



School of Global Studies

Navigating Child Marriage in Vietnam

An Ethnographic Case Study on Social Expectations, Cultural Norms, and Local Adaptations
of Child Marriage in Ban Luoc, Ha Giang

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Abstract

In the remote highlands of northern Vietnam, child marriage remains culturally embedded among ethnic minority communities, despite legal reforms and awareness campaigns. This ethnographic case study explores how child marriage is justified, perceived, and navigated in Ban Luoc commune, through three questions:

1. How is child marriage justified or normalised despite efforts to reduce it?
2. How do community members navigate social, legal, and cultural expectations?
3. How is child marriage perceived and distinguished from legal marriage or cohabitation?

Drawing on social norms theory, cultural relativism, and symbolic interactionism, the analysis reveals that child marriage is seen not as a legal violation but as a culturally rooted practice shaped by love, social expectation, and family duty. Practices like cohabitation, delayed registration, and engagement are used to balance local norms with legal constraints.

Gendered expectations also place a significant burden on girls, who often face disrupted education, teenage pregnancies, and limited autonomy. While state policies define child marriage through age and consent, local communities interpret it through terms like *qua lại* (side-to-side visiting) and engagement, which reflect different symbolic meanings.

The findings highlight the gap between global human rights standards and local realities. This study argues for culturally sensitive approaches to addressing child marriage, rooted in an understanding of how international norms are interpreted and adapted in specific cultural settings. It contributes to the broader discussion on how global norms are negotiated in local contexts.

Keywords: Child marriage, Cohabitation, Cultural Norms, Social Expectations, Social Norms Theory, Cultural Relativism, Symbolic Interactionism, Vietnam

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Acronyms

CEDAW - Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

CRC - Conventions on the Rights of the Child

SRHR - Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

UDHR - Universal Declaration of Human Rights

UN - United Nations

UNFPA - United Nations Population Fund

UNICEF - United Nations Children's Fund

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

Child marriage remains a significant global issue that affects millions of children worldwide and violates basic human rights. Child marriage occurs in both formal legal marriages and also in informal arrangements such as cohabitation (UNFPA & UNICEF, 2018, p. 3). Despite global efforts to combat this, nearly one in five girls still marry before turning 18 (UN DESA, 2022, p. 36).

Child marriage is a clear violation of human rights, breaching several international conventions such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). The most relevant one is CRC, which has been ratified by nearly every country in the world and defines a child as any person under the age of 18 (UNICEF UK, n.d). CRC emphasises the best interest of the child (Article 3), protection from all sorts of violence, both physical and psychological (Article 19), the right to health (Article 24), education (article 28), and protection from sexual abuse/exploitation (Article 34) (CRC, 1989). CEDAW and UDHR likewise highlight the importance of education, particularly for girls in CEDAW (Article 10) and universally in UDHR (Article 26) (UDHR, 1948; CEDAW, 1979). CEDAW further stresses that “the betrothal and marriage of a child shall have no legal effect” (Article 16) (CEDAW, 1979). These conventions aim to not only prohibit these practices but to create an environment where women and children can fully enjoy rights like education, health, and safety.

Furthermore, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically Goal 5 on Gender equality, advocates for the elimination of harmful practices like child marriage by 2030. Target 5.3 aims to “eliminate all harmful practices, such as child marriage and genital mutilations” (UN, 2015).

Initiatives such as the UNFPA-UNICEF Global Programme to End Child Marriage (2016) focus on education, changing social norms, promoting sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), and improving access to services for girls at risk. This program targets regions where child marriage is most common and works with local governments and communities to create policies and systems that protect children (UNICEF, 2024).

Child marriage is sometimes justified by families seeking economic relief or social benefits, however, it has devastating consequences on the development of young girls. Children who marry early have higher risks of early pregnancy, social isolation, and limited opportunities for education and economic growth, which can perpetuate poverty and hinder the development of entire communities (UNICEF, 2005, p. 1). UNICEF's analysis of national household surveys in 49 developing countries shows that child marriages are most common among the poorest 20% of the population (pp. 2, 6, 31). This poverty link is evident in countries like Vietnam, where despite global reductions in the practice, child marriage remains a significant issue, particularly in rural and ethnic minority communities (UNFPA & UNICEF, 2018, pp. 5-6).

Despite ratifying international conventions and making economic progress Vietnam, home to 54 ethnic groups (Vietnam Government, n.d) still child marriage persists, especially among the ethnic minorities in rural areas (UNFPA & UNICEF, 2018, pp. 5-6). This can be seen in reports from UNFPA & UNICEF that girls from rural areas particularly those from ethnic minorities are more likely to be married young. In Vietnam, one in ten women aged 20-42 were married before 18, some even before 15 (UNFPA & UNICEF, 2018, pp. 2, 6). Data from a Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS) showed minimal improvement in the rates of child marriage, especially among girls from lower educational and socioeconomic backgrounds (UNICEF MICS, 2021).

Ha Giang province, located in northern Vietnam along the Chinese border, is home to 19 different ethnic groups, and the five biggest groups are Hmong, Tay, Dao, Kinh (Vietnamese), and Nung. The province consists of 1 city, and 195 communes, including 145 which are classified by the government as poor (Hoang D., T et al., 2024, p. 137; UNFPA Vietnam, 2008, p. 1). In districts like Hoang Su Phi, which is a poor district in the province and specifically in the commune Ban Luoc, the site of this study, is an area where child marriage still persists despite national and local efforts (People's Committee of Hoang Su Phi, 2024).

1.2 Research Issue

Child marriage remains a significant global human rights violation, deeply embedded in cultural, social, and economic contexts, despite strong international legal frameworks such as

the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and national laws that prohibit the practice. In Vietnam, especially in rural areas with ethnic minorities like the northern highlands, the issue persists. Within the context of changing laws and evolving generational values, this study investigates how community members in Ban Luoc navigate the tension between traditional expectations and legal constraints. While national laws prohibit child marriage and promote child rights, local practices often diverge from these laws.

UNICEF and the Vietnamese government have made efforts to end child marriage, through awareness raising, educational programs, and partnerships with local authorities to enforce laws such as the 2014 Law on Family and Marriage (Law No. 52/2014/QH13) (Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2014), as well as initiatives like *Nghị quyết số 27-NQ/TU*. This resolution created by the Provincial Party Executive Committee of Ha Giang aims to eliminate “backwards” customs among ethnic minorities including marriage, funerals, festivals, and daily life practices. The People’s Committee of Hoang Su Phi reported their efforts to reduce child marriage in the region by focusing on raising awareness through campaigns and education (People’s Committee of Hoang Su Phi, 2024). However, progress is slow, especially in remote areas like Ban Luoc.

This research therefore addresses the gap between the formal legal frameworks and lived realities by exploring how child marriage is justified, normalised, and navigated in Ban Luoc. It examines how individuals and families respond to institutional efforts aimed at reducing child marriage, and why the practice continues in Ban Luoc.

To explore these issues, several key concepts such as *child marriage*, *cohabitation*, *social norms*, *culture*, and *legal navigation* were employed.

1.3 Aim

This study aims to explore how child marriage is experienced and understood within the ethnic minority communities in Ban Luoc commune. This is achieved by analysing firsthand narratives from locals who have experienced child marriage, and from local authorities’ perspectives. It will examine how cultural norms and community practices interact with legal frameworks and local efforts to prevent child marriage. Within the context of changing laws, development interventions, and evolving generational values. The research will investigate

how these communities navigate the tension between traditional expectations and modern constraints, and how they respond to societal and institutional efforts to reduce child marriage. By focusing on these complex dynamics, the study aims to contribute to a nuanced understanding of child marriage not only as a legal or developmental issue but as a deeply social and culturally rooted phenomenon.

1.4 Research Questions

Therefore, to achieve this aim, this study needs to ask and answer the following research questions:

- How do community members justify or normalise child marriage despite local and national efforts to reduce it?
- How do people in Ban Luoc navigate the social, legal, and cultural expectations around child marriage?
 - How do their perceptions of child marriage, and distinctions between legal marriage and practices like cohabitation, shape their navigation?

1.5 Delimitations

This study focused on child marriage among ethnic minority groups in Ban Luoc commune, primarily Black Dao and Nung. Kinh people were excluded based on the disproportionate prevalence of child marriage among the ethnic minorities and the study's focus on ethnic minority perspectives and justifications for the continuation of the practice. The participants included individuals who had experienced child marriage or cohabitation, regardless of when it occurred. While participants came from different age groups, the goal was not to conduct a generational comparison but to gather a range of different perspectives on how child marriage is perceived and justified in the community. Mostly one person per family was interviewed except for one case for help with translation purposes, the use of only one person may have limited the depth of family perspectives. Local authorities, although mostly not from ethnic minorities, were also interviewed to provide their insights on the issue. No interviews were conducted outside of Ban Luoc, as the focus was on understanding local, grassroots-level narratives rather than broader policy evaluation. This study does not seek to represent the entirety of Ha Giang province or Vietnam. Including individuals who had not engaged in child marriage might have enriched the understanding of the issue but was beyond this study's scope.

