Author's response to reviews

Title: Sexual Relationships among Men who have Sex with Men in Hanoi, Vietnam: a Qualitative Interview Study

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Author's response to reviews: see over
Reviewer #1

Title: Sexual Relationships among Men who have Sex with Men in Urban Vietnam: a Qualitative Interview Study
Version: 1
Date: 29 August 2012
Reviewer: Lei Zhang
Reviewer's report:

**General comment**
The authors present a qualitative study of men who have sex with men (MSM) in Hanoi, Vietnam to describe their sexual relationships. Overall this well-written and interesting paper highlights a dominant practice of short-term sexual relationships in this vulnerable population. It would be better if the length of this manuscript can be shorten, particularly the Methods and Results section, and go through a professional proof reading to eliminate some minor grammatical errors.

*We thank Dr. Zhang for very constructive comments on the manuscript. The paper has now gone through professional proof editing as suggested. Regarding shortening of the manuscript, we have tried to comply with this request when possible. However reviewer #2 and #3 have asked for a number of clarifications, which we had to take into account.*

Further point-by-point replies are included below.

**Specific comments:**

**TITLE**
As presented in the methods, this study was only conducted in Hanoi with a very small number of 17 purposive interviews, thus the authors should consider using “Hanoi” rather than “urban Vietnam”.

*Good suggestion. We have changed from “urban Vietnam” to “Hanoi” in the title of the paper.*

**ABSTRACT**
Line 3, page 2 - 30 times is a bit too high, see the second comment for the Introduction

*The abstract now states:*

“The prevalence of HIV among men who have sex with men (MSM) in Vietnam’s two largest cities, Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, may be above 10%.”

*See below for further details.*

**INTRODUCTION**
Line 2, page 3 – As the first appearance of “MSM”, this acronym should be expressed in a full meaning.

*Done*
The national prevalence of HIV in MSM and general population is estimated to be 2% and 0.29% in 2012 (as the reference 1), respectively, please consider changing ‘30’ accordingly.

To our best knowledge, some key findings of the 2009 Integrated Biological and Behavioural Surveillance in Vietnam is orally presented only, not published as a full report, so it would be better to revise the second reference. In this presentation, further, the prevalence levels of HIV in MSM in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City are 17.4% and 16.7%, respectively (Nguyen Tran Hien, the 4th National Scientific Conference on HIV/AIDS; December 1-3, 2010; Ha Noi, Vietnam). Thus, please consider the accuracy of the cited percentages.

Thank you. We acknowledge that this is a tricky issue since different figures have been referred to by different actors and in different reports. Sampling of MSM is of course also an extremely delicate issue method-wise, meaning that different sampling methods likely have led to different sample compositions in surveys.

We have changed the text in the beginning of the introduction to:

“Surveys in 2009 among MSM in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City in Vietnam have reported HIV prevalence rates of more than ten percent in both cities [3].”

Regarding referencing the IBBS round II:
The report giving the results from the second IBBS (2009) has actually been produced by FHI and has been unofficially released, (the government approval process is however slow). HIV prevalence rates were 14.8% and 17.3% in Hanoi and HCMC respectively, according to the report. Regarding referencing this data, the IBBS round II results for MSM are referred to in the Viet Nam AIDS Response Progress Report, 2012, divided on male sex workers and non-male sex workers. We therefore reference the IBBS round II data but add the url to the Viet Nam AIDS Response Progress Report, 2012 to refer the reader to the correct official source.

Comparison between MSM and general population prevalence rates
The statement of possibly more than 30 times higher HIV prevalence among MSM compared to that in the general population has been deleted given the various different estimates published. For the interest of the reviewers, the latest report available (AIDS Response Progress report) gives additional data on this.

Line 3, page 3 – “(2009)” should be “in 2009”

Done, see above.

