dualism while understanding the individual and society as constituted by a set of different discourses that are equally influential (Davies 1991, 43f). By acknowledging the unconscious as a form of agency within discourses, one may renegotiate who has power to change them (*ibid*, 45). A Foucauldian understanding of power, where some have more power within a given discourse than others, indicates that agents might be able to use their subject positions in different discourses to challenge hegemony (Lilja & Vinthagen 2009b, 78). Hence, by recognizing that there are competing discourses influencing every agent at every time means that agency can be held within a hegemonic discourse through having access to, and being able to move between, alternative discourses (Davies 1991, 46f). Competing discourses may thus open a space for agents to renegotiate their position and meaning; alternative discourses and practices can be turned against hegemonic structures in order to change them (*ibid*, 52). Different forms of identification proceeding from a variety of discourses can be a way of making this possible (Lilja & Vinthagen 2009b, 77ff). This study is based on a recognition of the unintentional as a form of agency and resistance.

## **5. Methods**

### **5.1. Study Design**

This is a qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews with young women in Hanoi. The study has been conducted with a grounded theory approach, proceeding from sociologist Kathy Charmaz's *Constructing Grounded Theory* (2014). The grounded theory approach indicates that the research has not been based on a hypothesis deducted from previous research, but instead I have been guided by the empirical material. As a grounded theory researcher, I started with data collection. The transcribed interviews were then coded, highlighting interesting aspects and themes that came up, which later turned into theoretical categories. Based on the findings from the analysis of the previous material, I then continued the research. By writing memos while coding, I have engaged in continuous analysis. Memos constitutes a crucial part of grounded theory, and are used as a basis for formulating a theory. The method for data collection, in this case the interview guide, may within grounded theory be revised for the next interview, focusing more on the themes or topics that seem to be important in the context. Hence, data collection and analysis are within grounded theory performed simultaneously which allows for a deep understanding of the empirical material and a theory that is unraveling over time (Charmaz 2014). Conducting interviews fits well with the grounded theory approach, as the methods share an "open-ended yet directed, shaped yet emergent, and paced yet unrestricted" approach (*ibid*, 85). In other words, conducting interviews has allowed me to ethnographically explore and navigate in the context of the participants, while aiming the research towards theory construction.

Grounded theory is a comparative method, since one is constantly comparing recent findings and analysis to the prior. The aim of grounded theory is to construct a theory based on the theoretical categories in the empirical material, rather than trying to fit the empirical material into already existing theories. One may discuss and draw parallels to previous theories and studies, but in an ultimate grounded theory approach the literature review is conducted after the empirical study

(Charmaz, 2014). In the case of this study, the literature review was partly carried out before entering the field, in order to identify a research topic. However, connecting the emerging categories to a larger theoretical framework was primarily done after the data collection phase.

The vantage point of this study has been “constructivist grounded theory”, as defined by Charmaz (2014). The notion of constructivism within grounded theory implies the view that there is no objective reality but that reality is continuously (re)constructed. Applying constructivist grounded theory hence means engaging in how the study participants understand, construct and give meaning to their world. Further, it means recognizing that the researcher has a certain interpretation of the empirical material based on privileges, tacit knowledge and values. These are things that cannot be erased, but should be examined during the research process (Charmaz 2014, 12ff). Further, when having a grounded theory approach, the researcher is rather interested in processes and experiences than in the individual (ibid, 207). In constructivist grounded theory, this means that the researcher is interested in human beings as agents who by their actions are constructing processes which creates structures, instead of in the structures *per se*. Hence, the individual is not regarded a passive object to the larger structures of its environment, but is assigned agency (ibid, 9). These views have been permeating my research.

## **5.2. Sampling Strategy**

A grounded theory researcher engages in what is called “theoretical sampling”. This means that while building theory, the researcher strives to find participants that can fill the gaps in the emerging theoretical framework. In other words, theoretical sampling does not aim to represent a pre-defined sample or to generalize the results, but instead the researcher is interested in developing the theory by going deeper into the theoretical categories derived from what has previously come up. Hence, one starts with an initial sample, which may later evolve and change into something wider, or more narrow (Charmaz 2014, 192ff). The criteria for the initial sampling is that it should be something or someone that is relevant for what the researcher aim to explore (Denscombe 2009, 132f). Within grounded theory approach, there

is further no pre-decided number of interviews to be conducted. This is due to that the researcher goes into the study with an open mind, and does not know exactly what should be investigated until the analysis phase after the initial data collection (Charmaz 2014, 105f). The data collection phase ends when the research reaches “theoretical saturation”; when new findings do no longer contribute to the theory development (Denscombe 2009, 139). Given the limited framework of this study I have been restricted to keeping the number of interviews comparatively low. However, as the last few interviews did not substantially change the direction of my emerging theorization, I claim that saturation has been reached.

As I already had some contacts in Hanoi, a snowball sampling method was applied in order to get in contact with possible research participants. This means that I used the social web of my contacts to find participants, and further that I was asking participants if they knew anyone else that might be interested in participating in the study. I am aware that the snowball sampling method implies some methodological risk-taking, as the respondents may come from the same social circles (O'Reilly 2009, 198f). However, I do not regard this a problem within the framework of this study, as the informants were supposed to come from a somewhat similar background. Yet, I used several different contacts to get in touch with participants, in order to secure a partial variety in the sample. The snowball sampling method fits well with the grounded theory approach and theoretical sampling, as it allows the researcher to continuously recruit participants that may prove relevant for reaching theoretical saturation.

### **5.3. Sample**

I have conducted 10 semi-structured interviews with 11 participants between 22 and 31 years old. The interviews lasted for about one hour, and took place in February and March 2017. The initial sample for this study was unmarried women in Hanoi, who had finished a university education and were below 30 years of age. However, due to some miscommunications two of the interviewed participants were still studying, but on their last semester, and one of the participants were 31 years old. I do not regard this an issue though, as the most important criteria were the

marital status and education level. Hence, they were still included in the sample. In one of the interviews, a participant brought a friend along. As she also met the sampling criteria, I decided to include her and do a minor group interview with the two. This might have influenced their answers to some extent, as they were affected by each other's views, but I also found some positive aspects of this interview-form as it allowed for an open conversation with less pressure on the participants. The sample further varied in whether they came from Hanoi or not. While most of the participants had grown up in Hanoi, a few had moved there as adults. Coming from the big city or from the countryside might affect the participants' viewpoints. However, this has been of benefit to the research, as this has given a richer perspective on the issue. Hence, the initial sample criteria did not change notably during the study, more than that it loosened to some extent.

The reasons for choosing this sample were many. Based on the prior research, I believe that these women have a lifestyle that can in itself be regarded as an act of resistance, as being unmarried as an adult woman goes against the Confucian-socialist belief in the family and the unselfish sacrifice for the greater good of the community as the primary priorities for women. The criteria of university education enabled reaching those who, at least in some aspects, belong to the middle-class, which according to my prior research are those who may substantiate new conceptualizations of the women's role. The reason for choosing young women is that, given the literature review above, the young generation could be regarded as a driving force in the contemporary discursive development since they are born and raised after the *doi moi*. Hence they have been growing up surrounded by an ever increasing economic affluence and with access to global popular culture and individualistic capitalist ideals. In short, I believe that this sample through their access to alternative discourses have a certain capacity to reflect upon the constructions of the women's role both within the Vietnamese society and from the perspective of global culture. This group is therefore relevant for exploring the ongoing processes regarding new forms of identity formation and the possible reconstruction of the women's role.

