

REVIEW ARTICLE

Men and masculinities studies in Vietnam: A brief review

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Abstract

In recent years, men and masculinities in Southeast Asia has begun to receive more attention from scholars as the result of increasing attention to intersections of race, gender space, colonialism, and place in countries such as Vietnam. This article provides an overview of current research on men and masculinities in Vietnam. It finds research on Vietnamese masculinities is predominantly understood through (i) concepts of *Confucianism*, with a particular focus on traditional ideas about gender and gender relations in kinship structures; (ii) considerations of Vietnamese masculinities post *Đổi Mới* (Renovation) and the impact of women's engagement in the labor market; and (iii) a focus on men as “at risk” or vulnerable, including a focus on alcohol consumption and engagement in domestic violence. We highlight limited focus in areas of sexuality and sexual practices, reflexive engagements with concepts of masculinity, focus on men residing in urban centres, considerations of bodywork and body project practices, and an overall Western approach to the study of masculinity in Vietnam. We conclude with a call for further research on men and masculinities in Vietnam framed through postcolonial epistemologies and research methodologies.

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KEYWORDS

gender, masculinity, men, postcolonialism, Vietnam

1 | INTRODUCTION

For decades, the study of men and masculinities has received considerable attention from scholars across different disciplines and across the globe. Emerging as part of a focus of the study of gender, men and masculinities is now often considered a sub-discipline and an active focus area in research and scholarship. Such research has explored how masculinity or masculinities can be theorised and queered (e.g. Anderson, 2009; Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Connell, 1987; Waling, 2019), and how masculinities are socially and culturally constructed, attending to time, representation, space and place (e.g. Hopkins & Gorman-Murray, 2014; Waling et al., 2018). Men's lived experiences have also been of interest, such as in sexual, romantic, and platonic relationships (e.g. Bank & Hansford, 2000; Sanders, 2008), men's health (e.g. Parker & de Vries, 1993; Scott et al., 2010), men and sports (e.g. Messner & Sabo, 1994), men in crisis (Silberschmidt, 1999), men's body image (e.g. Grogan, 2008), and the relationship between violence and men's engagement with ideals of masculinity (e.g. Baugher & Gazmararian, 2015).

The study of men and masculinities has historically centred on white, Western perspectives and contexts (Haywood, 2020; Whorley & Addis, 2006; Wong et al., 2010), though research exploring the intersections of race, space and place in lower- and middle-income countries is burgeoning (Louie & Low, 2003; Taga, 2004). One such area is Southeast Asia, where masculinities research has begun to flourish in spaces including Indonesia (Alcano, 2016), Malaysia (Khalaf et al., 2013), Thailand (Malam, 2008), and, the focus of this paper, Vietnam (Horton & Rydström, 2011). However, to examining masculinity in these disparate contexts, it is essential to first recognise dominant cultural practices and discourses that may shape how masculinity is conceived and performed.

Considering that the dominant output of men and masculinities research emerges from English-speaking countries such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada and Australia, it is imperative to consider how that body of work may shape research on men and masculinities in places such as Vietnam. Despite a significant development of this literature in the region over the last decade, few literature reviews have focused on men and masculinities research in Southeast Asia, and no such review has been conducted in Vietnam. This paper seeks to synthesise and trouble how men and masculinities research has been undertaken in Southeast Asia and, more specifically, in Vietnam. We ask, what are the dominant themes that emerge in men and masculinities research in Vietnam? What kind of methodological and theoretical frameworks are prominent in these works? What discourses are shaping the focus and direction of the research, and where might we want to shift or turn focus?

This paper has two aims. The first is to provide an overview of studies on men and masculinities in Vietnam by providing a summary of the major themes present in the literature and the key discourses which underpin and shape the way Vietnamese masculinities are studied. The second aim is to highlight gaps in the current literature and offer suggestions as to how research on men and masculinities in Vietnam can be further explored. We begin with a discussion of our method in finding, reviewing, and synthesising the data for this review. We then explore the major themes and discourses that emerge in the study of literature focused on men and masculinities in Vietnam, which includes Confucianism, *Đổi Mới* and Vietnamese masculinities, gender roles and family relationships; and sexuality and sexual practices. The concept of masculinity "as discourse" (Haywood, 2020) is applied to support our argument and, postcolonial approaches to the study of masculinity in Vietnam. Using this framework, we conclude with a call for further research on men and masculinities in Vietnam framed through postcolonial epistemologies and research methodologies.