Lines 3-5, page 3 – Along with sexual exposure of HIV, drug use, particularly heroin injection, is another risk factor of HIV infection in Vietnam (Nguyen et al, 2008. AIDS and Behavior. 12 (3): p. 476-482; Pham et al, STD, 2012. In Press) and this behaviour is particularly common among Vietnamese MSM. Please consider adding this information to provide a full picture of risk behaviours among MSM in Vietnam.

We have added this to the text. To avoid unnecessary stigmatization we have clarified that drug use seems to occur only among a minority of MSM (six percent in the Nguyen reference.
Two to eight percent in the IBBS round II).

The text now says:

“These high rates of HIV infection have their proximate cause in individual risk behaviors, such as unprotected anal sex and, for a minority of MSM, also injection drug use [4].”

Lines 4-5, page 4 – The authors should give reference for this sentence. “Research on same-sex relationships…”

Done

Line 14, page 4 – In this study, Hanoi was chosen as its socio-demographic transition was similar to other city in the region. However, it is not clear which region was mentioned (Asia, south-east Asia, northern region in Vietnam, or urban Vietnam), so the authors should clarify this.

Thanks, we have clarified this. The text now says:

“...Hanoi, a city in major socio-demographic transition like many other cities in South-East Asia and China.”

METHODS

In general, neither the duration of data collection nor the eligible male criteria for this study were mentioned. This important information should be added. Furthermore, a table describing selected characteristics of informants would be helpful for readers to follow easily the text.

Thanks for spotting. We have added the following text:

“Interviews took place between November 2008 and September 2009.”

“Inclusion criteria were person biologically born as males, living in Vietnam, 18 years and above, who had ever had sex (any type) with another man.”

We have also added a table with characteristics of the individuals, see below:
Unfortunately, no “local experienced” MSM were involved in the study team to adjust for social norms, suggest adequate questions and interpret correctly the meanings of unclear and inconsistent answers in a particular Vietnamese MSM context (lines 3-5, page 6). Verbal and non-verbal information were only collected by a local female sociologist and two foreign medical doctors (one male and one female) (lines 8-11, page 5). These may lead to major biases for the results, thus should be addressed in the Discussion.

We believe this has both negative and positive consequences. Several men said that as it was very difficult to keep secrets within their MSM circles and that “no one talks as much as gay men”. For some men it may therefore have been quite difficult to talk freely with another local gay man/MSM present. We also performed the study in collaboration with a local NGO working on LGBT issues and we discussed findings together.

We have added the following text to the discussion:

“No local MSM were present at the interviews. This may have led to misinterpretation of
verbal and non-verbal messages. It may however also have made it possible for men to speak freely about their lives without needing to conform to prevailing norms or fear that their statements would passed on to other MSM. Findings were also discussed with local key informants to avoid misinterpretations of the data.”

Line 20-25, page 4 – The participants were purely recruited with the study purpose and the authors did not conduct a respondent-driven sampling. Thus this information should be excluded from the main text as it may cause confusions for the readers.

Thank you for pointing out this unclarity. We have change the text to both provide necessary information about how the participants were sampled, while avoiding a confusion between our study and the previous study. We think that the use of respondent-driven sampling is important to mention as the method allow sampling of participants who are more socially distant from the researchers than what is usually the case in one- or two-wave snowball samples. Reviewer #2 also asked for additional information about how participants were recruited. We have thus clarified the text to avoid misinterpretation (method section):

“Two-thirds of the informants had previously participated in a respondent-driven sampling (RDS) study among MSM in Hanoi [19]. They had, at that time, expressed interest in participating in other research studies and were thus contacted.”

RESULTS
A general comment: please separate the quotes into an italicized-format (as lines 2-3, page 7; lines 20-21 page 9).