#### **5.4. Delimitation and Disclaimers**

The reasons for choosing to study the urban middle-class in Hanoi, and no other classes or locations are many. As mentioned in the historical background, northern Vietnam was developing differently than southern Vietnam after the colonization, as it was under communist rule prior to 1975. Hence, capitalism and the global market economy made a clearer entrance in Hanoi at a later point in history, and the changes may thus be more apparent (Thomas 2002, 193). The discursive change that I have identified might then have bigger implications in Hanoi than elsewhere, for example compared to in Ho Chi Minh City in the South. Further, there are as mentioned great economic divides between rural and urban Vietnam. Global culture is more influential in the urban centers of Vietnam than in the rural areas, as the urban middle-class has more opportunities to access it (Binh 2004, 55). As this study circulates around the young female middle-class in Hanoi, I will therefore not make any claims about other social classes or geographical areas. It should be kept in mind that the research participants represent an urban elite, facing issues that might seem very distant to some of their sisters in other strata of the Vietnamese society. However, given the rapid development these issues are of concern to an increasing number of Vietnamese women. Grounded theory is comparative in the sense that the researcher is constantly comparing new findings to prior. However, the aim of this study is not to make comparisons between participants from different groups or comparisons between then and now. I have identified a process that may currently be taking place within a certain social group in the Vietnamese urban society, hence this is what I have focused on in this study. I have relied on secondary sources for information on how the Vietnamese women's role has been discursively constructed up until now.

Approaching university educated women has been convenient for overcoming the language obstacle. As I do not have knowledge in Vietnamese, all interviews have been conducted in English. This poses a methodological problem in one aspect, as the participants might not have been able to express themselves in the way they wanted. However, due to the semi-structured interview form I could repeat the

participants' claims to ask if I understood them correctly, and ask follow-up questions if anything was unclear. Knowing English assumingly also enhances the participants' opportunities to access global culture, which further motivated this choice.

There are some critical remarks to be noted regarding grounded theory. Some argues that one cannot make generalizable claims through induction, since it might be that a given phenomenon does not continue to occur just because it has been observed at one place or time. On the other hand, as Charmaz argues, inductive theorizing allows for new interpretations and discoveries that might not be possible to visualize though a deductive approach (Charmaz 2014, 243). Moreover, grounded theory researchers rather practice *abductive* reasoning than inductive, as the research is constantly referring to theoretical categories and hypotheses derived from prior empirical data. In this way grounded theory is not, as it may seem to some, desultory or random. Through abductive reasoning, where the aim is to find the most plausible explanation to the empirical material, the researcher can further include anomalies in the theory building, which cannot be as easily done through induction (*ibid*, 200f). A second point of criticism is that grounded theory may risk being de-contextualized, as it is mainly used to build theories about a given group, phenomenon or place. This risk should be acknowledged, hence the grounded theory researcher must through abductive reasoning continuously ensure the relevance of the study for larger social, historical, and in this case developmental, processes (Denscombe 2009, 145ff).

### **5.5. Ethical Considerations**

Participation in the study have been voluntary, and the participants have not been reimbursed for participation. All participants have been giving their informed consent before the interview. They were given information on the theme and purpose of the study, and got informed that they had the right not to answer a question if they found it uncomfortable. The participants were aware that they would be anonymous in the presentation of the results, and that the interview material – transcriptions, notes etcetera, were kept without names or any other

personal information on them. The participants also had the possibility to withdraw at any time during the research process, and were offered to read the finished thesis. All participants have been giving their consent to be quoted under another name, chosen by me, in the research report.

### **5.6. Research Process**

The initial idea of this research was to study how young women resisted the traditional women's role through committing to the individualist ideals of modernity. I was soon to realize, however, that what I was investigating was more complex than that. After a few interviews, I understood that the *relation* between tradition and modernity, and the intriguing ways in which this relation was interacting with culture and identity to shape the Vietnamese women's role, were more relevant in the context of the field. The grounded theory method has thus proved helpful in the process of unraveling new theoretical directions throughout the course of the study. While I have engaged in theoretical sampling, the participant criteria have not noteworthyly changed during the research process. However, the interview guide has been revised several times, serving the purpose of digging deeper in to the emerging theoretical categories.

Understanding that modernity verses tradition was a pressing issue for the participants, the interviews were increasingly directed towards this matter. Due to prior research, I also asked about socialism. However, as will be further discussed below this seemed not to be a very relevant theme for the participants. Hence, tradition, socialism and modernity are themes introduced by me as a researcher, while based on an understanding of these from the initial coding and previous research. The other themes presented in the forthcoming chapter; "Marriage" and "Development and Globalization" have emerged from the interview material. "Identity" is serving as the core theoretical category of the study. In other words, identity is the main theme that the others were building up to and has been foundational for the direction of the research and the theoretical framework. Hence, the last section of the empirical analysis deals with the question of identity

formation in relation to the narratives of tradition and modernity that have been emerging throughout the study.

In short, while grounded theory with its explorative aim has been the method during the research process, thematic analysis has served as a way of understanding the categories that emerged from the study by relating them to themes examined in previous literature. Hence, the objective has not been to construct a *new* theory on women's identification. Rather, I have understood the processes explored in the study through both existing theory and a grounded theory empirical analysis, while continuously comparing new findings to the prior. The thematic division of the analysis below reflects this process.

## **6. Empirical Analysis**

Here, the findings and themes that emerged from the interviews are presented, discussed and analyzed. The thematic division of the chapter illustrates how I through grounded theory approach have been discovering the theoretical categories upon which to found the analysis. In this chapter, I explain the findings and emerging theorization in relation to my theoretical vantage points, and in the next I will summarize and conclude the study.

### **6.1. The Traditional Woman**

When asked to tell me about the traditional Vietnamese women's role, all the participants agree – the traditional Vietnamese woman is first and foremost dedicated to taking care of her family and doing household work. This is well summarized in the following quotes:

*"Most of them [the traditional women] never care about themselves. They just sacrifice their life for the husband and for the husband's family and their children."*

- Ha, 25

*"The wife has to take care of the family, taking care of the husband, the children, taking care of the parents of her husband, she has to cook. Every day."*

- Mai, 27

As Ha and Mai point out, taking care of the family means not only the husband and children but also, in accordance with Vietnamese tradition, the extended family. As explained by the study participants, the extended family primarily equals the husband's parents, as the young couple often move in with them after marriage. This is something that many of the participants worry about;

*“Maybe I try to find a husband that already has a house, so I don’t have to live with his family. So if I had to live with his family I would need to... not care about, but look after his parents. You can’t do anything that you want any more.”*

- Ha, 25

*“I think I will face a lot of challenges. Because I have to live with the man’s family, everybody is worrying about how their life will be when they live with the boy’s family.”*

- Houn, 25

Anthropologist Ngo Thi Ngon Binh’s research has showed that while Vietnamese parents are increasingly letting go of traditional values when raising daughters, the mothers-in-law are to a high degree still expecting their daughters-in-law to follow the Four Virtues (Binh 2004, 66). The above quotes confirm this, as they reflect an awareness of the changing role the young women may experience as they move in with their husband’s parents.