1.1 | Social, cultural, and research context of Vietnam

Within Vietnam, a Southeast Asian country with a population of around 96 million, Confucianism¹ and the Âm² (Yin in Chinese)—*Dương* (Yang in Chinese) ideology exert considerable influence in culture and associated gender role practices and expectations. Âm-*Dương*³ ideology contends that everything consists of two inseparable and contradictory elements. This is reflected in the way Vietnamese people explain and experience their world, and how they may organise their daily life (Lê, 2006; Trần et al., 2011). This ideology strictly regulates human relations, particularly those between men and women, through specifying codes of conduct (Luong, 2015; Trần et al., 2011).

According to the Confucianism, men are expected to strictly follow *Ngũ Thường* (The Five Cardinal Virtues) and *Tam Cương* (The Three Rules). *Ngũ Thường* are *Nhân* (Benevolence), *Nghĩa* (Righteousness), *Lễ* (Propriety), *Trí* (Wisdom), and *Tín* (Trustworthiness). *Tam Cương* governs three important relations in men's life, including *quân-thần* (the King-his men), *phụ-tử* (father-son) and *phu-thê* (husband-wife). In these relations, the King, father, and husband must be fair; take care of their men, sons and wife; be loyal to the King; and take care of their parents as they age. Meanwhile, *Tam tông* (Three Obediences) requires a daughter to obey her father, a wife to obey her husband, and a widow to obey her son. Women's set of moral characters are *Tứ đức* (The Four Virtues), including *Công* (Housework), *Dung* (Physical appearance), *Ngôn* (Appropriate speech), and *Hạnh* (Proper behaviour; Lê, 2006).

Vietnamese families generally follow a patrilineal family structure based on Confucianism, which shapes expectations around how Vietnamese men should act and behave (Luong, 1989; Phinney, 2008; Vu, 2008). Vietnamese patrilineal families, particularly in Kinh communities—the main ethnic group accounting for 87% of Vietnam's population; are divided into two understandings of lineage. The first, *bên nội* (inside lineage), which includes boys and men of a family or kinship, and the second, *bên ngoại* (outside lineage), which includes women and girls (Luong, 1989). Women and girls are considered outside lineage as once they are married, they become a member of their husband's lineage, with their children carrying on their husband's family name. Married and single men still belong to their lineage, and their children are named following their family name.

Since the American War ended in 1975, Vietnam became a one-party socialist republic country and has experienced enormous changes in society. Especially, in 1986, the sixth Communist Party Congress launched an “open door” economic policy starting the *Đổi Mới* (Renovation) process, an economic reform that has led to significant social, political, and cultural change. The Socialist-oriented market economy boosted industrialisation and modernisation, and expanded commercial and diplomatic international relationships. As a result, *Đổi Mới* has stimulated rapid economic growth and resulted in the reduction of poverty (Asian Development Bank, 2020; Le, 2008; Phạm, 2008, 2016; World Bank, 2020). It has also led to women's increasing participation in the economic and public sectors, shifts in family structures and practices, diverse social stratification, new cultural and material influences, and the lessening of political governance over Vietnamese citizens (King et al., 2008; Le, 2009; Ngô, 2004; Phạm, 2008). The impacts of *Đổi Mới* continue to be felt, as documented within research reviewed in this paper.

2 | METHOD

This article synthesises the research literature on Vietnamese men and masculinities studies. We used keywords as “masculinity”, “masculinities”, “manhood”, “manly”, “machismo”, “men”, “male”, “men's role”, “male sex role”, “gender role”, “Vietnam”, “Vietnamese” and “patriarch” to search scholar databases, including CINAHL, ProQuest Central, Jstore, EBSCO, Scopus, Taylor & Francis Online Journal, and Google Scholar. We also utilised the reference lists of journal articles. Empirical studies on Vietnamese men and masculinities conducted in Vietnam were included. Studies exploring Vietnamese international migrants were excluded, as our focus was specifically on studies exploring men residing in Vietnam, rather than those who have migrated elsewhere. Studies examining representations of Vietnamese men and masculinities were also excluded, as the focus of this work is on lived experience. Articles were read and summarised in an annotated bibliography, thematically categorised based on the topic content, and analysed for

the emerging discourses that shaped these thematic directions. In total, 66 articles were included for this review. Below, we discuss the findings by exploring (i) men and masculinities studies in Vietnam, (ii) gender roles and family relationships, and (iii) sexuality and sexual practices.