2. Previous Research and Theoretical Frameworks

To research how the community in Ban Luoc navigates and justifies child marriage it is needed to understand how child marriage is understood in the study, and what it looks like globally and in the area. To do this it is important to review relevant previous research, as well as introduce the conceptual frameworks/theories that form the basis of the study. Therefore, this section is divided into two parts: previous research and conceptual frameworks/theories. The previous research section consists of an overview of existing studies regarding child marriage both globally and in the Ha Giang province of Vietnam. In the second part child marriage will first be presented after that the three theoretical frameworks will be presented. These are: Social norms theory, cultural relativism, and symbolic interactionism. These four constitute the theoretical basis on which the thesis was analysed.

2.1 Previous Research

Previous research shows child marriage is a global phenomenon affecting the lives of young people in multiple ways. It is closely tied to gender norms, poverty, education, traditional norms and equality (Parsons et al., 2015; Psaki et al., 2021; Arthur et al., 2018; Jones et al., 2014). These studies show the underlying causes, consequences, and some juridical frameworks, especially those affecting girls' situations.

Parsons et al. (2015) describe how child marriage is a human rights issue with widespread economic consequences, and that it is rooted in gender inequalities, economic insecurity, and social norms. The study presents that girls who marry young often drop out of school, get limited access to work, and become economically dependent on their husbands. The earlier the child marriage takes place the less likely the person is to complete secondary education, which leads to reduced lifetime earnings and limited access to employment opportunities. This adds to lower productivity, reduced income and increased poverty, which can perpetuate poverty across generations (pp. 12-14). The study also link child marriage to increased risks of abuse, and health complications such as maternal mortality, malnutrition, and mental illness (pp. 16-17). Importantly, the study also points out the need to understand child marriage contextually and not only as something illegal, because in multiple cases teenagers

themselves choose to get married young, often in combination with pregnancy (Parsons et al., 2015, p. 14).

Psaki et al. (2021) study identified 5 key drivers for child marriage: social norms (cultural and communal expectations that push child marriage), poverty (financial vulnerability that leads to families seeing marriage as a solution to reduce dependency), lack of agency (girls limited ability to make independent decisions about their lives), lack of opportunity (insufficient access to education and work), and pregnancy/fear of pregnancy (the presence or fear of unplanned pregnancy that hastens marriage). These drivers interact on both individual, household- and community levels and should therefore according to the study be contextualised differently based on these levels under policy formulations (Psaki et al., 2021, pp. 13-15).

In her systematic overview Nour (2009) notes that child marriage often is motivated by tradition and “protection” of a girl's sexuality, but in actuality leads to physical and psychological damage to their health, including a higher risk of domestic violence and complications from pregnancy (Nour, 2009, p. 51). Young Lives (2016) similarly found that girls from rural areas often lack access to sex education, contraception, and information regarding SRHR and that these together with the strong traditions led to early pregnancies and marriages.

Arthur et al. (2018) study emphasised that child marriage is a discriminatory practice that impairs girls' autonomy, health, education, and long-term well-being, and it perpetuates gender inequalities and hamper development (pp. 51-52). The study analyses child marriage in 191 countries and points out that while most countries formally forbid marriage before 18 years, there are sometimes legal exceptions like parental agreement or religious/cultural traditions, and pregnancy which creates legal loopholes that undermine the protection of children. In 99 countries child marriage is allowed if parents agree to it, and in 30 countries it is permitted through religious or cultural traditions. They also mention that in many countries pregnancy or birth can justify child marriage (pp. 53-54, 58-59). Arthur et al. argue that despite laws the enforcement is often weak, these cultural norms and legal exceptions allow the practice to continue. Therefore, they emphasise the importance of clear and equal laws without any exceptions, and that this reduces the instances of child marriage and teenage

pregnancies, in which the legislature reforms should be combined with work regarding changing norms (Arthur et al., 2018, pp. 66-69).

Jones et al. (2014) conducted research among Hmong communities in Ha Giang province. Their qualitative study found that despite national advances, child marriage remains prominent among the Hmong people in remote villages, driven by gender norms, and cultural expectations, which lead to the limitation of girls' choices and the increased risk of early marriages. Practices like bride kidnapping further constraint girls' autonomy, where the girls face child marriage after spending 3 days at the boy's house, at which point they are considered married regardless of consent from either the girl or the parents. The report had some recommendations on how to address these challenges, such as the implementation of social protection programs and educational interventions at both community and school levels. The creation of mentoring programmes and initiatives to facilitate the entry of young people into the labour market. The need to also strengthen the efforts to enforce the laws that protect the rights of young girls and do this by addressing the underlying gender norms and by offering alternative opportunities. The study shows how the combination of geographic isolation, traditional norms and a lack of alternatives allows young girls to view marriage as the only alternative. The study's findings also show how deep-rooted gender norms, low access to education and limited prospects for girls contribute to the continued practice of child marriage (Jones et al., 2014, pp. vi-ix, 1-2, 6, 66, 68).

Together, these studies form the foundation for understanding the drivers of child marriage, including gender norms, poverty, education, and traditional practices. The findings from these studies offer an insight into the socio-economic and cultural factors that perpetuate child marriage globally. Vietnam in particular is a relevant study area due to its status as a middle-income country, where child marriage remains a significant challenge, especially in remote areas. Additionally, Jones et al (2014) emphasise the prevalence of the practice of child marriage in the Ha Giang area, while that study focuses on Hmong people, this research is instead about Black Dao and Nung communities in a different part of Ha Giang province.

2.2 Theoretical Frameworks

This study uses a combination of social norms theory, cultural relativism, and symbolic interactionism to examine how child marriage is justified, maintained, and navigated in Ban

Luoc. These perspectives help to understand the interaction between community norms, power dynamics, and legal structures combined sustain the practice of child marriage.

2.2.1 Child Marriage

Child marriage is a broad term and has multiple definitions depending on the country and region. According to UNICEF, child marriage is “any formal or informal union between a child under the age of 18 and an adult or another child” (UNFPA & UNICEF, 2023, p. 3). Vietnamese law, provides a stricter perspective on child marriage, where the legal requirement to get married is 18 for women and 20 for men. Given that this field study was conducted in Vietnam, the local legal definition was applied in this study. Thus, all cases involving women under 18 and men under 20 were considered instances of child marriages. According to UNFPA & UNICEF, there are four primary types of child marriage in Vietnam: traditional arranged marriages, love-based school dropout marriages that avoid legal registration to evade penalties, early cohabitation to address pregnancy-related stigma, and instances of trafficking or bride abduction (UNFPA & UNICEF, 2018, p. 6).

2.2.2 Cultural Relativism

Cultural relativism is a theory based on the idea that no external, objective mechanism exists that can judge the moral or cultural practices of different societies without falling into ethnocentrism. This means that all cultures are morally equal and valid, that there is no inherently superior culture to others, and that there could be no comparison and moral ranking between them (Howard, 1993, pp. 315-316).

Melville Herskovits (1972) emphasised that cultural relativism primarily is a methodological tool in anthropological studies to the question of the nature and role of values in culture, rather than a moral doctrine. He argued that people’s judgements are shaped by their experiences, which in turn are formed by one’s cultural background and “enculturation” (pp. 14-15). According to him, cultural belief systems are inherited and unconsciously shape how individuals interpret the world, and the very definition of what is normal and abnormal is relative to each society’s cultural frame of reference (pp. xiii, 19).

Herskovits warned of unrecognised ethnocentrism, where researchers mistakenly assume their values are natural or universal (pp. xiii, 21). He stressed that culturally contextualised behaviours, like marriage customs, may seem abnormal externally but serve as important

cultural roles (pp. 14, 20). He rejected the idea that culture is a static system, but rather that all cultures transform, even if gradually (Herskovits, 1972, p. 25). Cultural relativism therefore urges us to first understand the different cultures before evaluating them, while also being aware of our own cultural biases.

Scholars in the academic discourse have further divided cultural relativism into three conceptual forms:

- *Descriptive relativism*: Different cultures have different norms, social practices and moral systems, based on their cultural variations.
- *Metaethical relativism*: There is no objective truth in morality, but rather moral beliefs depend on cultural or individual perspectives.
- *Normative relativism*: People should follow different moral norms based on their cultural identity, meaning different cultures have different rights and obligations.

While descriptive and metaethical relativism explains moral diversity, normative relativism is more contested. As Fernando argues, recognizing cultural variation does not mean all moral positions are equally valid or beyond critique (Fernando, 1985, pp. 886-888).