All participants stress the traditional woman’s care-taking role and sacrifice for others, and this is often regarded as the negative aspects of the traditional women’s role. As is expressed in the above quotes, the participants mean that the traditional women’s role is so bound to the family that the women do not have time to care about herself. Ha also expresses this here;

*“Good thing is like they [traditional women] know how to sacrifice. Good thing but also bad thing.”*

- Ha, 25

This is interesting in relation to the previously discussed linkages between traditional and socialist values. The collectivist duties and mothering of the nation that women are tied to by both traditionalism and socialism is confirmed, and to some extent criticized, by the participants. Simultaneously, the notion of care-taking and dedication to family values is something, if anything, that is understood as the positive aspects of the traditional women’s role. Some participants regard

care-taking as something that should still be performed by women, however by their own will and choice;

*"I think on one hand I still really respect the tradition, but on the other hand I need to make sure that all the things that I do come from me, and not from the thing that the society require from me. [...] Because I just want to take care of the house, I just want to take care of my partner, my lover, sometimes. So, I do it like very... in freedom. So no one push me to do that."*

- Tam, 29

This should not be over-analyzed, since wanting to take care of your loved ones can be considered a natural part of life. However, the way some participants speak about it ties the woman's care-taking role to traditional Vietnamese values, as here;

*"I still think we [Vietnamese women] have something within that is very special. Of course, there is many bad things I do not agree with, like we need to stay at home or... I don't agree with that. But I still think the woman have to take care of the family, you know."*

- Thanh, 22

By stressing that they are doing things out of free will and not being forced or pushed into something without wanting to, the participants are claiming agency. However, the above quote also illustrates the recurring perception of the traditional women's role as something that is internalized in Vietnamese women, and therefore cannot be erased by changing customs. Hence, some participants argue, the traditional women's role is upheld and recreated by the women themselves;

*"Those people [traditional women] they volunteer to do it [household work] because they think it is honorable, you know, to tackle the woman task. You know, it's sort of emotional. That's why I'm thinking a lot of people here limit themselves, that's why I said they limit themselves, the women. They put up their task, their duty, that they consider the women have to do. [...] they could change for themselves but they wouldn't!"*

- Trang, 26

Sticking to the traditional women's role is further discussed by one participant in terms of a safe path, in the regard that traditional women do not have to make active choices regarding their life and can "adapt" easier to traditional surroundings. This was however the one thing that this participant could think about that was positive about the traditional women's role;

*"The traditional women's role... The good thing is... I cannot think about any good things! Maybe I am a little bit aggressive now. But I think the good side of being a traditional woman is somehow that it is easier to live, it is easier to think and like... I think, somehow easier to adapt."*

- Linh, 25

Linh here connects traditionalism to a feeling of safety, belonging and being able to understand one's surroundings. Vietnamese tradition being built upon collectivist values, this connection between collectivism and safety is in line with what has been noted above as the positive psychological outcome of collectivism. As will be discovered further on, similar connections are made between modernity and loneliness by some participants.

The construction of traditional women as passive, which can be distinguished in the above statement as it constructs the traditional lifestyle as "easier", is repeating itself through several interviews. While many participants stress their admiration towards traditional women, and point out that they respect their choice to follow the traditional women's role, the traditional woman is throughout the interviews also constructed as passive in relation to the "modern" woman since "becoming modern" is considered more of an active choice than "staying traditional". This binary opposition is connected to colonial constructions, and there are more examples of binary oppositions in the way the participants speak of modernity and tradition which will soon be examined. In sum, the participants have an ambiguous attitude towards the traditional women's role; on the one hand, it is regarded as positive since it emphasizes care-taking and family values, but on the other it is perceived as a restrictive force, binding women to the domestic sphere with little room for acting upon their own will.

## 6.2. The Socialist Woman

The participants' responses regarding socialist views of the women's role reflect what is brought up in the literature review above; the socialist image of the modern woman is not very relevant or interesting to them. They know about it because they have been taught about it, but they also deprecate it;

*"I choose to ignore it [socialism]; I don't want to learn anything about it or study anything about it."*

- Linh, 25

This indifference was something that I discovered early in the research process, so therefore I have not included socialism as a theme in the later interviews. It has not been brought up without me asking, except for during two interviews when the participants stressed that they did not want to work for the government in the future. It is noteworthy that socialism and politics are so uninteresting to the participants, since it confirms that this generation are influenced by other discourses than socialism, thus challenges the discursive power of the CPV.

The participants that were in fact asked about this topic mean that the socialist ideals put a burden on women, especially the married ones who are expected to be both good mothers and good workers who contribute to society;

*"Since the revolution there was the role model of women. We have a quite famous saying... I don't remember exactly. It is the value that women have to be good at family, good at work, and always ready to go to the frontier. It is like a superhero. It is still now. Like if you talk to the Women's Union now, they still promote that kind of role model. [...] But there is also a lot of... like on Facebook and discussions on blogs they talk about how that role model really creates a burden for women, because it is really... we cannot be that superwoman."*

- Thuy, 31

What is also significant regarding socialism and the women's role is the perception of Vietnam Women's Union among the participants. Trang, 26, explains to me that

the VWU is not an organization that anyone can become a member of, but that it is just represented by one person at each work-place. Linh, 25, mentions that her mother is a member, but she herself is not. The contribution of VWU is discussed as irrelevant to the modern women living in the cities, as the VWU is working more with poor women on the countryside. Linh here reflects upon their reliability;

*"It is still like invisible. They just hold some celebrations, and they donate some money to the old and the poor women. But I think that they barely do anything about the spirit and the mental thing."*

*"In my neighborhood, there is still violence but they don't do anything about it. People see that a husband beats his wife every day. Everyone can see it, but nobody does anything. Especially the Women's Union. Where are they? I don't know."*

- Linh, 25

Moreover, Trang means that she does not really know what the VWU does;

*"It's all very vague, it's all state... So I think it's good but it's still very vague, like it's more happy family, no domestic violence... Men should treat women right and..."*

- Trang, 26

Statements like these illustrate a political fatigue among the participants and it seems like they do not have political motives – at least not intentionally. However, the participants' dissent from identifying with socialist constructions of the women's role can be understood as an act of resistance. As discussed above, the socialist modernization project, even though no longer having a direct influence over young women's lives, has played a role in enhancing the traditional structures in Vietnam. Further, it has likely contributed to making the collectivist ideals even stronger in the Vietnamese society. Committing to individualism can therefore be regarded as even more controversial here. Confirming what was explored in the literature review, this discussion is meant to exemplify how distant the socialist role model seems to the study sample. It further illustrates how the socialist version of

modernity and the CPV's efforts to govern the youth and women in Vietnam is becoming outrivaled by the capitalist modernity narrative – which, as we will now explore, these young women are identifying with far more than with socialist conceptualizations.

