

# Virtue, Shame, and Choice: Perspectives of Sex Work Among Adolescents in Various Globalized Thai Communities

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## Abstract

Although taboo given the traditional Thai value of female sexual conservatism, sex work is a practice for which Thailand has gained international attention. As in other rapidly globalizing contexts, however, Thai youth are increasingly exposed to global values of gender equality, self-fulfillment, and personal choice. This may, in turn, alter youth perspectives of this taboo yet pervasive practice. To understand how Thai youth negotiate local and global values when considering sex work, this study examined the moral evaluations and moral reasoning of adolescents residing in variously globalized communities. Forty participants (20 adolescents in each a more and a less globalized Thai setting) participated in interviews in which they discussed their perspectives of sex work. Quantitative analysis of moral evaluations revealed that rural and urban adolescents alike deemed sex work as mostly morally wrong. Qualitative analysis of moral reasoning revealed that both participant groups prioritized Thai values of sexual purity for women, shame avoidance, and reputation maintenance. Yet distinct values were also endorsed across participant groups. Rural adolescents centered local values (e.g., relational choice, women's dignity, Buddhist divinity) and urban adolescents drew heavily from global values (e.g., autonomous choice, romantic love, international reputation) when reasoning about the morality and immorality of sex work. Findings point to the manner in which contextual realities shape—and reshape—cultural values in this rapidly globalizing nation.

## Keywords

cultural values, moral reasoning, adolescents, gender, sex work, globalization, mixed methods, Thailand

In late 2020, searching Google for the term “Thai woman” yielded a related question: “How much is a Thai girl for a week?”<sup>1</sup> This highlights the pervasive perception that Thai women can be bought and speaks to Thailand's reputation for sex work. Indeed, Thailand has received international attention as a sex tourism destination since the Vietnam War; a domestic sex industry also exists, though this tends to receive less international attention (Suntikul, 2013). Prostitution

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remains rather widespread in spite of the fact that it is technically illegal. Recent estimates suggest that there are between 200,000 and more than 1 million sex workers in Thailand (Amendral, 2021). Although ingrained in Thai culture, sex work remains stigmatized and sex workers are commonly judged as deviant and immoral (Chandran, 2019).

What do adolescents—who are engaged in developmental tasks of internalizing cultural values and exploring and committing to an identity (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1968; Knight et al., 2010)—think about this taboo, yet pervasive, cultural practice? And how might adolescent thought be influenced by socioeconomic, technological, and cultural change? Mounting evidence suggests that cultural and moral values—including values for gender and sexuality—transform as a result of globalization (Huntsinger et al., 2019; Kaasa & Minkov, 2020; McKenzie, 2020a; Manago, 2014). The study of how globalization influences moral values and reasoning is young, however, and less is known about whether and how moral values and reasoning might also be maintained even in rapidly globalizing contexts (McKenzie, 2020b).

This study investigates whether moral evaluations of, and moral values invoked when reasoning about, sex work differ among adolescents residing in variously globalized communities in northern Thailand. More specifically, we examine adolescent perspectives of sex workers (*kon kai borigan tang phet: คนขายบริการทางเพศ*). Though research has addressed the values guiding the decisions of Thai sex workers themselves (e.g., Ariyabuddhiphongs & Li, 2012; Sorajjakool & Benitez, 2015), less is known about the values guiding community members' perspectives of this practice. The topic of sex work is relevant to the study of globalization both because the cultural practice is predicated on international tourism and because it pulls for moral judgments pertaining to sexuality (which, as previously mentioned, are influenced by globalization).

## Changing Cultures, Changing Values

Theoretical scholarship suggests that cultural values are tailored to sociodemographic conditions such as type and extent of education, level of urbanization, degree of technological embeddedness, type of economic system, and degree of wealth (Greenfield, 2009, 2014). One implication of this tailoring is that as sociodemographic conditions transform with globalization, so too do cultural values. Drawing from terms introduced by sociologist Tönnies (1887/1957), Greenfield uses *Gemeinschaft* (community) and *Gesellschaft* (society) to describe two distinct ecologies and their corresponding cultural values. The prototypical *Gemeinschaft* ecology is rural, low-tech, internally homogenous, and has a relatively poor, subsistence-based economy. In these ecologies, values of collectivism and familial interdependence are more adaptive. The prototypical *Gesellschaft* ecology, meanwhile, is urban, high-tech, internally heterogeneous, and has a wealthy, commerce-based economy. In these ecologies, values of individualism and autonomy are more adaptive. Greenfield (2009, 2014) contends that as *Gemeinschaft* communities transform into *Gesellschaft* societies, individualistic values replace more traditional collectivistic values.