Cultural relativism helps explain why child marriage persists as a morally justified and legitimate practice within certain communities. Where some community members may not view it as harmful, but rather as a beneficial or necessary practice because of its believed benefits (family honour, economic stability, fulfilment of gender roles) for the girl's future rather than a violation of her rights. Herskovits cultural relativism offers an important framework for understanding practices like child marriage from the perspectives of the local community, rather than from external moral frameworks. Where it emphasises to first understand before evaluating, while also being aware of one's own biases. This is important in understanding why people in Ban Luoc continue and justify child marriage while from outside and from a human rights perspective it's wrong.

2.2.3 Social Norms Theory

To understand why child marriage continues in Ban Luoc despite local and governmental efforts, this study applies Cristina Bicchieri's (2006) theory of social norms. Bicchieri defines norms as patterns of behaviour accompanied by expectations, both informal or formal, personal or collective, they can be descriptive of what most people do, or prescriptive of

behavior (p. 1). A social norm exists when a sufficient number of people believe it applies in a specific situation and expect others to do so as well. These preferences and expectations result in collective behaviours that further reinforce the norm (p. 2). Meaning social norms are not just habits or moral codes, but rules people follow because of shared community beliefs. Bicchieri also emphasises that her definition of social norms is a rational reconstruction of how a social norm functions, and not a literal description of individuals' real beliefs and preferences (p. 3).

For a social norm to exist some specific conditions must be met. First, individuals must recognise that a behavioural rule applies in a given situation (contingency). Second, their preference to follow the rules is conditional on their beliefs about others. These beliefs include empirical expectations (believing most others follow the rule) and normative expectations (believing others expect them to follow it and may sanction them if they don't) (pp. 11-14). People thus conform to norms because they believe others do, and because they believe others expect them to and fear social consequences if they don't. Bicchieri distinguishes between different types of norms; *descriptive norms* refer to observed behaviours, *social norms* as those upheld by community expectations, and *moral norms* as internally motivated regardless of social influence (pp. 12-13, 16).

UNICEF (2021) builds on Bicchieri's framework by using simpler definitions and examples. They define descriptive norms (empirical expectations) as "what others do", for example, "I will get married by age 17 because all girls in my village marry shortly after reaching puberty". Injunctive norms (normative expectations) reflect people's beliefs about what others approve of or expect them to do, "If I do this I will be respected" and "If I don't do this I will not be respected". Moral norms involve personal convictions on right and wrong "I believe marrying before 18 is wrong and won't do it" (UNICEF, 2021, p. 2).

Social norms theory is particularly helpful for interpreting and analysing the interviews and understanding how child marriage, especially in the form of informal cohabitation, is maintained through social pressure and community expectations. Bicchieri et al. (2014) emphasises that practices like child marriage are sustained by a combination of preferences, options, and beliefs, which includes both empirical and normative expectations (pp. 4-5). This framework helps to explain child marriage as a socially reinforced behaviour, not merely as a tradition.

To deepen this framework, the study also incorporates elements from Connell's (1987; 2005) gender and power theory to highlight how some of these norms are not gender neutral. Connell argues that gender is a structure of social practice reproduced through institutions like the family, where roles and expectations are shaped by three structures of gender relations, power, labour, and cathexis (emotional and sexual relations) (Connell, 1987, pp. 92-93; Connell, 2005, pp. 74-75). Connell argues that within families, all three structures (labour, power, and cathexis) interact. For example, gendered divisions in wages or careers often influence domestic labour arrangements, and family dynamics can reflect patriarchal authority. Connell refers to this as the gender regime which is a system of gender relations that is not fixed but open to negotiation, resistance, and transformation (Connell, 1987, pp. 121, 123-125). These structures help maintain what she terms hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity, which are ideals that legitimise male authority and female compliance (Connell, 2005, pp. 76-77; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 848).

In Ban Luoc, expectations surrounding child marriage could reflect these gendered dynamics. Girls are expected to marry early, bear children, and support the household, which could align with emphasised femininity. Meanwhile, young men are framed as decision makers or providers, reinforcing the patriarchal dividend that grants them authority (Connell, 2005, p. 82). These gendered roles are not simply personal values but could be embedded within normative expectations of the community and by integrating Connell's concepts, the study could show that social norms and conformity is not only about community expectations, but about reinforcing gendered power structures. This will enhance the analysis by situating social expectations within broader gender regimes, which could help to explain why child marriage persists even under legal and institutional pressure to change.

2.2.4 Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism is a sociological theoretical framework that explains how individuals construct social reality through shared meanings and interpretations. It asserts that our social world is constructed through everyday interactions (Nickerson, 2025; Del Casino & Thien, 2020). Symbolic interactionism is based on how shared meanings are adapted and interpreted through social practice and people's behaviours in relation to social groups and the repetitive act of interaction, which constitute symbolic and shared meanings (Del Casino & Thien, 2020). At the core of this theory is the idea that symbols such as words, gestures, and objects

carry a specific meaning recognised by a group of people who share a culture. These symbols do not inherently need to be meaningful, but their significance emerges from social interaction, they only have this meaning because the society agreed on it. When people interact, they interpret these symbols and actions based on the shared meanings of the symbols, which guide behaviour and social navigation (Nickerson, 2025).

Herbert Blumer (1969) identified three key principles in symbolic interactionism:

1. People act on things based on the meanings that the things have for them. These things can include objects, people, social roles, institutions, ideals, or everyday situations.
2. The meaning of these things is derived from social interaction with other people.
3. These meanings are modified through an interpretative process while the person is dealing with the things they encounter (p. 2).

Blumer argues that the meanings things have for people are important, and to ignore the meaning is to falsify their behaviour (p. 3). In symbolic interactionism, meaning arises through interaction between people, and it develops as individuals respond to how others act towards the thing. Thus, meanings are social products, shaped through the defining activities of people as they interact. Meaning also has an interpretative process in which a person will see the meanings of a thing by internal dialogue, as they identify what has meaning for them and as they interpret the meaning it's modified depending on the situation and direction of the action (pp. 4-5).

Symbolic interactionism is useful for understanding how child marriage is maintained through shared cultural meanings and everyday interactions. It provides an insight into how certain terms related to child marriage are used, and what those terms signify within the community. For example, community members not referring to it as “child marriage” but instead use phrases like “*qua lai*”, “cohabitation” or “love”, which reflect culturally specific interpretations that differ from legal or human rights frameworks. When combined with cultural relativism and social norms theory, a comprehensive framework emerges for understanding child marriage in Ban Luoc. Cultural relativism will explain how the practice can be morally justified within the local context, while social norms theory highlights the expectations and social pressures that sustain it. Combined, these theories show how child

marriage persist not simply through tradition, but through shared meanings, social reinforcement, and cultural legitimacy.

3. Method

This study was conducted by using a qualitative and ethnographic method, to explore how child marriage is perceived, justified, and navigated among the ethnic minority communities in Ban Luoc. Ethnography enabled a deeper understanding of the practice through the extended field presence and informal, everyday interactions. The primary data collection method was semi-structured interviews with the ethnic minority residents and local authorities. This allowed for in-depth personal narratives from the community members but also an understanding of local legal frameworks and interventions. The qualitative method allowed for flexible follow-up questions, resulting in deeper insights. While a quantitative method could have provided useful statistical data, the aim of this study was to gain in-depth insights into the perception and navigation of child marriage, rather than focusing on the statistics or datasets of it (Bryman, 2012, pp. 35-36, 380, 383). To achieve this, an inductive approach was used, where no prior theories or information was relied upon before the field study and interviews took place. Instead, the goal was to allow the theories to emerge from the data gathering process. This approach draws generalizable conclusions based on observed patterns and evidence (pp. 12, 26-27). Although qualitative research is sometimes viewed as too subjective, due to its reliance on the researcher's interpretation of what is significant and important (Bryman, 2012, p. 405), it was still deemed the most suitable method for the objectives of this study. To address this critique, a thorough reading and categorization of all interview data were conducted, with each record transcribed and translated to ensure that no information was overlooked. While full objectivity in determining which information to emphasize was challenging, some efforts were made to minimize bias by structuring the data analysis process and the use of semi-structured interviews.

3.1 Ethnography

The data for this study were collected in the Ban Luoc commune during two fieldwork periods: First from February 16th to February 20th, and again from February 25th to March 7th, 2025. The research was carried out by two researchers, one from Sweden and one from Vietnam. The first period was spent on familiarizing with the host family, the village, and gaining a geographical and cultural understanding of the village. The second period was

dedicated to conducting interviews with the ethnic minority residents, as well as local institutions such as the commune committee worker and the head of the local health clinic.

This study employed a micro-ethnographic approach to better understand the cultural and social dynamics surrounding child marriage in Ban Luoc. As Bryman (2018) explains, ethnography is often associated with social anthropology and involves prolonged engagement with a community, often in a foreign country. The goal is to observe behaviours, listen to everyday conversations, and develop an in-depth understanding of how social practices are embedded in cultural norms (Bryman, 2018, pp. 512-514). Ethnographic methods were particularly suitable for this study because they allowed for an exploration how child marriage is discussed, justified, and negotiated in everyday life, beyond just formal institutional narratives. It also allowed for a better understanding of local language, cultural expressions, and their lived experiences.