### **6.3. The Modern Woman**

Even though “modern” seems to be given somewhat different meanings by the participants, most of them agree on some features when asked to describe a modern woman; she is “independent”, she has “dreams” and “goals” to pursue, and she has the possibility to follow her own free will;

*“In modern way it’s like we can do whatever we think [...]. It’s not the men decided everything.”*

- Chi, 24

Most of the informants give these answers without thinking too much, which may prove that this is a quite established perception. However, a few of the informants have a harder time answering this question. They seem not to identify with a modern woman but regard her as an external image. Thuy here also talks about the influence of commercialism on female ideals, which relates to the discussion in the literature review about how the construction of the women’s role might be influenced by capitalism;

*“The role model of a modern woman there is no single role model, it is more in the magazines, in the TV... Which is very open, successful, beautiful, take care of the family. I think that is... if you look at advertisement of washing powder or coca cola, some products on TV, it is the very role model of a woman.”*

- Thuy, 31

*"Modern woman? Modern woman... No... I'm very sorry but because I always find things change all the time and like... now I'm modern but in maybe five years later I'm traditional. So for me I don't have that kind of concept."*

- Tam 29

As we can see, some participants seem to distinguish a clear boundary between modernity and tradition and to identify more with modernity – note how Chi above is talking about modern women as “we” while in the previous section traditional women were mainly referred to as “they”, which is a recurring pattern in the interviews. However, to other participants it seems to be more unclear how to define modernity in relation to themselves. Hypothetically, even though it may be coincidental, this might have to do with age. The two who have the hardest time defining a modern woman are both around 30, which means they are almost 10 years older than the youngest informant – they can almost be said to belong to another generation, even though they are still raised after the *doi moi*. Hence, they may experience modernity as more distant, or less important.

Some participants portray modernity as something superficial, something that comes and goes, while tradition is, as also pointed out by Linh in the above section (p. 35), understood as more stable. This is well expressed by Chi, who comes from outside of Hanoi and have according to herself been growing up in a very traditional family;

*"Like now in the modern life, people can get married easy and they still can break marriage. But in traditional way they keep, they try to hold it [...]. Yeah, [it is] more stable, and the children can have both mother and father to live, and they will have more love."*

- Chi, 24

When asked about the negative aspects of the modern women’s role, the same participant answers;

*"I think in some way they too independent, then some do not think that take care of baby and take care of husband is their responsibility."*

Linh has similar thoughts;

*"If the modern woman has to work so much, and somehow like the intimacy or the bonding of the family will be not so strong, because everyone in the family will be growing up in a more independent way, so somehow they will grow up apart."*

- Linh, 25

In line with this, a few participants also connect modernity to an increased sexual freedom and being able to have many sex partners before marriage. However, this is not only expressed in positive terms, but one participant also means that it renders sex less intimate and personal. Thus, some informants are worrying that family values will get lost as women start to care more about themselves. This relates to the problematic re-negotiation of the balance between collectivism and individualism which, as discussed above, is one of the outcomes of the entry into modernity understood as capitalist development. Modernity may, according to how the participants are recurrently describing it, lead to more loneliness due to individualism.

The perception of the modern woman as self-centered and shallow is rather prevalent among the participants. Talking about modernity, many respondents stress that modern women care about themselves, but not in a selfish way – hinting that this could be one of the risks of the modern lifestyle;

*"The most important thing in my life is me! [...] Maybe you think it is selfish, but I always put myself on the top priority."*

- Phoung, 26

*"I think now for the woman they start taking care more for themselves. Like not being selfish but they do not only devote themselves for the family but they are also taking care of themselves."*

- Thuy, 31

In the above statements, a strong individualist ideal can be discovered. The notion of taking care of oneself and securing one's own best interest is a recurring theme in the interviews. All participants are in one way or another talking about the importance of self-fulfillment and "personal development" through for example taking "self-help courses", "learning new things" or travelling. This is also put in opposition to how traditional women live their lives;

*"You want to have several jobs, you want to go out, you want to explore the world. But the traditional women they only care about getting married, and having a family."*

- Huyen, 25

These individualist values confirm what was discussed above as the emerging trend among the young middle-class in the contemporary Vietnamese society. The participants for better or worse connect modernity to individualism in the way they talk about the modern woman. This points towards an understanding of modernity as situated within a capitalist culture.

As mentioned above, the concerns about selfishness and modernity suggest that the transition between collectivism and individualism might appear problematic to some participants. As Leshkowich (2012, 96ff) claims, the Vietnamese socialist history might contribute to a sense of moral guilt related to individualist ideals, and this seems to be reaffirmed in some interviews. This notion is enhanced by the respect and appreciation that some participants express towards traditional women;

*"Yeah, they [traditional women] are very careful and kind superwoman! Go to work and then take care of the family – cooking, cleaning, everything! My mother is really like a superwoman!"*

*"Because, some of my friends, they just want to get married [...], and to them it makes them happy, it is good. And we cannot judge them over being traditional or say that 'you are less happy than me'".*

- Huyen, 25

*“Actually, I really, really respect the women’s role in the family, when they cook, they take care of the family, I really, really like it.”*

- Tam, 29

This respect towards tradition could be understood as a defense of the tradition with which these women are partly identifying. Clearly, some participants are worried that I will misunderstand their dedication to the modern women’s role as a disparage of Vietnamese tradition. However, this might be a manifestation of Minh-ha’s (1999) theories as discussed above; speaking as “Third World Women”, the participants might think they should represent and defend Vietnamese authenticity.

Research in India has shown that youth that have developed a bicultural identity prefer some traditional habits to remain in their personal life, as a way of paying respect to their family (Arnett 2005, 24). One participant expresses this kind of thought directly;

*“As I said, I think I am quite traditional, I still fight with going the traditional way because to be nice to the family.”*

- Houng, 25

Binh’s research in Vietnam, which has been referred to before, show that many young women would to some extent like to preserve the traditional Four Virtues (Binh 2004, 57). Similar standpoints are thus expressed by some participants.

Nevertheless, selfishness seems to be the only negative aspect that the participants associate to modernity *per se*. The other bad things connected to being a modern woman relate to the pressure they have to put up with from family, relatives, friends and society at large. All participants experience, or have experienced, pressure from their family, relatives or more traditional friends to get married, settle down and get a stable job. Most of the participants are still staying with their parents, which to some constitutes an obstacle to become fully independent and modern, as their parents will not view them as adults. This also makes the pressure to be traditional more present in their daily lives;

*"I stay with my parents and grandparents, three generations. It is not nice at all, because they still control some parts of my life."*

- Thanh, 22

*"I don't think that my mother sees me as an adult. Because, she still thinks that if I am still living with her, I am still her child and she still has to care for me in some way. But that would also be the problem. Because I want to grow up, and I want to be more independent, to cope with my future life, because no one else can live for me, I have to live for myself!"*

- Linh, 25

As discussed above, “emerging adulthood” is a life-stage that presupposes a certain level of economic prosperity (Arnett 2005) – these are examples of how this constitutes a rupture towards the Vietnamese traditional family life. Especially those who have boyfriends are pressured to marry soon even though both they and their boyfriends want to wait, and those that have broken up from relationships experience disappointment from their families’ side.