Thanks for spotting. All quotes have been italicized

Line 18, page 6 – Due to sample number of informants, the authors consider adding the number of people after the phrases “Almost all men

We prefer to use this type of expression (“most”, “almost all” etc) compared to exact numbers. We think exact number give a false sense of exactness to the data, which was also not sampled in a statistically representative way. Since we chose to do a qualitative study on this subject, we have not phrased exact questions in the same way to all participants. Rather the interviews evolved as an informal conversations where tried to cover key areas and went in depth on certain thing with certain persons when that was warranted. We have however tried to count the number of persons that should be included for each group/type/attitude but it is not an exact science we believe the way we phrase it now is preferable.

Line 20, page 9 – the words of “all but one” consider to change.

Please see above.

Line 23, page 6 – the meaning “but most nonetheless” is unclear, please clarify

We have modified the wording. It now says:
“Most informants thus felt they had to hide important aspects of their life from friends and families, but the majority nonetheless led an active social life within the MSM world, forming and maintaining both sexual relationships and friendships.”

Line 26, page 6 – “point out” is a poor word choice here. Consider to change. □

We have changed to “describe”

Line 19-25, page 7 – I found an issue with these sentences that a total of 17 men were enrolled, however only 11 have ever had sexual contacts (4 males had 10 partners or less and 7 individuals had 10-200 partners in the lifetime). I wonder that how can the authors investigate sexual relationships among those who have had not any experience of sexual practices in their lifetime?
□ All men had experienced sex with other men but for some men the exact partner number is not known. This is due to that the interviews were allowed to flow like a natural conversation and no quantitate survey instrument was administered. We have clarified this in the text:

“Four informants had ten or fewer sexual partners and seven men described having had more than ten partners. One man described having had approximately 200 life-time partners, while the numbers is unknown for the remaining men.”

DISCUSSION
As shown in the results there is a strong link between the financial condition and sexual relationships, however the authors did not mention in the discussion. □ We have added extensively on this issue in the discussion. See e.g. the following:

“Money also seemed to be an important factor shaping sexual and love relationships. Men with money were perceived as more attractive and several men reported having lost a lover to someone of better means. This pattern may be connected to the increased emphasis on material assets in general in Vietnam, following doi moi, the transformation from a planned to a market economy [21, 23]. Another aspect of the importance of money in shaping sexual relationships is sex work. Prostitution and the means to pay for it has increase sharply after the economic reforms [23]. Although male-male sex services are less open and smaller than corresponding female-male sex work, these services are nonetheless highly accessible [24, 25] and some men in these interviews regularly and exclusively bought sex from male sex workers.”

Lines 7-10, page 11 – The authors used the proportion of condom use with stable and casual partners in quantitative survey of Chinese MSM to explain risk of having a high frequency of short-term relationships among Vietnamese MSM. This contradicts to the study objectives indicated in the last paragraph of the Introduction aiming to correctly interpret data from quantitative studies in Vietnam. These (Ref 17, 20) should be replaced by Vietnam’s data (IBBS 2006-2009; Nguyen et al, 2008. AIDS and Behavio. 12 (3): p. 476-482). □

Thanks for this comment. We have modified this section. The argument we are trying to make in this section is that stable relationships that have a high turnover rate may be particularly dangerous since stable relationships are likely to have much lower condom use than what is the case in casual partnerships. Unfortunately there is no research in Vietnam on the relationship between partnership types and condom use, which is the reason why we cite the Chinese studies.

The text now says:
“The findings may indicate a high frequency of partner change among men in Hanoi. Since condom-use is often more difficult to sustain in emotionally close relationships than in casual sexual encounters [18, 26], repeated short-term relationships could be a particularly risky pattern.”

According to surveys of MSM in Vietnam, they are more likely to have heterosexual practice in their lifetime (IBBS 2006-2009; Nguyen et al, 2008. AIDS and Behavior, 12 (3): p. 476-482) as well as have commercial sexual partnership, particularly among drug-using MSM (Clatts et al, 2007. Sexual Health. 4(4):261-7; Vu et al, 2012. Culture Health and Sexuality. 14(2):167-80). Nonetheless, none of these sexual relationships were found in this study. The author should consider expanding their discussion regarding these issues.