3.2 Empirical Methods

Data for this study were primarily collected through semi-structured interviews with community members and local authorities in Ban Luoc. Additionally, data from an unpublished focus group conducted by another researcher simultaneously in March 2025 with 25 9th graders at the local school was also used. This focus group explored the youth perspectives on teenage pregnancy, contraceptives, menstruation, and related social norms (Kisonen, 2025). The focus group data provide a valuable insight into peer influences and the normalisation of teenage pregnancy, which complemented the individual interviews conducted for this study.

3.2.1 Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews as the data collection method allowed flexibility, which was crucial given the sensitive nature of the topic due to its illegality. They also allowed for observation of the interviewees and adjusted or skipped questions if discomfort was observed (Bryman, 2012, pp. 41, 212). This flexibility may have helped to facilitate a more open dialogue, allowing the interviewee to talk more comfortably and make it easier to decide other questions in the moment that fits with what the interviewee is talking about. The semi-structured format allowed for predetermined themes and questions where an interview guide was used, which also left room for other emerging topics to be explored as the

interviews unfolded (p. 471). By using open-ended questions, it allowed the participants to provide more detailed responses, share their stories, and present their points of view, which in turn may have introduced new perspectives and unforeseen questions that otherwise wouldn't have been asked (Bryman, 2012, pp. 75, 404, 472). Given the sensitive nature of child marriage, the interviews aimed to explore how the participants talked about the practice of marriage, what language they used, and how they justified cohabitating before age 18 and 20. Another important thing to notice is that the word “child marriage” was never used while interviewing the community members except for the local authorities.

In addition to the interviews, with community members, informant interviews were also conducted, with key informants in the commune who could provide more detailed responses and share some statistics about the prevalence of child marriage in the village. This information was used as complementary data, as the primary focus was on interviews with the ethnic minorities (Bryman, 2012, p. 440). Out of the 14 conducted interviews, two were with key informants: the Vice Chairman of the Commune and the Head of the Commune Health Clinic. These two were chosen due to their institutional roles within the community, that could give an institutional perspective on the issue that complemented the personal experiences of the ethnic minorities, here the key informants provided information about local statistics, their efforts, and health issues related to child marriage.

Out of these interviews 7 of them were males, 5 from the ethnic minorities and both the key informants. In some of these interviews there were cases where some parents also discussed about their children who had cohabitated or married under the legal age. In this study two different interview guides were used, one for the ethnic minorities and another one for the key informants. The main topic areas in the first interview guide were: starting questions, background information about the interviewee, the causes of marriage, the consequences of marriage, and lastly about their kids. Some of the key questions asked were the participant's age, the age of their children (oldest child was specified), the age at which they became engaged, and whether they cohabitated before reaching the age of 18. Certain questions, such as those regarding the participants age and their oldest child's age were used as identifying questions to determine whether participants were a case or not, this approach was used because previous interviews showed a correlation between having a child underage and cohabiting before legal marriage. The second interview guide was for the informants, therefore not based on their own experiences but on broader questions such as: if child

marriage is still practiced, what the statistics of child marriage is in the area, what they do to combat it. The interview guides were structured like this to be able to explore the interviewee's personal experiences with child marriage, as well as their views on why such practices happen, what factors contribute to it, and how the practice is understood locally.

3.2.2 Sampling Methods

The primary sampling method employed was a purposive sampling method, where the participants were found by visiting specific households. Later a snowball effect approach was utilised, where interviews were conducted with people that fit into the topic and have cohabitated or married under the legal age or a person in the family had done this, based on referrals from previously interviewed participants. A purposive method was also used to interview local authorities such as the Vice Chairman of the commune and the Head of the commune health clinic (Bryman, 2012, pp. 202-203, 417-418). The main participants in the study were individuals who had cohabitated under the legal age, because as highlighted by UNFPA and UNICEF, it is important to recognise the informal types of unions such as cohabitations, where couples live together in a union before they are legally married (UNFPA & UNICEF, 2018, p. 3). This includes both those that had recently married as well as those who had done so in the past. Parents of people who had cohabitated or married under the legal age were also interviewed to gain their perspective on the motivations behind these marriages and to easier understand how the marriage navigated around the law. This ensured the study reflected the full scope of the village's common informal unions. By following this approach, the study was able to offer a more inclusive understanding of the phenomenon, addressing both informal cohabitation and early marriages.

As many individuals in the commune work in the fields or other locations during the day, the interviews mostly were conducted at noon or in the late afternoon, around 5:00 to 6:00 p.m., after participants had returned home from work to eat lunch or end for the day. The interviews conducted with the authorities, such as the Vice Chairman and Head of the health clinic took place during the day while they were at work based on pre-arranged appointments.

3.3 Participants

A total of 14 interviews were conducted, including 12 with individuals from ethnic minority groups and 2 with key informants (the Vice Chairman of the Commune and the Head of the

Commune Health Clinic). The sample includes both men and women, with participants ranging from those born in the 1960s to the 2000s. This generational spread was used to gather a broad range of perspectives, not to conduct a comparison between the generations. In some interviews, multiple cases were identified within a single household.

A full demographic details and interview identifiers are provided in the Appendix ([see Appendix B](#)).

3.4 Analytical Method

A thematic analysis was used as the primary analytical method for this study. This approach was chosen due to its effectiveness in identifying themes and patterns within the data and categorizing them into main- and sub-themes. A thematic analysis was also deemed particularly appropriate for this study as it allowed for a deeper understanding of their perspectives on child marriage and their justifications about it. It also aided in the identification of recurring themes in how participants talked about child marriage and their strategies. This approach enabled an exploration of both shared cultural logics and diverging viewpoints within the community, which helped illuminate how child marriage is viewed and still maintained within the commune.

Specific attention was paid to repetitions, local expressions, and similarities and differences within the data (Bryman, 2012, pp. 579-580). After the transcription and translation of the interviews were completed, the data were coded and organised thematically. Through this process these themes emerged: “*qua lại*” translated as “side-to-side visiting” instead of the term “marriage”, which highlighted a local variation on how the practice is done. “love marriage”, “arranged marriage”, “pregnancy”, “legal age”, “pressure”, and “education”.

3.5 Ethical Considerations

There are some ethical considerations to have in mind while conducting this study. Diener and Crandall (1978), as cited in Bryman (2012), outlines four primary ethical principles in social research (Bryman, 2012, p. 135):

1. Harm to participants
2. Lack of informed consent

3. Invasion of privacy

4. Deception

These principles sometimes overlap with each other in certain cases; they provide a useful framework of the main things to follow while conducting social research.

Harm to participants can be physical or psychological, such as stress or reduced self-esteem, therefore researchers must anticipate and minimise any potential consequences (Bryman, 2012, pp. 135-136). Informed consent is also essential, where participants must be given enough information to understand the research and from there decide freely whether to participate. Consent was therefore asked where participants were fully informed about what the study entailed (pp. 138, 140). Invasion of privacy relates to consent, particularly regarding personal questions and information. They also have the right to refuse to answer sensitive questions such as those about religion, income, or sexual activity (Bryman, 2012, p. 142).

As the study involves child marriage, which may be sensitive and, in some contexts, deal with illegal issues, particular care was taken, especially to invasion of privacy. Participants were informed of the study's purpose, their rights, and how the data would be used. Specific term like "child marriage" were not used due to their connotations and the participants' unfamiliarity with the term, locally understood terms like "side-to-side visiting" and "engagement" were used instead. All participants were informed they could skip, refuse or end the interview at any time. All data were anonymised, and any identifying information remained confidential. Consent was also obtained for audio recording, with the assurance that recordings would only be accessed by the research team for transcription and translation and later be deleted.

3.6 Limitations

Several challenges were encountered during the field research that impacted data collection, notably language barriers, alcohol consumption, and time constraints. Since most participants were ethnic minorities, some, especially older individuals, struggled to understand or speak Vietnamese fluently. This may have led to incomplete or misinterpreted responses. Occasionally, family members interpreted, which could have influenced the responses.

Additionally, due to limited time and interpreter availability, some households were not interviewed.

Alcohol consumption was another challenge, as drinking is deeply ingrained in village life. It sometimes made it difficult to ensure if participants were sober during interviews. After recognising this, efforts were made to observe for alcohol and ask directly about if they have been drinking. If participants confirmed they had been drinking, interviews were rescheduled. Despite these precautions, some participants could have been untruthful on whether they were intoxicated or not.

4. Results

This chapter presents empirical findings exploring how child marriage is perceived, navigated and justified in Ban Luoc. It is sectioned thematically, and begins by outlining local efforts to combat child marriage, based on interviews with the local authorities, providing a necessary background to the issue.

4.1 Local Efforts and Views on Child Marriage

This section outlines local authorities efforts and perspectives, to understand how they address the issue, how their views contrast with community members responses to child marriage and through this understand the local perceptions of child marriage.