To many of the participants it seems like their family environment allows them to freely speak their mind and resist the role imposed on them by their upbringing, even though it sometimes leads to conflict;

*"My parents and I have frequent fights and arguments about everything. Like about every one of my opinions. Like moving out, getting married late. And changing job too often, like than the standard of the traditional woman. So we have frequent fights about it, because my parents still think that if you are a woman and you live in Vietnam, you should still follow the customs and the regulations and beliefs of Vietnam. And if you want to change or if you want to be more modern, you should like go abroad!"*

- Linh, 25

Some participants however express that they for better or worse choose to completely “ignore” the subjects of marriage and future plans when talking to their families, to not risk getting into arguments;

*“Sometimes I just cannot express that I don’t want to get married now. They will feel bad for me. So I just make a joke or something like that, just to overcome the situation. And sometimes I express myself too much, but I know how they think and I cannot change their mindset. So I just try to avoid arguing with them.”*

- Minh, 27

Another prevalent strategy among the participants is to hide certain aspects of their personality and views, especially to older relatives, and act very obedient at home;

*“There was I while when I said back but now I just say yes. So when I go back home I don’t really express my personality and I become a very normal and good girl. I am but...”*

- Thu, 31

*“Most of the time I pretend that I agree but I understand that I am not responsible [to marry].”*

- Ha, 25

Some stress that they should keep a low profile concerning their “modern views” in their work life to appear professional. Linh, for example, is always hiding her tattoo at work. Intriguingly, one participant also express that she will sometimes have to oppress her more traditional side to fit in with her friends, and that she feels traditional in comparison to them;

*“Sometimes I cannot get into their conversation because they are... they express too much you know. So sometimes I cannot join their conversation. But most of the time I can handle myself and try to be modern with them.”*

- Ha, 25

This could indicate that some women feel that they must adjust to a new, “modern” norm for how to behave. Yet, almost all informants deny that there should be any pressure to be more modern, or appear successful and ambitious. Thuy, 31, does reflect upon the negative aspects of media images of how a modern woman should

be, but means that this does not affect her too much as she is not married. Another participant mentions that young women can now experience a pressure to mantle a double role;

*"About my friend, her husband expected that she still can keep the traditional role and take of baby, family, him, and then earn a lot of money and be successful in her career. [...] So I think for now they expect that women can be independent, and can find work for themselves, and earn money, get married, have babies... like be now both traditional and more modern."*

- Tam, 29

However, to most participants, modernizing is regarded as an individual and rational choice, based upon the injustice they have experienced during their upbringing. This enhances the construction of the modern woman as active, as opposed to the traditional woman. The following quotes further give the impression that modernizing is regarded as something that comes “naturally”, hence suggests a linear view of development;

*"No, I just naturally change to modern. You go to university, you meet people with different possibilities, and you can choose this is more suitable for me. Nothing pressure."*

- Mai, 27

*"I think that would be the influence or the impact of the family, that it make me feel... Or make me want to like break free so much. But I don't know, that is in my nature."*

- Linh, 25

The ones who feel like there is some pressure are those that have mothers with successful careers, who are inspiring and pushing them to be independent. This pressure is however described in a positive way;

*"You know she [my mother] was the one who encouraged me a lot you know like let's go study, let's go for your independence, and have your own like finance source, like don't ever think about getting married and think that your life would be like upon a husband or something."*

- Trang, 26

#### **6.4. Marriage**

I would like to linger upon the topic of marriage for a while. This has been brought up by all participants during our discussions, as it is perceived as closely connected to the traditional women's role. Marriage is also what most family pressure is about. However, while most participants see themselves as married in due time, getting married is not described as very important to them. Still, the topic of marriage in a sense illustrates the double vantage point that this generation have from both tradition and modernity, and how these two cultures in different ways influence how the participants construct their identity as young women.

As aforementioned, adolescence is a life-stage that is fairly new in the Vietnamese context. Among other things, this is because that young people marry later which extends the time between childhood and adulthood (Arnett 2005, 28). The time before marriage is expressed by the informants as linked to youth and freedom;

*"Because I haven't prepared anything for... marriage like that. I'm still young wild and free!"*

- Mai, 27

*"I actually think that before we get married we can be more modern and decide what we like."*

- Huong, 25

Notably, everything that the participants want to do in relation to their own fulfillment they claim that they must accomplish *before* marriage, because after that they will have to prioritize differently. This way, modernity, self-fulfillment and individualism becomes connected to the time before marriage. For this reason,

many participants hope to marry as late as possible, often in opposition to what their parents think;

*"I want to travel more, I want to work more, I want to earn more money.  
Then when I have to stabilize, I will then get married."*

- Chi, 24

*"In my age I really want to travel around and learn from others, and I really think that I will marry at 30 or something when I have enough experience and ready to have a family. And I think that is quite new. To marry later and want to do things on your own."*

- Thanh, 22

Most participants further express that it becomes hard for them to keep in contact with their married friends, because they have so different lives and because the only thing that their married friends are talking and caring about is their family;

*"It's quite difficult, like people around, my friends, they get married, and they have children, so sometimes even we lost the connection because we cannot share the same perspective, so sometimes it's so hard to communicate."*

- Tam, 29

Of course, it can appear obvious that anyone with small children at home can be caught up in family life. Yet, what is noteworthy here is that the participants recurrently stress that they will have to adjust more to the traditional women's role after marriage, in line with Binh's (2004) research as mentioned above. As tradition is connected to family values, naturally the participants see themselves dedicating more to that after they have a family of their own. However, this finding creates a notion that marriage constitutes a transition between two cultures;

*"[I am a modern woman] a little bit, but since I am going to get married, I am a bit more traditional."*

- Huong, 25

Even though the participants describe themselves as modern, some of them hence admit that they will for better or worse eventually commit to tradition – which appears natural to the participants. This illustrates the influence of both modernity and tradition in the participants' perception of the women's role, and how the traditional side is dominating in the private sphere. Further, modernity is through this notion constructed as a culture that one may temporarily be influenced by; a phase in life more than an actual lifestyle option. However, all participants agree that their marriage will not resemble their parent's marriage, which many describe as "unequal" or "complicated" and one of the reasons that they want to lead more modern lives themselves;

*"Like my mother, she does everything at home, like take care of her, take care of her parents, take care of my father, take care of his mother, my grandmother. She still need to do things and do every home work and she still needs to go out and earn money at the company. But she has no time to relax or something. But my father still don't think that this is hard for her and he does not help her to do things. He is like, the big man of the house. And I don't like this, and then it affects me, that I don't want to get married like that and I will wait until people change."*

- Chi, 24

Some participants see themselves marrying modern men, who will respect them and their independence. Therefore, they will not have to become more traditional after marriage;

*"Actually I will find a modern man, who accepts me. And who will let me work and sharing the housework with me. Not a traditional man who cannot accept me as an individual."*

- Mai, 27

To summarize, there is a recurring pattern to be found in the topic of marriage, which is connected to the discussion about modernity and tradition; marriage seems to be perceived as a kind of rite of passage not only between youth and adulthood, but also between modernity and tradition. Modernity is thus constructed as

something evanescent, belonging to the youth, while tradition is the stable ground that one, willingly or not, returns to after the debauchery of adolescence. This enhances the double image of modernity that has emerged above; on the one hand, it is regarded as desirable, but on the other hand it is constructed as shallow and unstable. Further, it suggests an understanding of modernity as a culture rather than as a point in time, in contrast to what has been discussed before.

