

PART IV

Conclusion

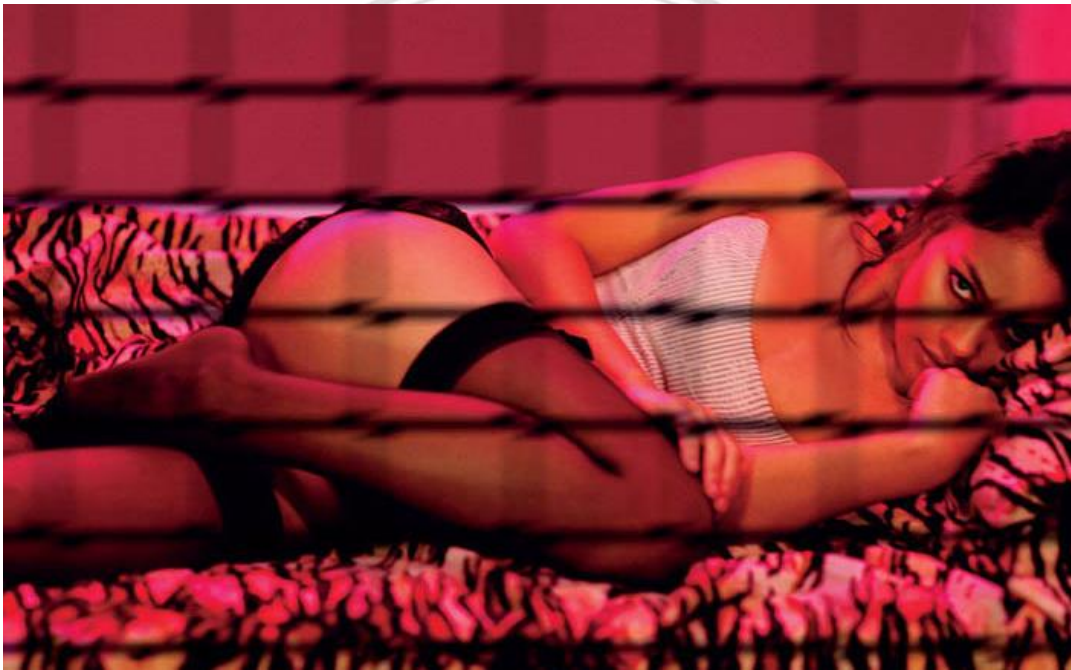


Figure 9.1 Although the girl seems to be locked into a cage, through her eyes, she has never absolutely surrendered to the powerful control mechanisms implied by the iron

bars.

CHAPTER 9

Rethinking Schoolgirls' Sexualities, Media and Popular Culture

“Everyday life invents itself by poaching in countless ways on the property of others.” (de Certeau 1984 p.xii)

According to de Certeau (1984), every society is thoroughly filled with networks of disciplinary powers, which he refers to as ‘strategies.’ De Certeau is interested in how each individual is able to encounter those dominant control power mechanisms by conforming to them only in order to subvert them. He thus pays attention to an individual’s everyday life practices, ‘the tactics,’ operated to compromise, negotiate, contest, or resist those powers imposed on them. The tactics are not to directly protest in order to demolish the dominant powers; rather, those tactics are always on the watch for opportunities that must be ‘seized on the wing’ (de Certeau 1984 p.xix). Especially ‘the tactics of consumption’ are ingenious ways in which the weak make use of the strong, thus lending a political dimension to everyday practices (de Certeau 1984 p.xvii).

In modern society, the disciplinary control system creates a ‘panoptic gaze’ to ensure that individuals internalize the powers of the dominant system, to ensure that they feel they are closely monitored, and as a result police themselves all the time (Foucault, 1977). The idea of panopticon can refer to the control mechanisms of various modern social institutions such as families, schools, universities, and even social media. However, the way de Certeau characterizes the tactics, which he calls ‘the polemology of the weak’ (de Certeau 1984 p.39), especially regarding their cultural consumption, paves the way for Fiske to argue that any cultural commodities primarily exist to sustain the interest of the people reflected through the various ways those commodities are actively interpreted and consumed by individuals in their everyday lives. Therefore, the creativity of ‘popular culture’ lies not in the production of commodities so much as in

the productive use of industrial commodities, or, as Fiske (1990) puts it, '[t]he art of the people is the art of 'making do'' (p.28). This means that the study of popular culture requires understanding, not only of the cultural commodities itself, but rather of the ways in which each individual utilizes them. Popular culture combines both control and resistance, but the latter forces are more creative and varied than the former. This theoretical framework provides the foundation to the purpose of this dissertation focusing on schoolgirls' sexualities that are practiced, experienced, and perceived by the girls themselves in their everyday life in Chiang Mai city.