Local authorities described efforts they have done to combat child marriage and teenage pregnancies in Ban Luoc. Efforts focus primarily on awareness campaigns, policy enforcement, and partnerships with schools and healthcare providers. These awareness campaigns are conducted through village meetings and social media platforms such as Facebook and Zalo. The Vice Chairman (13) emphasised raising awareness as the main intervention, stating “*The main measure is raising awareness; there are no other specific measures.*”. According to the Vice Chairman since the implementation of the 2014 Marriage Law there has been a decline in child marriages. However, he also noted the limited impact of these efforts among the older generations, especially those with limited Vietnamese or formal education

Even though we've tried multiple times, they still don't fully understand, which leads to ineffective parenting and consequently, child marriages happening. Even for the younger generation who understands Vietnamese, they don't fully comprehend the laws.

He noted that the varied individual knowledge and romantic relationships often lead youth into child marriages,

It's generally due to the understanding of each individual. In cases where the law isn't understood, the boys are usually older and are more likely to start dating. After that, the younger girls, who don't fully understand the law, tend to follow the boys...some are influenced by the boys they are dating, which leads to child marriage.

He further noted *"don't understand the legal age requirements. They love each other, so they move forward with marriage."*

The Vice Chairman continued to say that this lack of awareness contributes directly to child marriage *"The awareness of the people is lacking when it comes to the laws. This leads to early marriages, before the age of 18 for women and 20 for men."* He also pointed out how teenage pregnancy also is considered as child marriage *"There are also cases in this commune where they haven't married, but they have children before reaching 18, which is also considered child marriage."*

The local health clinic also plays an active role in preventing child marriage and teenage pregnancy, where they in cooperation with schools and the district health centre run educational programs focused on reproductive health and the consequences of early parenthood. Nonetheless, several people continue to have teenage pregnancies and find ways around the law. As the Head of Health Clinic (14) says, *"If they had registered, it would have been subject to the law, but they find ways around it...They only get married when they reach 18"*.

The local authorities also enforce fines and penalties for those who cohabit or marry before legal age. Interviewee 9 stated, *"If you are not old enough, you will be punished"*. Interviewee 3 added, *"If they marry too young and have children, it can be financially and physically burdensome"*. He also pointed out, *"now the government has set regulations that require*

couples to be of legal age before living together.” and that before the marriage and Family Law from 2014 was implemented, child marriage was even more common.

4.2 Framing and Sustaining Child Marriage

While the local authorities have tried to reduce child marriage through various efforts and awareness campaigns, the practice continues. This chapter presents how the community members frame, experience and sustain the practice of child marriage in Ban Luoc. The main themes include cultural traditions, parental expectations, community comparisons, love and cohabitation, teenage pregnancies, and lastly legal navigation.

4.2.1 Cultural Traditions and Arranged Marriages

This section highlights how marriage practices have shifted over generations. Older interviewees frequently mentioned arranged marriage as the norm in the past. All of the older participants got married through arranged marriages, this also includes some of the younger participants, particularly in families where traditions remain strong (7). Interviewee 1 for example reflected that, *“In the past we didn’t marry out of love... our parents arranged it. But now, people marry for love.”*. Similarly, Interview 4 said *“Back then, it wasn’t about love. Parents decided, and the marriage just happened. Even if the girl didn’t like it, she had to marry.”*. These reflections emphasise the generational shift toward greater youth autonomy in choosing partners.

However, in some families, arranged marriage still occurs. When asked about a couple (born 2005 and 2003) that recently married, Interviewee 7 said that it was arranged. In the same interview, she also explained how her son and his wife, both born in 2003, were in an arranged marriage.

Some interviewees even described the practice of early marriage as “tradition”. Interviewee 1s daughter for example said, *“I don’t want to get married early either, but everyone here gets married early... old people still want their children to get married to settle down early”*.

Another cultural belief that remains significant, particularly among the older generations, is the delay of marriage because of choosing a “good year” or “good day” for marriage.

Families often consult fortune-tellers to determine a suitable wedding date, which can delay

marriage for months or even years. Interviewee 7 explained *“In the Dao ethnic group, we have to wait until the fortune-teller says it’s a good year to marry”*.

These cultural practices have also evolved in more recent years. Interviewee 1 noted that *“people didn’t visit each other’s houses from side to side in the past... only in the last period”*, showing that the cohabitation practice is a relatively new adaptation.

4.2.2 Family and Community Expectations

Families often encourage or pressure youth to settle down early, because of social and household stability. Interviewee 4 expressed this when saying *“Among the Dao people, getting married early is considered good. Marriage brings stability.”* Other interviewees also echoed this sentiment stating that marriage was seen as a sign for maturity (10) and family stability (8). Some families also consider formal marriage a requirement for full household membership. Interviewee 7 explained, *“Yes. If they don’t marry, they won’t be considered part of the household. They have to marry to officially be part of the family.”*

In some cases, early marriage is also driven by practical needs. Interviewee 3 said, *“Every family wanted a daughter-in-law for extra help”*, showing how labour is needed to justify child marriage. Similarly, Interviewee 7 also said yes when asked about if the marriage was for help with labour, and added on *“Yes, but also because I wanted them to have a proper marriage”*.

Beyond family-level expectations there also exists peer pressure and community comparisons that further reinforce child marriage. Interviewee 3 for example described a *“competitive mindset,”* and explained, *“if one household had a daughter-in-law early, others felt the pressure to do the same. It was partly due to social expectations.”* Such comparisons create pressure, reinforcing child marriage as a normal and expected practice among families.

Interviewee 3 further elaborated that child marriage was often a matter of comparisons and circumstances *“In the past, the elders used to think that if other families became grandparents early, they had to keep up...if one family had a daughter-in-law early, then the other had to do the same.”* He also described how wealthier families could afford to hold weddings earlier, while others delayed the ceremony until they could afford it, even if they had one or two children by then.

4.2.3 Love and Cohabitation

One of the most commonly cited justifications for child marriage is “side-to-side visiting” or *qua lại* in Vietnamese as they usually call it, because of love. Interviewee 3 for example said, “*Young people today choose their own partners, and parents follow their lead*”, describing a generation shift in marriage practices. This new type of marriage, “love marriage” reframes child marriage as a personal choice rather than a social or legal issue.

This shift in practice also changed the terminology used. While legal institutions refer to these unions as “child marriage”, most participants did not use this term. Instead, they used “side-to-side visiting”, varying ways to describe “cohabitation” or simply “engagement/betrothal”. Interviewee 3’s wife when talking to her shortly after her husband’s interview, did use “child marriage”, but to describe what she claimed did not happen in her case. Her husband noted that they got engaged while she was 17 but emphasised that they did not cohabit until after marriage at 18. This suggests that within the community, cohabitation rather than engagement serves as the key marker for marriage.

This reframing casts child marriage as a legitimate and moderns through love and cohabitation. Older generations typically cohabit a year before marriage (8, 9, 10), usually aligned with traditions like “good day” or “year” selections for the wedding. Cohabitation is now a common adaptation to maintain tradition while avoiding legal penalties. Cohabitation allows couples to live together and function as husband and wife, without legally marrying. In some cases, cohabitation or engagement began even earlier (2, 6, 7, 8). Interviewee 8 stated, “*My wife was still too young, so her parents didn’t allow it. She was 13 when we got engaged and 17 when we got married.*”. Interviewee 2 also confirmed that she was already treated like a daughter-in-law while cohabitating, reflecting social recognition of informal unions before legal marriage.

Interviewee 5 shared, “*We met on Facebook started chatting... from different villages*” showing relationships outside of the village are not only common but also now initiated independently of family input. This trend was further echoed in the focus group (Kisonen, 2025) who shared that they usually met boyfriends through the internet, and that it is common to have a boyfriend from another school district. These insights highlight how digital

platforms are not only used for spreading awareness from the local authorities but also a part of youth relationships.

However, not all these love-based unions were described as positive. Interviewee 6 shared that her relationship started as “love at first sight” but ended in separation. She later found out that her husband had lied about his mental health, he also became verbally abusive, frequently absent, drank heavily, and accumulated debts that his parents had to repay. She gave him two years to change, but when he didn’t and after he burned their marriage certificate during an argument, she left permanently. After that, their children live with him and his parents.

4.2.4 Pregnancy and Normalisation

Teenage pregnancy is normalised in Ban Luoc and contributes to child marriage. A focus group (Kisonen, 2025) with 25 9th graders, revealed that pregnancy in grade 9 is common, with students even betting on who would become pregnant before the end of the school year. Teenage pregnancies were also mentioned in multiple interviewees, especially those born in the late 1990s and in the 2000s. Interviewee 2 noted that she and two others were pregnant at the same time in grade 9. Interviewees 5, 6, and 11 also described teenage pregnancies that preceded their formal marriages. One older Interviewee (8) confirmed this dynamic while talking about his son and daughter-in-law, “*Yes, they had a child first and got married later*”.