3 | THEMATIC OVERVIEW OF VIETNAMESE MASCULINITIES RESEARCH

In Vietnam, gender studies have focused primarily on the experiences of women (Harris, 2002). Research that does explore the lived experiences of Vietnamese men residing in Vietnam is quite rare and, as we discuss below, generally focuses on men's gender roles within a family (Dao, 2018; Horat, 2017; Knodel et al., 2005) or within a domestic violence context (Jame-Hawkins et al., 2016, 2018). More recent studies have focused on Vietnamese men as migrants, or residing outside of Vietnam, such as in the United States (Bui & Monash, 2008; Nghe et al., 2003; Thai, 2012a, b), or the United Kingdom (Barber, 2014). We focus specifically on research exploring Vietnamese men who live in Vietnam.

3.1 | Vietnamese masculinities

3.1.1 | Confucianism and Vietnamese masculinities

In the first body of work, scholars explored cultural narratives of being a man and how notions of Vietnamese masculinity have been shaped by the influence of Confucianism, the *Âm–Dương* ideology, and the patrilineal ancestor worship tradition. Early research in the 2000s was primarily focused on cultural notions of male and female bodies, masculinity and femininity, including how these notions shaped men's and women's behaviour in rural Vietnam (Rydström, 2001, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2006). According to Rydström,⁴ local people in rural areas believed that male bodies were associated with the forces of *Dương*. Under the influence of the *Dương* force in their bodies, men have “hot” blood enabling them to have physical strength and “hot” character, which equates to being “naughty”, “mischievous”, “active”, aggressive, hard to “control”, and violent (Rydström, 2003, 2004). Rydström also argued that “a male body was constructed as being superior to a female body in both biological and socio-symbolic terms” (Rydström, 2002). Men held a more powerful position in a family—“*trụ cột gia đình*” (the pillar of the family) and as the main decision-maker in a household, responsible for educating young male members of his kin. This also included leading patrilineal rituals, such as for his parents' funeral and reburial, annual death day⁵ ceremonies for those who have died on his father's side, and his children's marriages, among others (An et al., 2012; Rydström, 2002, 2003, 2006).

Rydström argued that the role was culturally assigned to a senior man in a household, and that men did not have to work for or earn that role, a component of hegemonic masculinity (see Connell, 1987). However, in a more recent study exploring the political economy of the male body, Le (2012) argued that being the pillar of the family was not a role that men could take for granted. Rather, it was symbolic capital that men had to work hard to achieve, otherwise their wife could assume the role (Le, 2012; Martin, 2013). If this occurred, such men would be regarded as failures. Other scholars have continued to focus on men's roles in relation to Confucianism, providing more detailed notions of what it means to be the pillar of the household. As the pillar of the house, a man should have a stable job to secure economic status; be an alcohol drinker who could handle his alcohol intake; be a good-mannered representative of his family; have a wide social network; be capable of securing his children's education, job and marriage; and take care of his siblings and male friends (An et al., 2012; Horton & Rydström, 2011; Le, 2012; Lê et al., 2012; Vu, 2008). Traditional masculinity in Vietnam influenced by Confucianism and, is perceived to entitle men a privileged, powerful and dominant social status over women in their family and broader communities. There is a need for greater consideration of the ways in which masculinity and femininity and gender roles play out in tandem with other cultural practices and discourses that are contextually and geographically situated.

3.1.2 | *Đổi Mới* and Vietnamese masculinities

During the period of subsidised economy, when the Communist Party of Vietnam controlled most aspects of everyday life and citizens received food, goods and services by coupons and food stamps distributed by the government, the standard of living was low given the economic crisis. During this time, men were still conceived as the main earner and decision-makers in the family (Bui, 2000; Luong, 1989). After *Đổi Mới*, dramatic social and economic changes provided opportunities for women to enhance their role and contribution to family. This period also showed an increase in their involvement in family decision-making and in income, which could sometimes be higher than that of their husband's (Hoang & Yeoh, 2011; Horat, 2017). In addition, as the standard of living and the increased gap between the rich and the poor increased, the pressure of maintaining a high household living standard (relative to other families) placed a burden on the husbands, furthering a perceived need for the man to fulfill the role as the head of the house, ensure income stability, and thus maintaining their sense of masculinity (An et al., 2012; Le, 2012; Lê et al., 2012). Studies of Vietnamese men after *Đổi Mới* in Vietnam predominantly focused on men in rural areas, who were seen as more vulnerable to changes in gender relations because of socio-economic change (Hoang & Yeoh, 2011; Tran, 2004; Vu, 2015).