Thanks. As a background, in the IBBS II, 16.5% of MSM in Hanoi reported ever being married and 34.4% of non-sex workers reported sex with a female in the last 12 months. In Nguyen et al 2008, 5.3% cohabited with a wife/girlfriend, and 30% reported ever having sex with a female. In Vu et al and Clatts et al 2007, many men had sex with women because they were heterosexual and had sex with men to finance their drug use.

Like many same-sex attracted men globally, a number of the men in our study had experienced sex with women, but we have not systematically investigated this issue since we focused on male-male relationships. Three of the 17 men were either presently married or had previously been married. Some men described that they tried to have sex with a woman to see if they could change their own preferences. A few men described having had a girlfriend at some point but we did not investigate their sexual experiences with these women. Since sex with women was not a core part of our investigation and we would therefore prefer to not go in-depth on this in the ms. We have however added this sentence to avoid the impression that these men had never had sex with women:

“We did not investigate the men’s sexual relationships with women but several nevertheless mentioned sex with women and three had been married.”

Level of interest: An article of importance in its field
Quality of written English: Acceptable
Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.
Declaration of competing interests:
'I declare that I have no competing interests'
Reviewer # 2

Title: Sexual Relationships among Men who have Sex with Men in Urban Vietnam: a Qualitative Interview Study
Version: 1
Date: 30 August 2012
Reviewer: Eamonn McKeown
Reviewer's report:

Based on 17 qualitative interviews, the article explores aspects of the sexual relationships of MSM in Hanoi, Vietnam.

While potentially interesting, at this stage it is not apparent that the material presented is appropriately framed or that the data has been analysed with sufficient depth to allow it to be recommended for publication in its current form.

The attempt to contextualise the paper in terms of informing HIV prevention interventions is not entirely convincing as currently presented. The main body of the text is almost devoid of detailed references to sexual risk behaviour making it doubtful that the paper is relevant to BMC Public Health.

Without a more firm embedding of the data in the Vietnamese/Hanoi cultural context, the description of a range of urban MSM having a range of sexual experiences, some looking for love, others not, etc. could probably characterize gay culture in lots of countries and settings.

We thank reviewer #2 for a thorough read and good suggestions. We have added extensively to the text in the manuscript to include these requests. Points by point replies are included below:

Some other points by section:

Introduction

- Some very vague comments: Effeminate men have become increasingly visible where? What does this mean? Homosexuality had been given increased media attention – in what way?

We have added details to this statement and included examples:

“Though not illegal, homosexuality is heavily stigmatized in Vietnam [11, 12]. Until recently homosexuality was not acknowledged publicly at all in Vietnam, but over the last decade effeminate men have become increasingly visible in the streets of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, as have bars and venues specifically catering to MSM [13, 14]. Homosexuality had also been given increased attention in newspapers and on TV during the last five years. Although media has often depicted homosexual and transgender men with negative connotations, the attitude lately has been somewhat more positive. Transgender singers such as Thai Tai, Cat Tuyen and Lam Chi Khanh have become popular [15] and recently the first pride parade was held in Hanoi [16].”
Methods
- More details on how the men were recruited to the study would be required.
Reviewer #1 wanted us to shorten the method section. Nevertheless we have tried to balance these requests, see above.

- More clarity needs to be added. “Eight men declined to participate...” – what stage was this?
We have clarified this. The text now says:
“... Eight men from the previous RDS study declined to participate when contacted on the phone. We did not ask for their reason to do so.”

- The inclusion of jobs of participants is so vague it adds little (e.g. “some kind of private business”)
We have added more detail about occupations:
“The men worked as building workers, porters, shop assistants, hairdresser, teacher, medium level managers in private companies, as government employee, computer programmer, two ran their own shops and one was a student.”

- The topic guide suggests the article will deal with coming out stories but there is very little material subsequently presented in this area. Also, there is a suggestion that sexual practices related to HIV transmission will be explored but there appears to be nothing on this at all – this is a key omission potentially undermining its eligibility for publication in BMC Public Health.