Another participant (5) even described how the pregnancy led to their marriage when asked if they got married because of the kids “*Yes, but my in-laws treat me well, so I let go of any thoughts of leaving*”.

Several participants described how pregnancy disrupted their education. Interviewee 2 shared, “*I planned to continue studying, but since I got pregnant, I stayed at home*.”. She added that she only returned to school to complete her final exams to finish 9th grade before stopping her education. Interview 11 expressed a similar sentiment, “*If I didn’t have children, I would have continued my studies. I still wanted to study, but after having children, when they were weaned off, my parents helped a lot, and I went to work*.”. These examples show how teenage pregnancy negatively affects girls' access to education, even when they desire to continue studying.

The focus group also revealed a serious gap in sexual education. Participants reported learning about menstruation and contraception from friends, family, or the internet. They also all believed that contraception is only meant for married women, and that they learned that the best way to avoid pregnancy was to abstain from sex (Kisonen, 2025).

This reflects how the practice is not only common but also viewed as a part of the expected life path among the youth which reinforces the continuation of the practice in the community. The Vice Chairman also described the social dynamics around teenage pregnancy and its consequences, stating *“Friends might tease them about being too young to have children, and some even drop out of school before having children because of the shame”* (13). These accounts show that while teenage pregnancy is common, it is still associated with social stigma, and together this stigma reinforces child marriage as a socially appropriate solution to pregnancy.

4.2.5 Legal Loopholes and Continuation of Child Marriage

In addition to this many community members also engage in legal navigation to avoid the penalties associated with child marriage. One widely used tactic is delaying marriage registration; however, this one differs from the older generation’s traditional type of delay. In this one couples cohabit, have children, and hold engagement ceremonies often as early as age 16, but wait to legally register their marriage until reaching the official age. As the Head of the health clinic (14) explained *“In these cases, they did not register their marriages. If they had registered, it would have been subject to the law... They only get married when they reach 18.”*. This legal workaround balances social expectations while also technically complying with the law.

Another notable example comes from Interviewee 5, who distinguished between legal registration and the ceremonial wedding, *“We haven’t had the wedding yet. We’ve only registered our marriage”*. This illustrates how couples may legally marry while still not being fully seen as married within the community, due to the absence of a traditional ceremony.

Some participants misunderstood the law altogether. Interviewee 9 believed that child marriage laws only applied in Ban Luoc *“This commune is different. If you are not old enough, you will be punished.”* then got surprised when corrected *“Oh, are they fined up there too?”*. This reflects a perception that Ban Luoc is different and uniquely subjected to legal

enforcement and also shows misinformation which indicates a gap in the awareness campaigns done by the authorities.

Administrative barriers also impact the navigation of the legal risks of child marriage. Two interviewees for example described their challenges in the registration of birth certificates. Where they struggled because they were underage at the time of birth. In one of the cases the Interviewee 6 admitted to falsifying the birth certificate to avoid legal consequences, stating *“We faked the birth certificate. Basically, now if anything happens, we are not legally tied to each other.”*. Another Interviewee 11 had to register the child as a single mother *“Here, we have to register the birth within 60 days, but since we were underage, I had to register as a single mother without the father’s name. After we got married, we could correct that.”*.

The Vice chairman confirmed that in underage births cases, they will assist in issuing the certificate because at that point *“nothing else can be done”*. Several interviewees remarked that child marriage was more common before the 2014 Marriage and Family Law. Interview 7 for example said *“Nowadays, if a girl is not yet 18, it’s not allowed”* and explained that *“in recent years, it’s not allowed anymore. If they visit each other too soon and have children early, they get fined.”* Interview 3 also added, *“Before the law on marriage and family, people mainly got married early.”* These responses indicate that while the law has shaped behaviour, it has not eliminated child marriage, only changed the ways it is performed.

4.3 Summary of Findings

These findings show that child marriage is rooted not only in law or awareness, but also in emotions, cultural norms, practical need, and social expectations. Despite knowledge of legal restrictions, they view child marriage as a natural part of growing up. Practices like love-based relationships, cohabitation, pregnancy, and legal workarounds sustain child marriage, while blending old and new values.

5. Discussion

This study aims to explore how child marriage is perceived, justified, and navigated among ethnic communities in Ban Luoc. The findings reveal child marriage as not just legal issue, but a social and cultural phenomenon. To understand this, the discussion is organised around the three research questions, using social norms theory, cultural relativism, and symbolic

interactionism to interpret the findings. It also reflects the tension between global human rights frameworks and local moral logics that shape behaviour.

5.1 Justifying Child Marriage: Social Expectations and Norm Adaptation

This section will be discussing how the ethnic community in Ban Luoc justifies and normalises child marriage, by using the Cultural Relativism and Social Norms Theory. In Ban Luoc, child marriage is widely normalised and justified through a variety of culturally embedded reasons. As the results show, these include love, pregnancy, family stability, community pressure, and traditions. Such justifications reflect a moral logic that deeply shapes the local cultural context rather than following the legal or institutional norms.

5.1.1 Cultural Relativism

Descriptive relativism sees moral beliefs and practices as shaped by cultural environments, and not as universal, while metaethical relativism argues that there are no objective moral truths, only culturally specific perspectives on what is right or wrong. These perspectives help to explain the internal moral logic of the community members, even when this moral logic differs from international human rights. In this context, marrying young due to pregnancy, love, or in the past arranged marriages, is then often internalised as normal, because it aligns with community values. This internalization aligns with Herskovits' (1972) view that moral judgments emerge from cultural enculturation. As in Ban Luoc, child marriage is not viewed as a violation but as a norm. Community members have all grown up with this practice, been shaped by it, and unconsciously see it as expected and acceptable. These findings indicate that child marriage is actively reframed as expected, rooted in emotional and familial values like, love, maturity, and family stability, despite the laws implementation.

This cultural framing is not unique to Ban Luoc, Jones et al. (2014) found similar patterns among Hmong communities in the Ha Giang province, where child marriage practices such as bride kidnapping still persists as a cultural tradition. Although bride kidnapping does not occur in Ban Luoc, the expectation to marry early, especially after pregnancy or underage because of love, parallels similar moral logics found elsewhere in the country. However, after the adaptation child marriage in Ban Luoc it has been reframed from coercive or harmful which bride kidnapping is. However even if love marriage is now justified as something done

out of love and not as something their parents have decided, it still is a social response to pregnancy, family obligations, or maturity.

UNFPA & UNICEF (2018), identify four types of child marriages in Vietnam. In Ban Luoc, arranged, love-based, and pregnancy-related marriages were common, which echoes these national patterns. While these practices vary across regions as seen in Jones' study with Hmong people, these four types reflect a broader national normalisation. As these variations highlight how child marriage often presented globally as a human rights violation, is locally experienced and justified through culturally specific logics. In Ban Luoc, child marriage is as mentioned framed as less coercive and more as a transition into maturity, family responsibilities, or emotional commitment such as love.

Moreover, previous research shows that cultural justifications are often reinforced by structural constraints. Parsons et al. (2015) and Arthur et al. (2018) have both highlighted how poverty, gender inequalities, and limited access to education make child marriage appear as a rational and even good choice. In communities like Ban Luoc, families may view child marriage as a way to secure their daughter's future or to reduce their families' financial burdens, further embedding the practice in cultural logic, because they have always done this based on these reasons and never seen anything wrong with it. These justifications show how tradition and structural vulnerability reinforce a cultural environment where child marriage remains normalised.

5.1.2 Social Norms Theory

Cultural norms explain why child marriage is justified; however, it is through social norms that it is reinforced at the community level. Bicchieri's theory explains the generational shift described by many interviewees. Older participants recalled arranged marriages as the norm, while the norm today is a love-based choice and described as "love marriage". While one (Interviewee 7) mentioned that she had arranged her son's marriage and knew of another recently arranged union, these examples appear to be expectations based on the majority of participants' accounts. Most others emphasised that the norm has changed and adapted over time. This new framing reflects an adaptation toward modern ideas of autonomy. Yet, it still operates within social norms that expect marriage at a young age, especially following pregnancies.

Several interviewees describe how pregnancy has often acted as a social trigger for cohabitation and marriage. While some couples such as in Interviewee 5s case, they may not have initially planned to marry, but pregnancy leads to marriage in the eyes of the community. Notably, no participants mentioned cases where pregnancy or cohabitation did not lead to eventual marriage, showing how these social expectations link pregnancy and cohabitation to marriage, either culturally or legally when the couple reached the appropriate age.

These findings show that normative expectations in Ban Luoc extend beyond mere compliance. They have instead reshaped it as voluntary choice, even when this choice is actually a response to deeply internalised social pressure, where deviating from them is rarely seen as an option. While social norms theory offers an explanation for conformity to community expectations, it can risk overplaying passivity. This is because in several of these cases the girls made deliberate choices to enter cohabitation.