This study aims to, on one hand, explore the various 'strategies' of the Thai state – operating via the school, universities, families, and related social institutions – that are trying to construct a desired sexual identity among schoolgirls in daily life. On the other hand, this dissertation examines the schoolgirl's diverse 'tactics' in their everyday lives to compromise, negotiate, contest, or resist those domination powers through consuming activities of media and popular culture practiced in the context of the city of Chiang Mai.

The preliminary fieldwork of this study was employed from June 2009 to March 2010 and the ethnographic methods were fully applied among thirteen research participants and related persons from March 2010 until April 2014 when they were in high school and their transitions to various universities in Chiang Mai. I pursued my study applying multi-sited ethnography by following them to different places and social settings. In addition, the audience ethnography was also employed by experiencing the ways schoolgirls consumed and actively interpreted media and popular culture in daily life.

For concluding the results of this study, in order to answer the research questions and objectives, are therefore divided into two main parts – 'strategies' and 'tactics.' In terms of 'strategies' which is presented in **Part II Thai Middle-Class Sexual Discourse and Its Discursive Practices** (Chapter 3-5), this part found that there are various control mechanisms via which the Thai state tried to forge and construct a desired sexual/gender identity and morality according to the *kunlasatree* (well-behaved woman) discourse among various social institutions. Early ethnographies of Thailand depicted the complementary status between men and women and described the existence of relatively equal sexual relations and sexual morale, especially among the northern

Thais. Young women in pre-Buddhist northern society seemed to enjoy some degree of sexual freedom. In the late 1980s, belief in and worship of local *phii pu njaa* or ancestor spirits – which served as a foundation for the relatively equal position – had weakened among northern Thais. This facilitated the transition from a matrilineal to a patriarchal system. The sexual beliefs and morality that are perceived as ‘normal’ among people in present northern Thai society have in fact been imposed by, and merged with those that are dominant in the central region of Thailand. The rising power of the central government over local regions in the twentieth century and, linked with this, processes of administrative and educational reform accelerated the dissemination of these dominant beliefs about masculinity and femininity among political rulers. Therefore, in contemporary Thai society, young teens, especially females, are subjected to stricter sexual control than would have been the case just a century ago (Michinobu, 2005).

In contemporary northern Thai society, sexual practices among teenage girls (and, to a lesser extent, boys) have been the case for much social anxiety and have been commonly blamed for increasing ‘immoral’ and ‘deviant’, suggesting the new generation are becoming more materialistic, promiscuous and violent. Additionally, various academic studies in health science, psychology, youth sexual behavior surveys, etc, portrayed Thai youth as vulnerable and in danger of being polluted, fuelling a series of moral panics and providing a rationale for state intervention—very much in line with the concept of ‘power/knowledge’ that Foucault describes in his *History of Sexuality* (Foucault, 1990). These fears have been expressed through various actions by the state, such as the ‘social order campaign’ which was widely popular among conservative urbanites (A. Cohen, 2006). The provision of sexuality education, enforcement of a media rating system to assess sexual and other ‘undesirable’ content, and increased monitoring of the Internet were also legitimized by these ‘alarming’ studies and moral panics, and aim to control and repress female youth sexuality and shaping it to be ‘proper’ and ‘healthy’ according to the hegemonic Thai state’s desired sexual/gender morality.

Foucault (1977) compares such social controlling mechanisms to the model of panopticon to illustrate the arrangements of surveillance as central to instilling discipline in individuals. Several major social institutions played important roles to

enforce the hegemonic sexual/gender identity among schoolgirls. This study reveals various forms of surveillance, discipline, and punishment which aimed at making Thai schoolgirls' bodies become docile, subjected, transformed, and 'improved'. Within families, parents tried to implement both mental and physical controls of their children. For the control of mind, parents constantly taught and implanted their expectations on their daughters, especially regarding the importance of their education and of retaining their virginity. Regarding physical control, parents employed various surveillance measures to control their daughters in relation to their time, space and who they contacted or spent time with. While the girls were studying in high school, the school constantly internalized a sense of pride and 'exclusivity' among its students. Rules and regulations, especially regarding to sexual issues, were formulated and strictly enforced. The school established an effective collaboration with its working partners to check on and punish misbehaving students. Once the research participants continued their studies in universities, the control mechanisms remained in place, but were delegated to senior students who exercised those powers via the *rub nong* tradition and the campus dormitory management systems. For the *rub nong* tradition, senior students organized various rituals and activities to internalize a sense of pride and unity among new students. Numerous rules and regulations were also formatted and enforced by senior students to control the freshmen, especially regarding uniforms and sexual behaviors. Meanwhile, the control of female sexuality was obvious in campus dormitories. Apart from gender division, surveillance by security guards and CCTV cameras, as well as numerous rules and regulations, the dormitory committees who were senior students also played an active role in controlling and monitoring the younger dormitory residents.