The coming out process was often part of the men’s story and in practical terms this was often where the interview started, although the details of the coming out process was not part of our aims. We have clarified in the methods, where it now says:
“In practical terms this meant the informant was asked to relate his experiences of sexual and love relationships from the time when he realized that he was attracted to other men, and up until the present.”

Regarding sexual practices related to HIV transmission, our primary focus was to increase knowledge of men’s relationships in general rather than details of risky practices. We believe however that both issues are important. We did actually include sexual behavior questions in the question guide but in most cases there was not enough time to explore both. To not mislead the reader we have deleted the sentence where we say that we explored sexual practices.

Results
Living with one’s nature
- Same-sex attraction being part of one’s nature appears as a key finding in the results section in the abstract and is part of the first subheading under results in the main text – but it is only actually treated to one or two lines with no further exposition.

We have added to this section. See heading “Living with one’s “nature”: openness and social context”

- How do you know that this study is looking at “evolving” patterns of relationships. How do you know from one-off interview they are evolving?

We do not in this sentence claim that the individual men we interviewed changed their relationships, but it is clear that relationships patterns among MSM in general are changing in Vietnam and we allude to these general changes in several places in this revised version.

To add some background for the benefit of reviewer “2, the men ranged in age from 19 to 48 years. It was apparent that very much had happened during the last thirty years. The internet has completely changed the scene for how to meet partners and how to think about your own sexuality. There is now accessible information about homosexuality. Some men live together and others buy sex from male sex workers, which was extremely uncommon in the older men’s days. It is very obvious that the younger well-educated men has adopted a western cultural perspective on their gender roles etc, indicative of substantial changes in how men interact.

Sexual relationships
- Odd categorising of number of sexual partners – “10 or fewer” and “10 to 200”.

We have clarified this sentence:

“Four informants had ten or fewer sexual partners and seven men described having had more than ten partners. One man described having had approximately 200 life-time partners, while the partner numbers for the remaining men is unknown.”

- This is a short-ish section despite being central to the title of the paper and is thematically under-developed. What are the key points actually being made other than some participants have casual sexual encounters, some have short-term relationships, etc? This needs to be revisited to more clearly articulate major themes related to relationship configurations, sexual behaviour, HIV risk, etc.

We acknowledge that there is a lot more to add here. We have added extensively on related issues in the discussion, as per request from reviewer #3 and also clarifications and Vietnamese words to the result section. Given that this is the longest part of the paper and reviewer #1 has asked us to cut the length, we think the current level of detail forms an appropriate balance.

Love and money
- This is a very short section lacks any analytical depth.

We have a section in the discussion on this issue.

Discussion
- Not clear on the meaning of “Western ideal of long-term... partnering”. Is this the predominant ideal in Western gay culture?

This sentence referred to heterosexuals. We have clarified this:
“For these men the heterosexual Western ideal of long-term, emotionally committed, exclusive sexual relationships may not be the model against which they measured and judged their own relationships.”

- Are men buried in the “family home” as intimated in the discussion?

One man also talked about his need to be able to return to his village to be buried when dies. If he would reveal himself as homosexual to his wife in the village, he considered this to be impossible.

As per request from reviewer one we have tried to shorten some sections and cut this out.

- Under limitations of the study - can the sampling be probabilistic in a qualitative study?

In principle yes. Sampling, data collection and analysis are distinct concepts. Probabilistic sampling in qualitative studies is of course uncommon. For policy makers and other it may however be worth pointing out that generalization of findings should be made with caution.

- The suggestions of legalizing same sex marriage and a higher cultural acceptance of same-sex relationships in Vietnam is laudable but seem a bit disconnected from the realities of the Vietnamese social context where you acknowledge homosexuality is heavily stigmatised.