While numerous studies have explored notions of masculinity in rural areas, there are few scholars who have examined the experiences of men who reside in urban settings, including their perceptions of being a man in relation to the cultural, social and economic change that occurred following *Đổi Mới* (Hoang, 2014a,b; Martin, 2010, 2011, 2013, 2017). In his ethnographic studies among young men in Hanoi (the capital city of Vietnam), Martin pointed out the "contradiction", "ambivalence", and "discontinuities" between young Vietnamese men's perception of masculinity and their practices in their daily lives (Martin, 2011, 2013, 2017). Young men wanted to reinforce the traditional notions of masculinity, as established by Confucianism and the ideals of *Dương*. However, they were "ambivalent to notions of male power and authority" (Martin, 2013, p. 210) by showing their respect and admiration to their mother's changing economic contribution to the family given their increasing role in the private economic sector after *Đổi Mới*. They also articulated that they did not feel that they experience privilege over young women (Martin, 2017). Martin (2017, p. 265) argued that ambivalent masculinity was "a means of organising and representing complex and contradictory memories and personal desires about 'being a man' in the midst of social changes and through everyday relationships".

In other works, such as that by Hoang (2014a,b), the focus has been on elite businessmen's transnational masculinity—a new pattern of hegemonic masculinity that was practiced by businessmen working in transnational corporations (see Connell, 1998; Connell & Wood, 2016). Transnational masculinity is understood as constructed in relation to other men through intersections of race, class, and nation (Connell, 1998; Connell & Wood, 2016). Hoang (2014a) argues that there are new forms of masculinity emerging where local and wealthy Vietnamese men contest the superiority of Western ideals of masculinity. Such men demonstrate their financial dominance and Vietnam's increasing economic capital over Western businessmen through the payment in cash rather than using credit cards, which may be more common among those from Western countries (Hoang, 2014a,b).

Regarding social and economic changes after *Đổi Mới*, scholars argue that a new kind of masculinity is forming, in which men want to maintain a traditional sense of masculinity (as articulated by Confucians and *Dương*) but acknowledge the increasing role of women and question the notion that men should hold power and authority (Martin, 2010, 2013). Most of these studies have focused on masculinity among men perceived as disadvantaged, such as those residing in rural areas or young men who have limited economic and social capital. Most studies have also focused on men's experiences after *Đổi Mới* but have not fully explored the influences of economic growth, globalisation, and old ideas of Confucianism and the *Âm–Dương* ideology on men's lives and their perceptions of masculinity. Surprisingly, there is little to no research exploring how wars, such as the Vietnam–American war (1954–1975), may have shaped how Vietnamese men understand masculinity, family, and other associated roles prior to *Đổi Mới*, though a large body of work has examined the experiences of American veterans (e.g. Gardiner, 2013; Weber, 2010).

3.2 | Gender roles and family relationships

Vietnamese traditional norms regarding gender roles are intertwined in family discourses and gender relations in Vietnam (Rydström, 2010). Men and boys are perceived to possess higher status⁶ and more privilege within family structures than women (Rydström, 2001, 2002, 2010). Men are expected to be the head of the house, the main decision-maker, material and moral care provider to his family, a role model for his children, and a good alcohol drinker (An et al., 2012; Phan, 2008; Rydström, 2003; Vu, 2015). As a breadwinner of the family, men are expected to do “big” work and have a salaried occupation, such as a construction worker, teacher, or government officer, among other careers (Bergstedt, 2016). Meanwhile, women are assumed to subordinate to their husband as the main caregiver and reproducer of the family; doing “small” work such as household chores, childbearing; care-providing to other family members; maintaining the family harmony and, for rural women, most of the farming work (Bergstedt, 2016; Khuat et al., 2009; Knodel et al., 2005; Luong, 1989; Rydström, 2010). Below, we explore how research has attended to ideas about gender roles regarding household structures, economic contributions, family violence, and substance use.

3.2.1 | Household structures and economic contributions

After *Đổi Mới*, the Vietnamese government encouraged private economic sector development to facilitate industrialisation and modernisation and to promote economic growth. Families became a fundamental economic unit of a Vietnamese “socialist-oriented market economy” (Phạm, 2016). Many scholars have examined the ways in which these political, socio-economic changes, and the government's gender equality campaign have influenced gender roles and family structures in Vietnam. Knodel et al. (2005) conducted a survey of three marriage cohorts in the Red River Delta region to measure the changes in gender relations over 40 years. The study argues that, despite *Đổi Mới*, gender roles within a family have remained the same. Husbands continue to be decision-makers in the family while wives take on most household chores and child-rearing responsibilities. However, the study does note increasing support from their husband in these duties, which suggests a shift from such responsibilities being solely the domain of women (Knodel et al., 2005). This study, however, lacks a consideration of gendered power relations, such as those that might occur when women join in the private economic sector as employees or engage in work overseas, and the potential for women to earn relatively more income than their husbands.