The television series also played an important role to promote the conventional, hegemonic model of Thai feminine gender/sexuality; however, the schoolgirls' interpretations were multiple and full of contradictions. Regarding schoolgirls' interactions with television drama series, this study has shown the interplay between the series' texts and how these texts were actively re-appropriated and made meaningful for the schoolgirls in their everyday lives. The research participants energetically engaged with and talked about the series' texts and concepts that are offered to them. However, they did not necessarily pick up from these series' messages that the producers wanted

them to pick up; the received text can be quite different from that of the original text. Schoolgirls' television drama series consumption was thus a productive and transformative process, intimately tied to the appropriation and conversion of meanings.

The negotiating interpretations of female sexuality conveyed through Thai television series in Chapter 5 pave ways to **PART III Schoolgirls' Tactics and Social Practices** (Chapter 6-8) which aims to explore the diverse 'tactics' schoolgirls deployed in everyday life to compromise, negotiate, contest, or resist those dominant control powers described above. In their familial contexts, research participants operated in various ways against their parental attempts to control them. Applying the concept of 'bedroom culture' (McRobbie & Garber, 1976), online social media paved ways for them to come up with various tactical practices in order to construct and express their sexual selves within the strictly controlled domestic territory. This study confirms that this concept of a 'bedroom culture' is indeed essential to the social lives as well as sexual self-construction and expression among the participants. While previous studies of the girl's bedroom culture have drawn on the cultural interests of teenage girl's identity construction merely in relation to the physical, social, and intimate spaces of the bedroom, this study argues that the conventional concept of bedroom culture cannot simply be understood in terms of zoning and physical arrangement of the bedroom. This study offers a new approach to understand the girl's bedroom culture by zooming in on online social networks that provide an alternative (cyber) space for the girls to gather, in addition to or sometimes instead of conventional physical gathering places. This gave the girls a high level of freedom in which they could creatively adapt practices to contest parental controls. While at school they employed several tactics for achieving a certain level of sexual autonomy, such as the use of secret words and language with double meanings, the use of nicknames, ways to bypass time restrictions, their engagement in homosexual practices, their use of friendships, consumption of cultural commodities, their appropriation of technological advancements, etc. When the research participants continued their studies in various universities in Chiang Mai, they made use of the transitional period from high school to university life to temporarily cast away from the strict control of their parents and senior students through the flexible nature of studying at a university, homosexual relationship, dormitory climbing, and making fun of the senior students and a strictly controlled campus dormitory. Although a wide

range of negotiating practices were done, the schoolgirls could come up with their own ways to compromise those repressions by being obedient when they perceived they could comfortably accept the rules or regulations rather than subvert them. Moreover, subverting meaning of their encounter with governing powers into a humor was also the way they compromised those repressions in everyday life that they cannot resist.

Employing multi-sited ethnography and audience ethnography paved the ways for me to observe the ways in which research participants creatively made use of the media, popular culture, urban spaces, and consumerism; and to investigate the wide range of schoolgirls' sexual and cultural practices through which their sexual subjectivities were formulated and expressed. This dissertation draws on research participants' reactions to and discussions about Thai television drama series. It also describes the ways the girls aspired to become a '*pretty*', model, or even a beauty queen. In the efforts to attain beauty, some schoolgirls went as far to undergo plastic surgery. Moreover, this study explores their cultural and sexual practices in the shopping malls and nightclubs.