Thanks. However, after the submission of this article the minister of justice in Vietnam proposed legalization of same-sex marriage, see e.g. http://www.usatoday.com/news/world/story/2012-07-29/vietnam-gay-marriage/56573384/1

General points
- Uncritical use of Western terms like “boyfriend” and “unfaithful “ (as well as “love” as a noun and synonym for partner) is problematic.

One of the authors of this article, who also performed most of the interviews, is a Vietnamese sociologist. We have discussed these concepts closely in the group and we have made our best to not use these concepts uncritically.

To increase transparency we have added the Vietnamese words used by the men throughout the text. Regarding for example “boyfriend” we have written:
“Terms used for relationships and partners were the same as those used in heterosexual relationships, for example boyfriend (bạn trai), husband/wife (chồng/vợ) and lover (người yêu, người tình).”

- Very little ethnographic flavour is given related to the “rich social lives” of MSM
in Hanoi

We have added slightly here but have chosen not to go further in-depth given the length of the paper.

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

Quality of written English: Needs some language corrections before being published

Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests.
Reviewer #3

Le Minh Giang’s Review Report
Manuscript titled “Sexual Relationship among Men Who Have Sex with Men in Urban Vietnam: A Qualitative Interview Study”

The argument put forward by the authors is that while recent burst of studies on MSM and HIV risks in Asia, including Vietnam, has paid much attention to their behavioral risks, there exists a gap in our understanding of sexual partnering and relationship patterns among MSM in this region. The article goes on to provide a descriptive analysis of what interviewed MSM (who are homosexually identified) reported on their experiences in relationships with other men, which are mostly characterized as short-term and casual rather than long-term and stable. The authors also make attempts to explain why homosexually active men in Vietnam have such patterns, offering both reasoning of the informants as well as their own interpretation. The paper is well written and the arguments are coherent.

I, however, have some concerns on several aspects that I would like to see strengthened in the next revision.

1. Major Compulsory Revision:

The authors seems to agree with the informants that unless various mechanisms that make heterosexual couples stay in long-term relationship become available for homosexually active men, they will continue to “follow their desire and live out ‘their nature’” (p.11). I think this argument could be interpreted in potentially unhelpful, if not dangerous, way that homosexually active men have a natural tendency of engaging in short-term, multiple relationships. This is certainly not the case, and one thing we learn from recent literature on men buying heterosexual sex is that that a significant number of Vietnamese heterosexual men are engaging in concordantly multiple relationships even though they are married.

While I believe that the authors do not agree with this interpretation, I think they have not done enough to prevent this interpretation (other than proposing legalization of same-sex marriage and improved cultural acceptance of MSM relationships). To rectify this issue, I would like to see more discussion of the context for homosexual relationships in Vietnam, drawing from literature, media reports as well as from the experiences of the authors. A better analysis of the context would show how structural factors (such as lack of legal recognition, culturally embedded silence on homosexuality, growing market influences including commercialization of sexuality, and fledgling gay communities in urban settings that are increasingly driven by cosmopolitanism and market neoliberalism) might explain the fragmented nature of MSM relationships in Vietnam. Such as discussion, I believe, would open up other venues for intervention in reducing HIV vulnerability of MSM in Vietnam and elsewhere in Asia.

We thank reviewer 3 for very insightful and constructive suggestions.

We have extended and revised the discussion, clarifying the diversity in attitudes and experiences and hope that the text now does not convey speculative interpretations as to
homosexual men's potential relationships tendencies, one way or the other. As suggested we have expanded considerably on the parallels to contemporary Vn heterosexual relationship trends and to the importance of economic factors and market liberalization in contemporary society.

Point-by-point answers are included below.

2. Minor Essential Revisions

p.4 – last paragraph from bottom – I would like to understand more about the eight men who “lived with other family members.” Are they living with parents, siblings or with their own families?

We have made a table (table 1) which provides socio-demographic background data on the participants. “Family members” have been separated into three categories.