### **6.5. Development and Globalization**

Approaching the core problematization of the study, this section will demonstrate how the participants have reflected upon the topics of development and globalization in relation to modernity. Modernity is generally perceived as a positive and liberating force. Except for being independent and having the possibility to fulfill their dreams, modern women are also by many described as more open-minded and adaptable to changes than traditional women;

*“Now, everything is global, you can’t be like traditional if you want to explore new things.”*

- Ha, 25

*“[The modern woman] have an open-minded view about marriage, about the changing life-styles. Because the world is still developing and there is a lot of things emerging, so I think having an open mind would be great for the modern woman because she would not be reluctant to change, at least.”*

- Linh, 25

Notably, the above quotes relate modernity to development and globalization while constructing tradition as non-compatible with this objective. Further, these participants seem to be taking this global “change” for granted. The hegemonic construction of modernity/development/globalization as superior to tradition might thus have influenced how the participants think about tradition and modernity in their own lives. The lack of negative aspects of modernity vis à vis the lack of positive aspects of tradition illustrate an intriguing point regarding how modernity and tradition are perceived by the participants. Apparently, this generation of

Vietnamese women are eager to break free from patriarchal structures and create life such as they want it. However, what is interesting is that many of the participants express a complete rejection of traditional values, while they are cherishing modernity and individualism. “Traditional” and “modern” thus becomes constructed as binary oppositions, reflecting post-colonial and capitalist discourses where the traditional is regarded as less valuable. Tradition is by the participants constructed as “irrational”, “passive”, “stagnant”, “backwards”, “closed” and “local”, while modernity is constructed in opposite terms of “rational”, “active”, “mobile”, “forward-looking”, “open” and “global”. I will get back to this in relation to the issue of identification.

As mentioned, a “modern woman” seems easier for some participants to conceptualize, especially the younger. Hypothetically, this might be an effect of increased exposure to “global culture” through mass media and social media, which may have influenced the younger more. This is sometimes stressed by the participants themselves, as many of them are connecting modernization to globalization and “exchange” with Western or global culture;

*“[...] so I learned from different cultures the role of the women in their society. I think that is the way we got more knowledge about the modern women’s role.”*

- Phoung, 26

*“They [modern ideals] come from... I don’t know. Just the foreign cultures, I guess. Like from movies and papers, and of course social network is so much channel for us to reach your culture. And of course we prefer it more than more than our television.”*

- Thanh, 22

*“I think somehow the origin of the modern woman may come from the Western countries, but it can also come from each individual, each mindset of any person.”*

- Linh, 25

In relation to globalization and modernity, one participant means that the modern woman is more of an international identity, which is a view that may also be interpreted from other interviews;

*“Of course, there are more independent modern people in some countries than in this country, but if they are modern people they are the same. [...] I think that modern is a more international role.”*

- Huong, 25

This “international role” is in line with what was explored in relation to modernity in the theoretical framework. The modern identity here becomes discursively linked to global culture and a global consciousness. As Huong also stresses that “modern people are the same” globally, the perception of a global identity emerging side by side with the local is enhanced. So, many participants stress that the Vietnamese society is currently changing in a global direction, and connect this change to modernity. One participant further connects this to a division between “developing” and “developed” countries;

*“It will be better and it push the thinking of the developed country, and I think it is good, it is getting better. But somewhere it is still traditional, and I don’t like the traditional way.”*

*“We will change the thinking of both men and women to get better and Vietnam to be developed country and not developing country like it is now.”*

- Chi, 24

And another participant regards tradition as an obstacle to development;

*“Because it is so traditional it cannot develop more, if the mindset of the people is not developed or changed.”*

- Linh, 25

In this way, some participants again construct a linear view of tradition and modernity, where modernity is a historical stage which one reaches through developing from tradition. Tradition is here understood as standing in the way of

development, in line with colonial ideas. In extension, this suggests an understanding of modernity as a capitalist development within which there is no room for traditional views, and tradition becomes positioned outside of the development process. Modernity is thus at the same time constructed as a separate culture coming from the West or “foreign cultures”, existing simultaneously with tradition without changing it *per se*. Hence, there is an ambiguous perception of modernity amongst the participants, constructing it at the one hand as a separate culture, and on the other hand as something that tradition will, or should, change into. However, becoming modern is, as mentioned, primarily seen as a product of experiencing the negative sides of traditional family relations at home or in the close environment and wanting to break free from these – the influence of global culture is often regarded as secondary inspiration. Most participants also mention education as a key to why they are becoming more “modern”. Through this notion, the participants somehow express that they are finding their own path towards being modern women, instead of uncritically adapting “foreign” lifestyles.

When speaking of modernity my role as a researcher is important. With regards to the participants’ perception of the West as more modern than Vietnam, me being a Western woman asking them about their views of modernity is obviously problematic. Those who were in the interviews completely dedicating to modernity and rejecting tradition might have wanted to appear as “modern” for me, through identifying with what they may have perceived me as a representative of. Simultaneously, in some cases I could sense a defensive attitude towards my questions, as if the participants were expecting me to judge their tradition or their traditional views. Further, by constructing a clear boundary between Eastern and Western culture, many participants expressed that they understood their traditional culture as very distant to mine;

*“Vietnam is different from the Western, how you think and opinions is different than Western. So being a modern woman in Vietnam is very hard.”*

- Ha, 25

*"I think I have the same opportunity as women in other developing countries, but for the Western women they are more independent than us."*

- Mai, 27

*"I see friends, like Swedish friends like you, like I see them and I like the way they live, and it could be better if I first change like them or something. Not just Swedish friends but I have some other friends in the world and then I see the way women in this country live. And I think it would be better if Vietnam women can be trained in some way."*

- Chi, 24

*"I'm sorry but I don't know if I understand the Westerner view completely. I think that you are more independent than us and you are yourselves more than us."*

- Thanh, 22

I tried to remedy this problem by emphasizing in the beginning of the interviews that there was no right or wrong and that I would not judge their opinions, but that I was only interested in their personal experiences. I also remained humble throughout the interviews, and did not act surprised or upset by anything they were telling me, if not appropriate of course. Nevertheless, the above quotes construct a distance between Western and Vietnamese women. This understanding may be influenced by the colonial constructions of modernity and tradition which are enhanced within the contemporary development doctrine. The Western female comes to represent the developed, independent and liberated woman that many of the participants strive to be. As we have seen throughout the analysis, the participants are partly identifying with the global modernity, but on the other hand they are thus apparently understanding themselves as distanced from the Western culture that they perceive as its origin. This corresponds to Bhabha's (1999) and Hall's (1999) claims as discussed above; discursive othering practices seem to be affecting the participants' perception of themselves. The "otherness" is understood as part of their identity, thus the participants' identity formation builds upon a negotiation with this perceived opposition. However, this also connects to Minh-

ha's (1999) claim that the Third World Woman is expected to express distance to the West, which may be affecting the participants' concept of self in relation to a Western feminist researcher. Continuing this discussion, I will now turn to the issue of identity.