Employing Giddens's idea of 'the reflexive project of self' (1991) and the ways schoolgirls 'made do' (Fiske, 1989) with their female sexuality and popular culture consumption in everyday life, the ways they became a *pretty*, model and beauty queen demonstrated their tactics to appropriate, negotiate, or contest the conventional sexual discourse for their own benefit. For the participant who became a beauty queen, she did this through complying with the conventional norm of being well-behaved and being 'beautiful in a Thai way' (*ngam yang Thai*); by being successful she gained an important advantage, being acknowledged and even praised by the school authorities. In contrast, those who was a model and '*pretty*' appropriated less 'traditional' (sexy and modern) image of feminine sexuality. Whether complying or challenging to the hegemonic sexual controls, the results of this study show that the reflexive project of self was intensively practiced; and that the schoolgirls exhibited an active agency and were not passive. Plastic surgery could also be understood as a product of the reflexive project of self and a part of their popular culture consumption in everyday life. The results show that female beauty is not generally linked with and subordinated to the institution of Buddhism anymore, as a research participant stated that: "*Making merits make you become beautiful in the next life, but plastic surgeries make you become*

beautiful in this life.” With the growth of the beauty industry in Thailand and the increasingly global circulation of beauty products and standards of feminine beauty, plastic surgery became more and more popular. The changing notions of the individual self as ‘makeable’ and not ‘given by merit made in a previous life’ contributed to the rapid growth of plastic surgery among mainstream Thai women, including the research participants. The availability of plastic surgery offered them a sense of control over their appearance and a sense of personal empowerment.

Schoolgirls’ everyday life cultural and sexual practices in shopping malls and nightclubs in Chiang Mai were also closely examined. Applying Bourdieu’s idea of ‘cultural capital’ (1984), this study found that schoolgirls actively identified themselves to be ‘higher-class’ and have ‘better taste,’ comparing to the lower-class female youth group, which they referred to as *sakoy*. This superiority was instilled through various forms of space utilization and cultural commodities consumption – such as spending time in high-class shopping malls, coffee shops, restaurants, and nightclubs; and displaying their good taste through fashion, dressing, make-up, ordering particular types and brands of alcohol and tobacco and engaging in particular drinking rituals. It was also expressed via taste in music, having certain types/styles of girlfriend/boyfriend, and their flirting/dating practices. Within the realms of shopping malls and nightclubs were also actively made do among schoolgirls to negotiate and contest various dominating powers, especially via school, family and the state social order. The schoolgirls prepared another set of clothes and a non-identifiable bag to conceal their high school student status; they also turned off their social media to evade of being tracked and caught by school authorities while skipping classes and spending times at places outside school during school hours. Homosexual relationships among young women in shopping malls and nightclubs were widely found. Young lovers usually utilized spaces in cinemas, coffee shops, restaurants, games booths, karaoke booths, and photo booths in order to ‘spend time alone’ together. Moreover, the way they dressed up, put make-up, and increased their breast sizes were practices to transform themselves to look mature. In nightclubs, they used other older persons’ ID cards or copy the seal to other group members to pass the nightclub entrance checkpoint. Some of them asked senior friends who had ID cards to order drinks for the ones who did not have ID card. They also took advantages from an inversion of conventional Thai tradition to explore their

sexualities; as well as they chose to go to the nightclubs that they were able to spend time after the closing time stated by the state social order campaign. These sexual and cultural practices could serve the interests of the schoolgirls to achieve a productive pleasure by utilizing them in alternative ways – to send a message of evasion or even resistance that they were not conformists to mainstream standards (Fiske, 1989). Through these practices, they sought to create their own identity and sexual selves apart from conventional control powers.

Since Margaret Mead (1949) proves that female youth gender and sexuality are socially constructed rather than biological based, it is really impossible to analyze youth sexuality without reference to the economic, political, and cultural matrix within which they are embedded. From this small but growing body of work, it is clear that the anthropology of youth is particularly well situated to offer an account of how young people around the world produce and negotiate cultural forms (Bucholtz, 2002). In order to profoundly understand youth sexuality in contemporary Thai context, the great contribution of anthropology leads me to closely examine the way in which ‘youth agency’ actively negotiate, convert, subvert, manipulate, and appropriate their sexuality within the massive influences of sexual controlling powers. Scholars have been challenged to think about changing constructions of Thai sexualities without resorting to a logic of essentialism that seeks refuge in idealized gender models. Thai sexualities should not be seen as the product of biology in which male sexuality and masculinity, and likewise female sexuality and femininity, are evitable and unchanging products of genetic inheritance (Lyttleton, 1999). However, studies of gender and sexuality in Thailand have lacked an understanding of female youth gender and sexuality as relationally and situationally constructed, and have often failed to reflect the diversity of ways in which notions of gender and sexuality are manifested and contested in everyday practices, as well as their rapidly changing nature as the ways to challenge stereotypical views of Thai society. Most studies on youth sexuality, especially in a context of contemporary northern Thai society, have been generated from the perspective of adulthood, expressing concern and seeing youth sexuality as problematic and in need of intervention, and have downplayed the youth-centered point of view, including their desire and perceived rights to a degree of sexual pleasure and freedom (Bucholtz, 2002; Cook & Jackson, 1999; Santasombat, 2005). There are merely few contemporary