5.2 Navigating the Social, Legal, and Cultural Expectations of Child Marriage

While child marriage is normalised and justified as a cultural expectation, as discussed in 5.1, families in Ban Luoc also then navigates the tensions between social expectations and community pressures around the legal restrictions. This negotiation has resulted in a variety of adaptations such as cohabitation, delayment of marriage registration, and birth registration difficulties, which allows ethnic community members to comply with the local expectations while also minimizing legal risks.

5.2.1 Cultural Relativism and Social Norms Theory

One of the most prominent adaptations in Ban Luoc is cohabitation, where couples begin living together, before legal marriage occurs. This is typically framed as not a legal violation, but as a practical and socially acceptable arrangement. Interview data suggests that cohabitation is now the dominant form of child marriage, especially in cases involving teenage pregnancy, where it has acted as a trigger in enforcing normative expectations about respectability and adulthood, which then have reinforced the social expectation of marriage. Although some institutional actors such as the Vice Chairman acknowledges that cohabitation is seen as child marriage, no participants reported any legal consequences because of it. As Arthur et al (2018) argued of the importance of a clear and equal law without exceptions to reduce child marriage, however this noted gap between law and enforcement reflects a

leniency that allows these cultural adaptations to persist, which continues the practice despite stricter laws. This practice reveals a contradiction, where the law is intended to protect children, yet its enforcement pushes families towards informal unions such as cohabitation that then escapes legal penalties. This contradiction may in actuality deepen the vulnerability that the girls' experience, as can be seen in interviewee 6s case of having an abusive marriage and now not having custody of her children because of having to fake the birth certificate.

In the past, families relied more on arranged marriages while delaying marriage ceremonies until a "good day" or "year" according to the fortune-teller. Today, however, families, particularly those less traditional don't do that anymore, but instead delay as a workaround with the law and wait to register the marriage until they have come of age. This shows a shift in how norms are performed, but not necessarily a change in what is expected.

The pressure to conform comes not only from elders or tradition but also from peer families. As Interviewee 3 explained, some families feel compelled to secure a daughter-in-law early in response to seeing others do it. This creates a competitive social dynamic, where families may act even earlier not out of choice, but to maintain status and respectability. This in turn could lower the expected age from 16-17 (girls) and 19 (boys) for marriage even further, because of the escalating expectations.

From a cultural relativist lens, one could argue that these behaviours are part of a legitimate cultural system, and how they see it as a need for stability and economic reasons. However, this argument becomes more complex when these cultural values intersect with the harms that this practice leads to.

It is also important to see this navigation as a gendered problem, this is because the strategies described may appear as neutral or adaptive, but their impacts are in fact gendered. As Connells (1987) theory of gender and power shows how child marriage in Ban Luoc affect the girls who have to bear with the consequences of this navigation. Drawing on it based on the three structures: labour, power, and cathexis, these gender imbalances can be seen.

In terms of labour, girls who cohabitation are expected to assume domestic responsibilities. The power structure can be seen from how girls drop out of school and lose access to continuing education and social mobility. Interviewee 6s case of abuse further illustrates how

this power imbalance is reinforced in these marriages, and how it has negatively affected her by marrying young, with losing free access to her children. The cathexis structure can be seen from the emotional and sexual expectations, where the girls get pregnant and how it always leads to marriage.

Moreover, as aforementioned, Interviewee 3 talked about the pressure and competitiveness of getting a daughter-in-law early, however there was no mention of urgency around finding a son-in-law early, just that they should get married when they are seen as mature. Girls, on the other hand, are expected to move into the boy's household and become part of his family. These findings suggest that gender norms in Ban Luoc do not just accompany child marriage, they actively structure it. It is evident that these girls' roles are defined by traditional expectations like domesticity and obedience, which is consistent with Connell's theory of emphasised femininity.

These gendered dynamics are enhanced by structural constraints, such as the lack of access to a good sexual education and lack of contraceptives, especially for unmarried girls, which has led to misinformation and unplanned pregnancies. The focus group participants noted how contraceptives are culturally framed as only appropriate for married women, further limiting girls' ability to prevent teenage pregnancies and child marriage. This lack of access is a cultural norm, one that also contributes directly to teenage pregnancies and marriage as the only option.

Parsons et al. (2015) and Arthur et al. (2018) highlight a similar thing in how child marriage limit's girls' agencies, tying them to domestic labour and reproductive duties. This aligns with the findings from the focus group, where girls described limited access to SRHR and believed contraceptives were only intended for married women. Nour (2009) and Young Lives (2016) similarly found that rural girls often lack SRHR access and education, leading to unplanned pregnancies and child marriage. Cultural relativism helps explain these beliefs, on contraceptives and how this is their culturally moral value on the subject. However, this lack of SRHR leads to harm as mentioned above, Interviewee 6s story also shows the consequences of this lack of education, where her child marriage ended in an abusive situation with a separation, in addition to the lack of access to her children. These things could have been avoided if not for the social norms that have equated cohabitation and pregnancy with the obligation to marry.

In short, the ethnic community navigates child marriage through shared expectations, cultural continuity, and legal circumvention. These practices are deliberate, patterned responses to conflicting systems, where legal laws, community norms, and gender expectations intersect. To understand child marriage in Ban Luoc there is a need to not just understand the reasons it exists, but how it is sustained, adapted, and reproduced in the face of external community pressures.

5.3 Perceptions of Child Marriage

To understand how and why the practice of child marriage continues among ethnic communities in Ban Luoc it requires an exploration of how they define and interpret marriage itself. This section therefore draws on symbolic interactionism and cultural relativism to analyse how community members give meaning to actions like cohabitation, engagement, and legal registration, and how these meanings affect their perception of child marriage.

5.3.1 Symbolic Interactionism

According to symbolic interactionism, social meaning is created through everyday interaction and shared language (Blumer, 1969). In Ban Luoc, people rarely if ever, use the term “child marriage”. Instead, they referred to it as *qua lại* “side-to-side visiting”, or as “cohabitation”, “engagement” or “waiting for a good year”. These cultural terms reflect locally shared understandings of relationship stages, rather than legal categories. These terms get legitimacy precisely because they are used, reinforced, and reinterpreted in daily life. This symbolic reframing does not only reflect cultural differences, but also as mentioned in previous sections enables families to adhere to social expectations while avoiding legal sanctions. Symbolic interactionism helps to explain how community members interpret and assign meaning to these choices. For the girls choosing cohabitation, it was not always compliance, but sometimes an enactment of affection or independence.

For example, while institutional actors like the Vice Chairman described cohabitation as a form of child marriage, most participants did not recognise it as such. To them, these unions were normal, socially legitimate, and morally acceptable. One participant (Interviewee 5) even explained that although she was legally married and living with her partner, she didn’t consider herself truly married because the marriage ceremony had not yet occurred. This

suggests that in Ban Luoc, legal recognition alone does not define marriage, but instead ceremonial and social validation play a vital role in constructing it.

Interviewee 3's wife viewed engagement underage as acceptable, but cohabitation under 18 as not. While the Vice Chairman viewed cohabitation and underage pregnancy as child marriage, others instead saw pregnancy in 9th grade as common, showing a clear disconnect between the institutional and local definitions in the community, and how definitions are socially negotiated, and not legally fixed.

Furthermore, the absence of the term "child marriage" outside of institutional actors with higher education suggests that this could be a language gap or a conceptual mismatch. Most of the participants are ethnic minorities, and all of them outside of the institutional actors are ethnic minorities, where some of them do not speak Vietnamese fluently. It is therefore entirely possible that they are either unfamiliar with the term or understand it differently in their own language. Since the interviews were conducted only in Vietnamese, these local linguistic nuances may have been missed, potentially concealing how participants may actually interpret or label child marriage. This shows how language functions not just as a tool for communications, but also as a mechanism for social classifications. As symbolic interactionism emphasises, the meanings of concepts like marriage are constructed, contested, and lived, and in Ban Luoc this construction diverges from legal narratives.

5.3.2 Cultural Relativism

These interpretative differences can be understood through normative relativism, which holds that moral standards are not universal but shaped by cultural context. As Fernando (1985) notes, under normative relativism, different cultures are entitled to their own moral logics, meaning what is right or wrong depends on their shared cultural values.

Then applying this normative relativist lens to Ban Luoc, community members do not necessarily view cohabitation or engagement as morally wrong. Rather, they see these actions as culturally appropriate responses to social transitions like pregnancy, maturity, or love. Under this lens, child marriage is not a violation, but rather a fulfilment of cultural expectations.

This also connects back to Herskovits' (1972) critique of ethnocentrism, where external actors may view child marriage as harmful, but from within the community, these unions are seen through a different moral lens, one that is based on family duty, tradition, and social expectations. Child marriage from this perspective is then not seen as wrong, but as something expected, and is maintained through cultural learnings and social reinforcements.