### **6.6. Negotiating Identities: Standing Up or Giving In?**

The issue of identity has been the core theoretical category emerging from the interview material. Hence, this section constitutes a commentary which concludes the empirical analysis by connecting what has been thematically explored above to the larger theoretical framework of the study, approaching an answer to the initial research question. So, how do the participants then negotiate their identity within the traditional/modern narrative? As has been illustrated in the above analysis, it seems to be hard to tell in many cases. While there is a wish to pursue a modern way of living, many also see themselves as restricted by traditional family patterns. Simultaneously, participants value the traditional family life. In line with colonial development discourse, modernity is further valued higher than tradition in some aspects, which renders it challenging to identify with both. There are some general patterns emerging in the way that the participants are conceptualizing modernity and tradition in relation to their role and identity as women. However, these strategies often overlap for the same participant. Asking about whether someone identifies as modern or traditional can obviously be problematic – it is not an easy question to answer. As previously noted, I also sensed a confusion about these kinds of questions from some participants, especially those who did not have a clear conceptualization of “modernity”. However, this analysis is, like the above, based on the interviews as a whole and not only on the participants' answers to specific questions.

One way that the contrasting views are handled is to completely reject tradition in favor of modernity. A few informants clearly have this strategy. One of them has been growing up with a single mum, and has, according to herself, through that been inspired to become independent. Another has been pushed by her mum

throughout her upbringing to be independent and make it on her own, and claims that she will not allow herself to be influenced by tradition unless choosing to;

*"I am not bound by any kinds of roles or traditions that I don't feel right"*

- Trang, 26

Yet another has grown up in a traditional family outside Hanoi and moved to the city alone at the age of 20. It might be easier for these participants to reject parts of the traditional women's role as they do not have very strong bonds to it through family. However, this claim is made with humility. As discussed, my role as a researcher may be influential here; since modernity is connected to the Western world and globalization the participants may want to highlight their modern approach for me, or portray modernity in a way that they might assume me to expect from them.

The second way in which the participants handle the discrepancy is that they identify as modern women, but at the same time they somehow express that traditional values are important to them – almost like it is a shame that those values might be outrivaled by modernization or that they must abandon them in order to be more independent;

*"I think, in my opinion, combining the traditional views and the modern views would be somehow the perfect combination for me, but at the same time it is hard. Because sometimes you can choose just each side, like the traditional one or the modern one. It should be like... It will be easier."*

- Linh, 25

*"We have our own culture, and this thought... A part of this change is that some old fashion style keep in our minds. Like we read the stories about the women in the past and we learnt about it in the school, and this cannot change just because we live in another time."*

- Thanh, 22

Notably, Linh regards a combination of modernity and tradition as impossible, while Thanh believes that the traditional views will not disappear in favor of something else due to the ongoing “change”. In extension, Linh’s argumentation might imply one side eventually conquering the other, while Thanh rather suggests that the traditional identity will continue to develop side by side with the modern.

The big share of participants identifies as both traditional and modern, and do not want to, or regard themselves able to, commit to one of them. Therefore, they must “balance both”, as one participant puts it. However, they also express that this might come to change in the future;

*“No, I am influenced by the tradition, [...] but I think I am just a little bit influenced by the traditional. I think I am in between the traditional and the modern woman but the modern part is more strong. I am in between the generations but the next generation might be totally different.”*

- Mai, 27

*“Actually, I try to be modern because I live in the traditional family so it takes me time to realize more about myself... I think that I am like ‘modern-oriented’.”*

- Ha, 25

Ha further thinks that this double identity is a positive thing, because it means that she can be flexible to different situations. This flexibility is also something that is talked about in positive ways by other participants.

*“I want to be a flexible one. Traditional with suitable people and... Flexibility is a good thing.”*

- Ha, 25

This connects to the above discussion about bicultural or hybrid identities, where the former presupposes an understanding of modernity as a hegemonic “global culture” and the latter allows for more exchange and merging between cultures. Some participants tend to construct their own identity as coherently “modern”, and

seem to regard it as a self-elected hybrid of “traditional” and “modern” culture. Others are torn between different positions and experience a clear difference between modernity and tradition, which is described in both positive and negative terms. These participants further appear to have developed a bicultural identity, behaving differently in public and private spheres. To them, combining the two identities is described as hard, and therefore they must commit to one at a time.

Many participants articulate a resignation to the prospects of women in Vietnam – often in relation to “the countryside” which is recurrently described as less modern or “developed” than Hanoi. This enhances the perception of the Vietnamese urban middle-class as belonging to a global culture;

*“I think the women in the rural areas and those who do not get educated are very hard for them to approach new things. And they still believe in the traditional things. Because you know for 1000 years we have had Confucianism [...], people are influenced by that a lot. And it is very hard to change the mind just in short term when for 1000 years it has... A long term.”*

- Mai, 27

*“We [in Hanoi] had the chance to develop, other than those in the countryside.”*

- Huong, 25

These kinds of statements confirm the large divides between urban and rural areas in Vietnam. It is further interesting from the perspective of othering practices; by constructing women at “the countryside” as different, the participants are identifying based on what they are not and are in a way repeating colonial constructions of tradition and authenticity while using it against others. To maintain some traditional practices is described in positive terms by many participants, whereas women on the countryside are thus, by a few participants, described as uneducated and traditional in a negative way. This can be understood in the light of Mohanty’s (2002) ideas as discussed above. As the “Third World Women” are now

situated both under *and* within the Western gaze, and the women in this study can be seen as belonging to a global middle-class and thereby partly be defined as “Western feminists” in Mohanty’s terminology, they have a double vantage point. This corresponds to the double identification among the participants as both “modern” (read: global, Western), and “traditional” (read: Vietnamese).

To finish this analysis off, I would like to come back to the topic of agency and resistance through identification, which was explored in the theoretical framework. Several participants express that they do not think that the women’s role has much prospects of changing in the near future, as the traditional gender roles are firmly rooted in the Vietnamese people and society;

*“Even though from a bigger perspective you see like ‘okay, women now can go to school and go to work and get a lot of big position in life and’... But deep down I mean in the code of behavior, that’s what I want to talk about, like behavior that change the life a lot, then I think the behavior of a lot of people still do not change.”*

- Trang, 26

*“I know it could change, the gender equality could change, but not much in Vietnam. I think maybe it will take very long time. Actually, I think with the one who have good education, maybe it affects and have a good influence on them.”*

- Ha, 25

While these quotes construct a quite negative outlook for Vietnamese women, some are more positive and shows a strong feminist commitment and agency;

*“I think I am changing a lot, and I think that I have to be like somehow even more aggressive to stand up for my rights and for what I deserve to be and what I deserve to take!”*

- Linh, 25

*"I think it is changing now. Because I see many now a quite open and they are not just stick with the traditional mindset but they try to learn from other cultures. And if they see something better they will take it for themselves."*