anthropological studies which pay respect to youth cultural agency in modern northern Thai society. The study of Cohen (2006) is one such study; it explores the way in which Chiang Mai youth construct identity at the intersection of global capitalism, national ideologies and local culture. She shows how young people, faced by rapid urbanization and modernization, create an ongoing sense of self and community through symbolic boundaries, consumerism and subcultural capital – focusing primarily on drugs and gangs. What emerges from these process of identity formation is youth agency, an issue which until recently has been relatively neglected in studies of young people. However, this study focuses on the cultural agencies of male youth, while sexual and cultural practices among female youth agencies are unfortunately ignored. Meanwhile, Michinobu's study (2005) focuses on the effects of social and cultural changes in the global economy on the sexual behavior of young women who work for multinational factories in northern Thailand. Michinobu recognizes young women's subjective response to those powerful influences. As employing medical anthropology, Michinobu's study exclusively focuses on working-class young women and their sexual attitudes and practices related to the risks of getting HIV infection.

I agree with the study of Boonmongkon et al (2013) among female youth in the suburban district in Bangkok which focuses on the complexity of the relationship between young women's negotiating sexual subjectivities and online media technology. Even though the results of this study are primarily based on a combination between quantitative data and qualitative data derived from focus-group discussions and narrative interviews, the findings of this research confirm the arguments of my study that the online media serve as tools that help young women develop and express their gender identities. Although the discourse on women's chastity which puts pressure on young women to maintain their virginity still influence in Thai society, young women are able to exert their agencies in negotiating and expressing their sexuality through the utilization of the Internet and online technologies (Boonmongkon et al., 2013). The use of online media in modern Thai society thus has become a part of young women's self-presentation and have reflected their subjectivity that who they are and who they would like to be. This is evidenced in various social phenomenons in modern Thai society, such as 'selfies' or the immergence of '[Inter]net idols'.

For my study, to understand profoundly from the schoolgirls' experiences and their everyday worlds, conducting a contemporary anthropology of youth has guided me to observe and participate in schoolgirls' actual practices in daily life to chart the sense that how these young women, as active cultural agents, make use of the media and popular culture they encounter in particular cultural contexts. An intensive involvement with the schoolgirls guided by the anthropology of youth approach and with a great respect to their agencies, this study recognizes the 'ways of operating' via which are seen as the 'tactics' of subordinate people to skillfully make use of what the system provides, against the 'strategies' of the strong. In other words, teenage girls should be acknowledged as not passive receptors of hegemonic sexual discourse conveyed through social institutions. This study shows that northern Thai girls have their own ability to negotiate their sexual subjectivities for their own ways.

Concluding Remarks

This dissertation has shown that schoolgirls are not passive victims of a hegemonic conservative controlling regime, but active cultural agents who constantly evade, negotiate, contest, or resist the power imposed on them by dominant forces. They are able to use the cultural resources available around them, taken from global popular culture, local urban culture and the consumer society. Fiske, following de Certeau's ideas, states that "popular culture is made by the people at the interface between the products of the culture industries and everyday life. Popular culture is made by the people, not imposed upon them; it stems from within, from below, not from above. Popular culture is the art of making do with what the system provides" (de Certeau, 1984 cited in Fiske, 1989, p. 25). This dissertation illustrates this.

As mentioned, Northern Thai beliefs in a role of the ancestral spirits of *phii pu njaa* in controlling or guiding female sexuality, which have been interpreted as a pre-modern sexual control mechanism, became less explicit and were gradually replaced by various modern sexual control systems. The period that female youth are able to be sexually active has been significantly prolonged in modern northern Thai society compared to those in pre-modern era. Young females in pre-modern northern Thai society were recognized as being mature after they were married, the 'rite of passage', mostly between the ages of seventeen and twenty-one after a period of courtships that lasted