More recent studies have noted that women from rural areas may migrate for employment to supplement household need; however, this will only occur if agricultural work is not providing sufficient income (Vu, 2015; Vu & Agergaard, 2012). Other women may begin to work in trades or household business (Horat, 2017; Martin, 2013). In both cases, women may become material providers, resulting in loss of time and capacity to engage in traditional caring duties, or perhaps gaining more power in their family structure (Hoang & Yeoh, 2011; Vu & Agergaard, 2012). Research has noted mixed reactions from men within these changing economic circumstances. Some studies note that Vietnamese men have been embarrassed or feel ridiculed for having to take on forms of labor traditionally considered to be feminine (Bergstedt, 2016; Hoang, 2011; Horat, 2017; Locke et al., 2012). Other studies have found that while some men actively take on the caring role to support their wives' working, they typically expect to hand these domestic tasks back to their wives when they return (Horat, 2017; Vu, 2015).

Scholars, such as Hoang and Yeoh (2011), Vu (2015), and Horat (2017), have emphasised that regardless of the enormous changes that have arisen in relation to gendered relationships, both husbands and wives have maintained traditional masculinity and gender roles rather than confronting them. Breadwinner-wives have performed as a submissive wife in front of others to protect their husband's sense of masculinity as the patriarchal hierarchy role model for their children and to build an image of a happy, traditional family (Vu, 2015). Research also highlights different strategies for men to protect their sense of masculinity. Some have built their image as a responsible kinship member and a good father to maintain their well-respected status within the community (Hoang & Yeoh, 2011; Horat, 2017),

while one study reported how some men affirm their decision-maker role in the family by purchasing expensive goods regardless of objections that may come from their wife (Vu, 2015).

3.2.2 | Family violence and alcohol consumption

The examination of intimate partner and family violence,⁷ and aggressive forms of punishment, and alcohol consumption has been a major focus of study. Qualitative studies have noted a belief that aggressive and violent behaviour is inherent to Vietnamese men and that this justifies violent physical treatment of female partners (Jame-Hawkins et al., 2016; Phan, 2008; Rydström, 2003). Krause et al. (2016) found that younger men with fewer social and economic resources are more likely to affirm their masculinity by hitting their wife than is the case for well-respected and wealthy older men (Krause et al., 2016), highlighting a link between economic resources and engagement in maltreatment of women. Research conducted in rural Vietnam also pointed out that violence directed at children is also commonly accepted, whereby physical punishment may be used to discipline young boys (Rydström, 2006).

Men's drinking habits have also been a focus of research, in particular family violence and men's bonding practices. Being able to drink large quantities of alcohol is typically regarded as a signifier of masculinity, perhaps best expressed by the common Vietnamese sentiment, "a man without alcohol is like a flag without wind" [*Nam vô tửu như kỳ vô phong*] (Lincoln, 2016; Vu, 2008). Drinking alcohol for men occurs not only to prove their manliness, but also to expand and strengthen male bonds (Nguyen et al., 2019; Vu, 2008). Drinking alcohol can be seen as a means by which to enhance social networks, which can be an effective strategy for men from rural areas who possess low economic capital but can still maintain their role as heads of their household by other demonstrable forms of masculine practice (An et al., 2012). They argue that poverty and alcohol are not the direct cause of violence but rather that the sense of being weaker and less masculine caused by having less economic resources can lead men to drink alcohol and to be violent (Hoang et al., 2013).

More recent studies have mostly focused on heterosexual men in rural areas; men's masculine performance in relation to women; negative impacts of masculinity, such as men's violence against women (Jame-Hawkins et al., 2018; Yount et al., 2016); men's drinking habits (An et al., 2012; Gillen, 2016; Vu, 2008); and men's difficulties in adjusting to women engaging in labor market (Horat, 2017; Vu, 2015). In this body of work, scholars argue that regardless of the changing gender roles after *Đổi Mới*, traditional masculinity values are still dominant; and both women and men are struggling to adapt to social changes.