Extract of table 1:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Living with</th>
<th>Parent(s)</th>
<th>Wife</th>
<th>Sibling only</th>
<th>Friends</th>
<th>Boyfriend</th>
<th>Alone</th>
<th>Unassigned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

p.7 – second paragraph from bottom – It is important for readers to see the Vietnamese word for “play around” since this is an important emic concept. Similarly, in other instances where emic concepts are used (such as “nature”) I would like to see Vietnamese words that were actually used in the interviews. I would also like to see more discussion of this term: what does it mean in the Vietnamese context?

We have added Vietnamese words to important concepts throughout the text. Specifically regarding the emic concept “play around” we decided for clarity and brevity to delete it, since reviewer #1 asked for shortening of the ms where possible. Regarding “nature” we have added the vn words, and added a clarification:

From the ms:

“Almost all men in the study saw their longing to have sex with other men as part of their “nature” (bận chất or tự nhiên) and something they were born with. One man commented, “it is not a disease, it cannot be removed, it is my nature. … For some, this inborn trait was however very difficult to bear.”

p.9 – first paragraph from top – I am interested in the notion of faithfulness as viewed and understood by the informants. Is it about long-term faithfulness or short-term
faithfulness? What do they expect from faithfulness? What do they expect in return for their being faithful? Are their understandings similar or different from those of the researcher(s)? If data were available, a more elaborate discussion on this would be revealing.

We have checked all the instances where faithfulness has been described in the interviews. The words used are lòng chung thủy, sự chung thủy/chung thủy. Throughout the interviews the use is compatible with the meaning of not having sex with someone else besides your partner. Sometimes it seems as unfaithfulness could also be compatible with thinking about or missing a third person (the person being unfaithful with). In essence it does not seem to be different from how heterosexual persons in Vietnam use the term. We have not specifically asked the men to discuss the meaning of the term but we have not found any instance where the men used it in a way that would conflict with the meaning above. This use of the term does not seem to be different depending on whether the respondent had a long or short perspective on the relationship. Unfortunately it is difficult to go more in-depth on this issue since we have not explored it systematically with the participants.

The text in the ms now says:

“Many informants who sought, or had previously sought, stable relationships described faithfulness (lòng chung thủy, sự chung thủy, chung thủy) as a highly valued quality of a partner, but one which was, however, largely unobtainable. Many men had experienced their partners being unfaithful, many men had themselves been unfaithful and they knew that many of their friends were unfaithful while in relationships. The concept of faithfulness in itself seemed however to be used in the same way as among heterosexuals in Vietnam (i.e. not to have sex with others, and perhaps for some men: not having or acting on certain emotions).”

p. 10 and 11 – The section on love and money is important and helpful in providing the larger context of MSM relationships that I mention above. However, the discussion section doesn’t elaborate on this issue to make sure readers understand the context of increasing commercialization of sexuality and relationships in Vietnam. Some literature might be helpful here:


Thank you for very constructive references. We have added extensively in the discussion in to take these into account.

p.12 – second paragraph from top – I would like to understand more how social
desirability may affect how and what are discussed during the interviews. It is particularly important to understand how social desirability does not stop the informants from telling stories about multiple partners and relationships. Or is it socially desirable for a sub-culture of Vientamese MSM community to have such types of relationships? And yet they complain about the fragmented nature of their relationships, especially to those who they believe would have moral downment on long-term relationships.

Our impression was that having multiple partners was not a sensitive issue one way or the other. As we mention, there seems to be no norm against having many partners. Who has sex with whom, who has broken up etc is the core part of the gossip and discussed back and forth by the men in their everyday lives. There may of course have been social desirability but in most interviews the atmosphere was very good and the men spoke freely and also wanted to continue the discussion at more occasions.

We added to the ms:

“The interview subject was sensitive and social desirability in the discussions may have been present. We perceived however the atmosphere as open and that most participants talked very freely about their thoughts and experiences. Five of the interviewees called, on their own initiative, the main interviewer (TPV) during the weeks after the interviews to continue the conversations.”