around one to five years before they were married. After that, the young couple usually lived with the bride's parents for one or two years and then moved out to reside permanently somewhere nearby. If the bride was the youngest daughter, she would inherit the parental house and also the duty of the care of the ancestral spirits (Potter, 1976). This dissertation found that the discursive practices of middle-class sexual norms through family and modern educational systems are the main factors that delay the 'rite of passage' among female youth until after they obtained at least their bachelor degrees. That means that according to modern middle-class sexual morality they are now recognized as being mature, and also will be allowed to engage in any sexual activities, at around the age of twenty-two. Nonetheless, this dissertation has proven that although the girls can never entirely escape from the long period of control mechanisms of the hegemonic sexual and gendered regime, they are able to tactically utilize their consumption and appropriation of media and popular culture as a site of struggle with the powerful conventional sexual and gender discourse, using numerous popular tactics through which they cope with, resist, and evade these forces. The schoolgirls in this study showed an ability to creatively modify the resources made available to them.

To understand female youth sexuality in modern Thai society, the anthropological approach of youth culture has been primarily concerned with how the researcher can experience the way schoolgirls, as cultural agents, actively construct their sexual identity and express their sexual selves within diverse social contexts and dominant sexual discourses in their everyday life. The findings of this study prove that the attitude toward youth sexuality that labels youth as victims of modernization, urbanization, and consumerism, and as challenging moral standards and traditional Thai values, are out-of-date. Such attitudes are clearly influenced by imaginary, nostalgic and essentialist values idealized in nationalist ideologies, values which hold limited meaning for most contemporary Thai youth (Bucholtz, 2002; Cohen, 2006, 2009). Through modernization, urbanization and consumption, it is clear that schoolgirls are able to assert their agency and to find ways to negotiate and challenge traditional forms of femininity that they encounter in their day-to-day lives (Thaweesit, 2000), as well as the model of 'well-behaved women' (*kunlasatree*) in the context of modern northern Thai society.

This dissertation has shown that schoolgirls have their own ability to negotiate, appropriate, transform, or reproduce their gendered and sexual subjectivities to meet their own goals, as reflected through their cultural and sexual practices in daily life. The subtle ways in which ordinary people “poach” the property of others and adapt it to their own ends is a central feature of everyday life (de Certeau, 1988). While the social controlling mechanisms play a critical role in the process of sexual and gender socialization, schoolgirls are able to compromise and resist this for their own ends. Teenage girls’ cultural and sexual practices in everyday life therefore become a significant sphere where female youth ‘actors’ maintain their ability to define who they are in their own terms.

Studying schoolgirls’ sexualities in this manner results in deeper understandings about their ‘negotiating sexualities’ that have recently emerged and developed. Apart from its contribution to the deeper understanding of interactions between popular culture and female youth sexuality, especially theories of female’s sexual repression and resistance in modern northern Thai society, this dissertation suggests that greater respect should be given to youth agencies in developing any successful programs, especially regarding sexuality education and sexual health promotion, in the context of contemporary northern Thai society. Rather than employing a controlling approach, related social institutions should provide a respectful atmosphere and create a supportive environment. A working method emphasizing equal partnership between schoolgirls and related key stakeholders is advised for the process of effective program development, implementation and evaluation in order to reduce further conflicts and resistance.

It has been reported in other studies that Thai parents were likely to be much stricter and controlling in raising their daughters in comparison to their sons (Rhucharoenpornpanich et al., 2010), something that was confirmed during the research for this dissertation as well. This dissertation suggests that parents should understand that the rapid social and cultural transformations occurring in modern urban Thai society can be challenging for teenagers. Parents should be encouraged to initiate open discussions about sexuality with their daughters when they are young. Many studies have supported that parents should be open-minded and know how to talk with their

children about sensitive issues such as sexual relationships, condoms, birth controls, and sexually transmitted infections which are topics that have been found to be less often discussed in Thai families, since parents feel embarrassed to talk about sexual issues with their daughters. Some of them even believe that talking about sex could pave ways for initiating female youth's interest in sex or they believe that their daughter are not at risk or too young to discuss about this topic, all of which have been found to be misinterpretations of the reality of modern Thai girls' lives (Rhucharoenpornpanich et al., 2012). In accordance with other studies, the schoolgirls expressed a desire for closeness and warmth from their parents, but also sought greater autonomy in decision-making, including when it comes to sexual matters. They indicated that they wanted their parents to listen, provide warmth, and allow more freedom, but also to be aware of their activities (Fongkaew et al., 2012). Therefore, this dissertation suggests that as long as the dominant mode of parenting, with its conservative and controlling style and a negative view of female youth sexuality remains in place, it is likely to result in daughters to remain secretive about their sexual activities to avoid disappointing their parents and to avoid parental punishment.



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