However, this stands in contrast to international human rights frameworks, such as UDHR, CRC, and CEDAW, which asserts that marriage should be done by people of age, with full consent. UNFPA & UNICEF (2018) does also mention this, however Vietnamese law differs from these in their age classification. In Vietnam girls must be 18 and boys 20 to be able to marry, whereas in international perspectives both genders should be 18. This is noteworthy because it shows how Vietnam diverges from international perspectives on their view of maturity and age, where boys seemingly mature later than girls. Then, from an international perspective most of the male participants would not have been cases of child marriage, but from Vietnamese laws perspective they did. UNFPA & UNICEF in combination with human rights emphasise the risks following child marriage such as lack of education and gender inequality. However, in Ban Luoc child marriage is instead perceived as protective and stabilising, especially in cases of teenage pregnancy.

These views of local moral logics then shape how the community members respond to outside intervention. As seen in Interviewee 9s comment, and how he was surprised with how not only Ban Luoc had these regulations and laws, suggesting a belief that Ban Luoc could be unfairly targeted. This reflects a disconnect between external norms and local realities and could reinforce resistance to outside actors and regulations.

Adding to this complexity is also the possibility of language barriers and how their ethnic identity influences how they understand the term "child marriage". As mentioned in symbolic interactionism, the participants are from ethnic minority groups and do not always speak fluent Vietnamese. This absence then of the term "child marriage" in interviews could reflect a cultural framing but also a linguistic inaccessibility. As such, local understandings of marriage may not even align with the state's legal definitions due to a linguistic mismatch.

Together, symbolic interactionism and cultural relativism show that child marriage in Ban Luoc is not simply just legal defiance, but a culturally rooted interpretations of relationships.

Ban Luoc's experience reflects a broader global challenge of how to balance culturally rooted practices with international efforts to promote children's rights, gender equality, and long-term development.

5.4 Some Reflections on Recommendations

Addressing child marriage among ethnic communities in Ban Luoc requires a multidimensional strategy that goes beyond just legal enforcement, and awareness campaigns. Effective interventions must engage with local beliefs, cultural values, and the lived realities of the community members, while still upholding international human rights standards.

Firstly, community-based dialogue is essential and should target respected influential figures, such as village leaders, teachers, and fortune-tellers. Giving them with the knowledge to understand both the legal framework and the health and social consequences of child marriage can help to shift the local norms from within the community itself.

Second, intergenerational education is needed and must reach both youth and old to challenge the belief that child marriage is expected or beneficial. Campaigns should address social expectations, not just personal choice, using familiar terms like *qua lai* to reflect local meanings. Under this type of education, they must focus on shifting norms of perceived community expectations, and not just inform them of the laws.

Third, educational and economic alternatives should be expanded. Incentives such as vocational training or flexible school schedules for pregnant girls can help delay child marriage giving them educational opportunities. However, this should not lead to a continued norm of viewing teenage pregnancy as normal or common but giving pregnant girls the opportunities to continue with education if they want. Government or NGO support for poor households is also crucial to reduce the economic pressure that can let them continue with schooling.

Fourth, sexual and reproductive health education must be normalised in schools and communities. Providing practical information about contraception and parenting alternatives, while also supporting teenage mothers through flexible study options and peer networks, can

reduce stigma and drop out, they must also be informed that contraceptives should not only be for married women, but for everyone.

Lastly, child marriage cannot be address without tackling its drivers: poverty, gender inequality and limited opportunities. Rather than dismissing culture, efforts must work with communities to create new pathways that align with local values while also protecting the children's rights. Therefore, local authorities must stop with only focusing all their efforts on awareness campaigns when they have noticed it is not fully working and must also integrate efforts that targets the main drivers of child marriage.

6. Conclusion

This study explored how child marriage is perceived, justified, and navigated in Ban Luoc, a rural commune in northern Vietnam. Through ethnographic fieldwork and semi-structured interviews, the findings reveal that child marriage is deeply rooted in the cultural and social norms in the community, where legal laws and global human rights definitions often where at odds with the local perspectives on the issue. Rather than being viewed as coercive or harmful, child marriage is instead framed as a response to love, family duty, and economic necessity. Practices such as cohabitation, delayed registration, and teenage pregnancy are not perceived as violations but as expected stages in young people's transitions into adulthood. This normalisation is sustained through cultural enculturation, social norms, and gendered expectations, particularly those that place the burden of child marriage on girls.

By integrating cultural relativism, social norms theory, and symbolic interactionism, this thesis shows how the community's behaviour is shaped by shared meanings, collective expectations, and deeply internalised traditions. While some adaptations aim to comply with legal laws, they don't technically follow it.

Although its small sample size and geographic focus, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how global issues such as child marriage are experiences and rationalised in local contexts. This study highlights the limitations of legal interventions that do not account for cultural context and underscores the importance of culturally sensitive, community-based approaches. The continued existence of child marriage in Ban Luoc suggests that addressing this issue requires more than just legal reforms, it instead need a more nuanced understanding

of local meanings, practices, and power dynamics, and these things need to be made accessible to everyone even those that do not fully understand Vietnamese.

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Appendix A: Interview Guides

Interview Guide 1: Individuals and Parents of Those Who Engaged in Child Marriage

1. Starting Questions

- Can you tell us about yourself? (Name, age, occupation)
- How many members are there in your family?

2. Background Information

- How old were you when you got married?
- Did you meet your spouse in this village or somewhere else?
- Was your marriage arranged by your parents or was it your own choice?
- What was the process like before marriage? Was there an engagement ceremony?
- Did you have any celebration before moving in with your spouse?

3. Causes of Child Marriage

- Why did you get married at that age? (Economic reasons, family pressure, pregnancy, etc.)
- Did you or your parents believe that marrying early would bring stability?
- Was there any pressure from the community to marry early?

4. Consequences of Child Marriage

- How has your married life been? Can you share both happy and difficult experiences?
- Did you face any struggles after marriage? (Economy, education, family life)
- If you had the chance, would you change anything about when you got married?

5. About Their Children

- How many children do you have?
- Are your children married? If yes, at what age?
- Do you want your children to marry early? Why or why not?

6. Community Perspective

- Do many people in your village marry young?
- Do you know someone who married young? Why did they do so?

Interview Guide 2: Local Authorities and Committee Members

1. Starting Questions

- a. Can you introduce yourself? (Name, position, responsibilities)
- b. How long have you been working in this position?

2. Child Marriage in the Community

- a. Is child marriage still commonly practiced in your commune?
- b. Can you share any examples of recent child marriages?
- c. What are the main reasons why child marriage still happens in this area?

3. Statistics on Child Marriage

- a. Do you have any statistics on child marriage cases in recent years?
- b. Are there any trends showing an increase or decrease in cases?

4. Efforts to Combat Child Marriage

- a. What initiatives or programs have been implemented to prevent child marriage?
- b. How does the local government or NGOs raise awareness about this issue?
- c. What are the challenges in reducing child marriage cases?

5. Causes and Consequences of Child Marriage

- a. What are the common reasons families give for allowing early marriage?
- b. How does early marriage impact individuals, families, and the community?
- c. What are the long-term effects on children born from early marriages?

6. Future Directions

- a. What future policies or actions do you think could be effective in reducing child marriage?
- b. How can the community be more involved in preventing this practice?

Appendix B: Participants

The participants were categorised into three age groups: individuals born between the 1960s and 1970s, those born between the 1980s and 1990s, and those born in 1999 and 2000s. Specifically, Interview 6 was born in late 1990s and was therefore specified as born in late 1990s because she was borderlining between the 8x-9x and 10x and followed more closely the 10x trends. Within these groups, there were 8 cases among those born in the 2000s, 7 cases among those born in the 1980s and 1990s, and 7 cases among those born in the 1960s and 1970s. Of those interviewed, only 2 were determined not to be a potential case, as they married or met after the legal age requirement.

The table below presents the 14 interviews conducted, in some instances, one interview revealed multiple cases, sometimes as many as four. If this happened it was noted in the “notes” part of the table. Interview 1a and 1b is also written as that because these two interviews were conducted at the same time. Here F stands for Female and M for Male. 6x-7x stands for those born 1960s to 1970s, 8x-9x those born in the 1980s to 1990s, and lastly 10x for those born in the 2000s.

Interview ID	Gender	Age group	Year of cohabitation	Notes
Interview 1a	F	10x	20	Daughter
Interview 1b	F	6x-7x	15-16	Mother
Interview 2	F	10x	16	
Interview 3	F	6x-7x	18	
Interview 4	F	6x-7x	15	Interviewee mentioned 1 more case
Interview 5	F	10x	17	
Interview 6	F	late 9x	17	
Interview 7	F	8x-9x	15-16	Interviewee mentioned 3

				other cases
Interview 8	M	6x-7x	17	Interviewee mentioned 3 other cases
Interview 9	M	6x-7x	19	Interviewee mentioned 3 other cases
Interview 10	M	8x-9x	19	
Interview 11	F	10x	16	Interviewee mentioned 1 another case
Interview 12	M	8x-9x	20	Not potential interview
Interview 13	M			Vice chairman of the commune
Interview 14	M			Head of Health Clinic