- Phuong, 26

It is interesting how the participants position themselves in relation to the Western world regarding the how the women's role might change. As already noted, some participants express a prevailing cultural distance to the West. However, some of those who are leaning more towards modernity and global culture mean that their worldview is essentially Vietnamese, and construct this as positive;

*"Because the other women, not the Asian one but the Western, they have quite different point of views and I am still thinking the opposite way."*

- Ha, 25

*"I think our thought has change, but it is not like 100 % Western. Sometimes I feel I can see the differences, like the contact with the family. It is not like you guys think, we are more focused on the family value."*

- Thanh, 22

Except from further enhancing what was discussed in the previous section about identity formation and internalized otherness, this could be an argument against the idea that globalization should imply cultural streamlining. Colonial inferiority lay aside, these participants construct the local and the global as equally powerful, and thereby claim agency in relation to global culture. The study participants thus continuously renegotiate their position as both traditional (Vietnamese) and modern (global) women through accessing and using subject positions within these competing discourses. By constructing an identity as emanating from a variety of vantage points, they are intentionally as well as unintentionally challenging power structures in their direct and indirect surroundings. This is an example of how developing bicultural or hybrid identities should not necessarily be regarded as a problem, but can also be understood as a creative and productive act of resistance.

Yet, as the study participants belong to an “in-between generation” as Mai states above, and Vietnam has rather recently opened towards global capitalist influence, it is hard to draw conclusions about what further development will bring. After all, it seems like many participants identify with a global educated middle-class more than with their Vietnamese heritage, as they stress how their reason for becoming modern is exchange with other cultures and access to global media. This would then on the other hand suggest an increasingly integrated global culture, where the hegemonic construction of development as synonymous with capitalist globalization may outrival alternative understandings of modernity, instead of creating hybrid modernities.

## **7. Conclusion**

Based on the empirical analysis, I will now attempt to answer the initial research question of this study; how do constructions of “tradition” and “modernity” influence identity formation and perceptions of the women’s role among young educated and unmarried women in Hanoi?

The traditional woman is by the participants perceived as dedicated to taking care of her extended family, and she puts the need of the collective before her own desires. While this notion is to some extent understood as negative since it binds women to the domestic sphere and limits her agency, it is also constructed as a stable and familiar way of living as it enhances the woman’s eminent role as family care-taker.

The modern woman is described in more positive terms by the participants, highlighting aspects such as independence, freedom and self-fulfillment. While these properties are optimistically emphasized, the modern woman is also portrayed as more selfish and shallow than the traditional, and symbolizes a disintegration of family structures. Experiencing pressure from the family to marry and lead a traditional life increases the participants’ dedication to pursue a modern lifestyle, which they construct as a rational choice based on their background and experiences. At the same time, the participants claim that they will probably commit to the traditional women’s role when they marry. This illustrates how tradition still influences the private lives of women in Vietnam.

Stressing the importance of individualism and freedom while at the same time connecting modernity to development, changes in society and globalization, the participants express an understanding of modernity as positioned within a global capitalist culture. However, in many interviews connections are being made between modern/public sphere and traditional/private sphere, which illustrates how Vietnamese youth are developing bicultural identities as they are gradually integrated in the globalized society. Simultaneously, socialist conceptualizations of the modern woman, which have for long been informing the construction of the

women's role in Vietnam, are being neglected. Socialist modernity is thus increasingly outrivaled by the capitalist ditto.

The participants portray Western women as more modern and liberated than themselves, but at the same time identify more with them than with women living on the Vietnamese countryside. However, while on the one hand identifying with Western women, on the other they are continuously expressing their cultural distance to them. This might have to do with the uneven power relation between me as a researcher and the participants of the study – Western feminist research has been criticized for implicitly or explicitly encouraging Third World Women to represent authenticity, which may be apprehended by the research participants. Nevertheless, this finding still points towards that the participants' concept of self may be affected by the rapid development and the influence of global culture, as it illustrates how their identity formation is colored by the negotiation between a sense of belonging as well as a sense of otherness. This suggests that the transition to globalized modernity might be experienced as challenging with regards to identity.

As noted above, the participants are constructing modernity as a culture stemming from the West. However, the empirical material also point towards an understanding of modernity as a developmental stage following tradition. The latter reflects a linear view of development, corresponding to the hegemonic development doctrine. This notion is enhanced by the way that the participants talk about modernity as related to globalization, and in extension about globalization as something that is unavoidable. Modernity is thus understood as a characteristic of capitalist globalization, while tradition becomes positioned *outside* of this development process and impossible to combine with the same. On this account, when tradition is put in relation to modernity, tradition is perceived as backwards, irrational and passive, whereas modernity and globalization are constructed as its opposite. The binary oppositions that can be discovered in this narrative; modernity/tradition, global/local, and development/underdevelopment, where the latter is understood as subordinate to the prior, connects to colonial discourse. This

becomes problematic in relation to identity formation, as the women in this study identify as both modern/global and traditional/local.

Thus, when these women are attempting to renegotiate the traditional women's role, the alternatives which they encounter are already established roles and colonial subject positions, created within a globalized capitalist modernity which favors male values. Within this patriarchal discourse, the traditional society with which the participants are partly identifying is rejected in the names of "modernity" and "globalization", and individualism is regarded as a virtue while collectivism is frowned upon. Hence, independently creating a modern female identity becomes challenging. This illustrates a pressing issue in relation to the effects that the globalization of capitalist modernity has on local experiences of development. As the hegemonic development doctrine generates a wish to continuously modernize in order to "catch up" with development and globalization, those who are not understood, or understand themselves, as "modern" or "developed" within this discourse are experiencing a feeling of inferiority in relation to those further up in the discursive hierarchy. Following, the absence of alternative narratives of modernity than that of globalized capitalism creates an "either – or" situation, where a common perception is that traditional culture must be discarded in favor of development, no matter if it may be valued in some aspects. Hence, even if global culture may not be outriveling the local as tradition is still strong in forming identities and lifestyles for the young generation, colonial power-structures are recreated as capitalism is increasingly gaining a hegemonic position in the modern world-order.

To secure an inclusive global development, alternative modernities must therefore be recognized. Maybe those who should be in the forefront of such an expansion of potentials are those who have not completely adapted a capitalist imaginary. Thus, given the argument that identification is a form of resistance, the women in this study are possessing a notable agency. Through intentionally or unintentionally renegotiating roles that they are from different perspectives expected to live up to, the participants are using their access to different subject-positions within

competing discourses to expand the understanding of what “a modern woman” is. This can be discovered in how they are expressing their different strategies of forming an identity by combining tradition and modernity.

Conclusively, even though different forms of patriarchy; tradition and colonialism as well as socialist and capitalist constructions of modernity are all influencing Vietnamese young women’s understanding of their role and identity, it would be unfair to think of them as subordinate to these discourses. This study illustrates that there is an uncertainty surrounding the woman’s place in the developing Vietnam, concerning how she should position herself in relation to competing constructions of reality. However, the study participants are through their negotiating practices creatively expanding their subject-positions within each discourse. This notion may challenge hegemonic constructions of their role and possibilities, globally and in Vietnam.

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