3.3 | Sexuality and sexual practices

The study of men's sexuality in Vietnam has been limited both in scope and in methodological approach. Scholars have largely focused on men's sexuality in relation to heterosexuality and its association with masculinity and gender norms. Vietnamese people perceive men's sexuality as a "natural quintessential drive" (Horton & Rydström, 2011, p. 543). Horton and Rydström (2011) describes a belief that men, whose blood and temperament are "hot", need women, commonly conceived as "cold", to balance male quintessence through sex. If a man's sexual drive remains unfulfilled, heat will accumulate in his body, posing a risk of "explosion" (Horton & Rydström, 2011). Not only is it often believed that men are unable to control their sex drive (Paula-Frances, 2003), but being sexually active is perceived as essential for men to ensure balance and health (Khuat et al., 2009). Thus, if a man engages in extramarital sex, his wife, rather than himself, will be blamed for not fulfilling her sexual duties. The man is regarded as being forced to find another woman to release the "heat" and avoid the risk of explosion (Horton & Rydström, 2011; Khuat et al., 2009; Nguyen & Harris, 2009).

Extramarital sex has been a dominant focus of Vietnamese's men's sexuality research. Before the American war in Vietnam (1954–1975), men were permitted to marry multiple wives, an act which was seen as a demonstration of

wealth. Later, the Vietnamese Communist Party replaced polygamous marriage with monogamy (Khuat et al., 2009; Luong, 1989). Since 1954, in the North of Vietnam, extramarital sex was seen as a serious crime, which was strictly governed by the society and the Party. At that time, while most men were on the frontline of the army, their wives were expected to be faithful and take care of the family in their absence. If a wife engaged in extramarital sex, she would be punished for betraying her husband who was fighting for national freedom (Khuat et al., 2009). The political and economic changes occurring since *Đổi Mới* have further shaped men's opportunities to engage in extramarital sex in a variety of ways that enable a commercialising and sexualising of men's leisure as a new form of masculine identity (Phinney, 2009). In this new context, engaging in extramarital sex is seen to 'prove' their maleness through demonstrations of sexual potency. Visiting female sex workers with other males is sometimes seen as a way to strengthen male bonds and enact their wealth and social dominance (Hoang, 2014a; Horton & Rydström, 2011; Nguyen, 2009; Nguyen & Harris, 2009; Nguyen-Vo, 2010; Phinney, 2009). Phinney (2009) observed that men are often provided opportunities to engage in extramarital sex when socialising with male friends, colleagues or business partners. Rejection of a sex worker in this setting can result in teasing and claims they are not a "real" man, which can in turn disrupt a bond with other males.

However, a body of research shows that young men may be struggling with expectations to engage in traditional masculinity and changes in the modern society (Klingberg-Allvin et al., 2012). In contrast to relatively servile expectations of women in traditional framings of masculinity, Horton and Rydström (2011) report that some young men are aware of women's capacity for sexual desire. Such men worry that they are not well-prepared to take the lead and satisfy their female partners' sexual expectations due to poor relationships and sexuality education in Vietnam (Horton & Rydström, 2011; Khuat et al., 2009). Finding sex workers and/or watching pornography films together are practices sometimes undertaken in preparation for future sexual relations (Horton & Rydström, 2011). These practices serve the purpose of developing sexual confidence and, in turn, a sense of masculine performance.

Since the emergence of HIV/AIDS, Vietnamese men who have sex with men (MSM) have received attention from numerous scholars; however, most work examines their sex and sexuality only from a public health and at-risk perspective (Colby et al., 2004; Garcia et al., 2012). There is a lack of research exploring how they negotiate their life within a society framed by notions of dominant masculinity, homophobia, and body image. We identified only two papers examining how Vietnamese gay men negotiate with heterosexual masculinity and heterosexual normalcy (Horton, 2019; Horton & Rydström, 2019). Research has noted that some MSM have applied several strategies to avoid its negative impact on heterosexual masculinity and normalcy on their life, including living far from family, entering a heterosexual marriage to fulfil their familial responsibilities while maintaining their MSM practices in secret, or marrying a woman who has sex with women, for a mutual benefit of fulfilling family expectation and being open to each other about their sexuality (Horton, 2019; Horton & Rydström, 2019).

4 | CONCLUSION

This review reveals several themes that shape research on Vietnamese men. The first, that the scholarship has primarily portrayed Vietnamese masculinities as influenced by Confucianism and the patrilineal family, with a particular focus on traditional ideas about gender relations. Here, Vietnamese men are regarded as always embedded within kinship and family networks (An et al., 2012; Rydström, 2006). Unlike Western scholarship on men and masculinities, which has focused primarily on men's relations with other men (unless the focus is on intimate and sexual violence; Haywood et al., 2018), research on Vietnamese masculinities is firmly situated within family and kinship relations. As such, little attention is paid to other ways in which men might negotiate masculinity, such as men's emotional reflections or men's engagements with urban and global life.

The second theme has been a focus on men that are set up as "at risk" or vulnerable. This has included Vietnamese rural men, migrant male workers, MSM, and urban young men with limited social and economic capital. It includes an overall focus on negative impacts of masculinity and unequal gendered power relations, including men's

violence against women, men's drinking habits, and men's difficulties in adjusting to women engaging in the labour market as wage earners after *Đổi Mới*. This may in part be due to international funding priorities that focus more on traditional issues, such as health and gender inequality (Cassidy, 2010; Crane & Dusenberry, 2004), rather than more nuanced considerations of how masculinity is engaged in and embodied by Vietnamese men. The missing narratives of middle-class, urban men and their masculinities may occur due to the assumption that these men are not in some way at risk (e.g. for HIV/AIDs, or problematic substance use) or as a problem (e.g. perpetrators of family violence and gender inequalities, which is often attributed to working class or rural men) and therefore not deemed worthy of attention (see Roberts & Elliott, 2020). This may result in an absence of understanding in how such men may be negotiating masculinity in their daily lives, the changing roles of women and family structures, and increasing awareness of lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and gender diverse, intersex, queer identifying (LGBTIQ+) people and the challenges they can face.

The third theme is that the bulk of the literature can be said to be from a "macro" approach, in which Vietnamese masculinities are portrayed as a set of fixed and institutional privileges which are upheld by Vietnamese men without much negotiation, reflection, or confrontation regardless of culturally regional differences. Thus, nothing was mentioned about the differentiation between masculinities in the North and in the South of Vietnam in this literature. The exceptions are the works of Horton (2019) and Martin (2017), who have touched on Vietnamese men's reflections on masculinities by describing young heterosexual men's ambivalence and LGBTIQ+ people's resistance to traditional notions of masculinity in Vietnam. The question of individual practice, and how men might negotiate or reflect on their engagements with masculinity, is limited (see Waling, 2019, 2020) despite recognition of large social, cultural, and economic changes post *Đổi Mới*. Future studies exploring Vietnamese masculinity as a relational process, in which men are aware of their privileges, engage with masculinity and negotiate with it through their agency and emotional reflexivity are needed.

The last theme is evidence of the way "Western social sciences becomes the framework" for research conducted not only in the Global North⁸ but also in the Global South (Haywood, 2020). Haywood notes that such theories and approaches, particularly masculinity theories, can be inappropriately applied to local contexts and spaces in the Global South, such as in places like Vietnam. For instance, the narrative of traditional Vietnamese masculinity relies on theories of gender relations and power dynamics developed by Global North scholars, specifically that of hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 1987). Such depictions of Vietnamese masculinity continue to dominate the literature and do not accurately reflect or capture the flux of Vietnamese men's engagements with masculinities and global shifts, such as increased engagement with digital cultures, globalisation and its associated impacts, increasing recognition of diverse genders and sexualities (i.e. LGBTIQ+), men's body image and bodywork practices, and men's sexual practices outside of a risk or infidelity discourse. Moreover, the depictions of Vietnamese men and masculinities tend to be static and constituted through negative actions (e.g., violence, excessive alcohol drinking, extramarital sex), and lack depictions of masculinities as having the potential to be "positive, transformative and altruistic" (Haywood, 2020).

As highlighted, most of the of the current literature on men and masculinities in Vietnam is framed through Western frameworks and theories. However, a few scholars have found that empirical evidence of men's experience in Global South, specifically in Vietnam, do not always subscribe these frameworks and perspectives (An, 2012; Gillen, 2016), speaking to Haywood's (2020) critique of the need to account for local contexts, space, and place. For example, An (2012) notes that while alcohol is a significant aspect of Vietnamese men's masculinity, men's drinking cultures in Vietnam subscribe to an idea of control and men should not drink to excess (Gillen, 2016). This is vastly different from research on alcohol consumption amongst men in Global North countries such as the United Kingdom, United States, and Australia, where excessive alcohol consumption and loss of control through alcohol (often materialising as violence) is a significant marker of ideal masculinity (e.g. De Visser, 2009). Similarly, through research on men's alcohol consumption, Gillen (2016) found challenges in conducting research with Vietnamese men that adhered to Global North expectations of research ethics and practices. Specifically, one of these challenges is the silencing around whether it is appropriate for researchers to engage in alcohol consumption during their field-work practices; and it is largely a stigmatised and hushed discussion. He argues that such expectations have been

developed through frameworks of whiteness and masculinity that do not account for how these frameworks are produced and engaged outside of the Global North. It refers to a need to conduct research in the Global South, including Vietnam, in engaging with the local knowledge and voices, which is known as the core values of postcolonialism (Ashcroft et al., 2007). Postcolonialism is a social movement and research approach critiques the universal application of Western frameworks, practices, and theories without consideration of spaces; and places aims to address inequalities produced through these frameworks; and centres the voices and knowledge of marginalised and excluded people (Bauchspies, 2007; Bristol, 2012; Sherry, 2008).

We are in alignment with Gillen's (2016) argument concerning the need for a postcolonial approach to the study of men and masculinities in Vietnam. This can be achieved through maintaining an on-going dialogue with their research communities so such communities can be directly involved in knowledge production and benefit from the research (Bauchspies, 2007; Bristol, 2012). Moreover, scholars can practice reflexivity to describe how and to what extent their background, including their engagement with Western epistemologies, methodologies, and research practices, may shape their research questions and approach (Sherry, 2008). By doing so, scholars will be able to elicit a deeper and more nuanced understanding of Vietnamese men and masculinities within a local, social, and cultural context.

In thinking about future directions of Vietnamese masculinities studies, we encourage scholars to engage a post-colonial approach. Such research can attend to how men in Vietnam are negotiating varying ideals of masculinity as articulated by traditional and contemporary perspectives while paying attention to specific local and social contexts. Additionally, using this approach may provide space to better understand men's varied sexual and gender identity practices, their potential engagements with bodywork practices and body image, and how men are negotiating social and cultural changes in their lives with the advent of globalisation and increased access to digital technologies.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Confucianism was introduced in Vietnam around the first century B.C.E when Chinese invaders introduced their customs, rites and language. Since the *Lý Thánh Tông* Dynasty in the 11th century, Vietnam has officially adopted Confucianism as official political doctrine (Luong, 2015; Trần et al., 2011).
- ² Throughout this paper we have chosen to use the Vietnamese term for a number of concepts to emphasise local culture, time and place.
- ³ Vietnamese people believe that *Dương* is associated with men's body, the sun, heaven, heat, activity, day, exteriority/superiority, upward, red colour, a circle, the South, left, and odd numbers. *Âm* is associated with women's body, the moon, Earth, cold, passivity, night, darkness, inferiority, inwardness, black colour, a square, the North, right, and even numbers (Lê, 2006).
- ⁴ In this literature, Rydström is the first and only scholar who has documented Vietnamese perspectives concerning how *Âm* and *Dương* influence men and women. This is usually cited by other scholars working in the field of Vietnamese identity and masculinity.
- ⁵ For instance, the eldest son of a family was expected to organise the funeral as well as ceremonies on the 49th and 100th day after a family member is deceased. Subsequently he would organise a ceremony on the death day every year in tribute to the deceased family member.

- ⁶ There are at least three reasons that have been proposed as to why boys and men possess a higher status and more privilege in the family than women. The first is that a man is a sign of continuing future of the family through creating new generation. The second is that a son, especially the eldest son, maintains close ties to their deceased patrilineal ancestors by organising worship ceremonies; thus, he is connecting his deceased paternal ancestors and living members of his family and kinship. The third is that Vietnamese male bodies are "inscribed with the collected 'morality', 'honor' and 'obligations' of this past generation" (Rydström, 2002, p. 363). Thus, the existence of a man and what he does are representative of his family's morality and honor in the past and present (Rydström, 2001, 2010). Therefore, Vietnamese people believe that men are the connection point of the past, present, and future of the lineage (Luong, 1989; Rydström, 2002).
- ⁷ Family violence mentioned in the literature are physical violence toward women and children, including physical punishment for "education" of children. We recognise that the use of physical punishment for "education" of children, which would be considered a form of abuse in global spaces, is culturally accepted in Vietnam according to the social beliefs of using violence to express masculinity, gender inequality and hierarchical parent-child relationship. These cultural factors are big challenges to Vietnamese government's efforts to reduce violence toward children.
- ⁸ We recognise that the terms "Global South" and "Global North" are contentious and are cautious in their application in this paper. By Global South, we are loosely referring to a group of countries that have experienced significant economic, social, cultural, and political challenges, and that have often been subjugated to the violent colonialism of Global North countries. We note, however, that even countries designated as Global North (such as Canada, the United States and Australia) have also been subject to violent colonialism regarding First Nations peoples, and many Global North countries also experience many social, political, and economic challenges.

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