Empirical research widely supports Greenfield's (2009) proposal. Across 18 countries in diverse world regions, Kaasa and Minkov (2020) note a global shift between 1995 and 2014 in the direction of endorsing cultural values typical of wealthy Western societies. That is, they found evidence of unidirectional global transition in ideologies and values from collectivism to individualism and to interconnected values of secularism, self-expression, and moral permissiveness. Research isolating particular sociodemographic conditions (e.g., degree of urbanization, level of technological development) has yielded similar results. In Mexico, Maya emerging adults who relocated from a rural to an urban environment endorsed new, *Gesellschaft*-adapted values of choice, exploration, self-fulfillment, and gender equality (Manago, 2012). In China, adolescents residing in urban, *Gesellschaft* environments were less likely than their rural, *Gemeinschaft*-dwelling counterparts to endorse traditional cultural values of family obligation and parental obedience (Fuligni & Zhang, 2004; Zhang & Fuligni, 2006). In Ethiopia,

adolescents more strongly endorsed individualistic values and independent self-construals after 1 year of laptop use (Hansen et al., 2012).

There is unevenness, though, in *whose values* are most susceptible to change with globalization-related sociodemographic shifts. As previewed in the previous paragraph, research suggests that adolescents and emerging adults are most likely to endorse divergent, non-traditional cultural values. This is likely because these age groups are in the midst of exploring and committing to their identities and values (Arnett, 2000; Erikson, 1968; Knight et al., 2010), and uniquely exposed to and influenced by globalization-related forces such as new media and advanced formal schooling (Fuligni & Tsai, 2015; Jensen et al., 2011). Research also suggests that young people living in urban environments more commonly endorse non-traditional cultural values than do their rural-dwelling counterparts (Fuligni & Zhang, 2004; Huntsinger et al., 2019; McKenzie et al., 2019b).

There is unevenness, too, in *which values* are most susceptible to change with globalization-related sociodemographic shifts. Mounting evidence suggests that young people's gender values are especially sensitive to globalization influences. Indeed, research suggests that gender-related values and perspectives of hierarchical gender roles are shifting faster than other cultural values, such as family obligation (Georgas et al., 2006; Manago, 2014). Huntsinger et al. (2019) found that Armenian adolescents who were urban and used the Internet more frequently endorsed less traditional gender-based attitudes toward marriage roles than did adolescents who were rural and used the Internet less (Huntsinger et al., 2019). Manago (2014) found that Mexican adolescent girls enrolled in high school were more likely to prioritize gender equality and personal choice over parental authority in partnering than were their mothers. Likewise, compared to previous generations, adolescents and young adults in globalizing world regions of East Asia, the Middle East, and Sub-Saharan Africa endorse values for gender and sexuality that prioritize personal choice and self-fulfillment (Abu Aleon et al., 2019; Moghadam, 2003; Nsamenang, 2002; Rosenberger, 2001; Weinstock et al., 2015).

## Cultural and Moral Values in Thailand

Thailand is a highly collectivistic country with strong commitment and loyalty to the in-group (Hofstede, 2001). Family loyalty in particular is valued, as are related values of filial piety and family interdependence (Kanchanachitra, 2014; Thanakwang, 2015). Values pertaining to maintaining pride, dignity, and group harmony are also salient (Ukosakul, 1999). Indeed, family loyalty and pride are interrelated values in the Thai context. Among Thai sex workers, for instance, a sense of pride is derived from sacrificing for and financially supporting the family (Amendral, 2021; Ariyabuddhiphongs & Li, 2012). The importance of pride maintenance and shame avoidance is reflected in the organization of Thai language and phrases. The commonly used phrase *sia-naa* (เสียหน้า), which literally translates to “broken face,” illustrates just how powerful an infraction it is to bring shame to oneself or one's social group. In the Thai context, an individual moral shortcoming is commonly perceived as reflecting negatively not only on the deviant individual, but also on their family (Pinyuchon & Gray, 1997).

Relatedly, values for gender and sexuality—particularly for girls and women—are deeply ingrained. “Virtuous” Thai women are expected to be sexually pure, gentle, obedient, and conservative (Kanchanaga, 1979; Klunklin & Greenwood, 2005). If a Thai woman engages in promiscuous or premarital sexual activity, she risks damaging not only her own reputation, but also the reputation of her family. As Pinyuchon and Gray (1997) explain, “To the majority of Thai families, being a sexually experienced female is seriously unacceptable, bringing great shame to the girl's family” (p. 215). As in many cultural contexts, gender double standards and power imbalances exist wherein it is deemed morally acceptable—indeed, normative—for young Thai men to have sexual experiences (Tangmunkongvorakul et al., 2005).

Lastly, as an overwhelmingly Buddhist nation, religion influences Thai cultural values. As one of the most religious countries in the world (Gallup International, 2017; Pew Research Center, 2015), Buddhism is embedded in the daily lives, relationships, and moral frameworks of Thais (Cassaniti, 2015; Eberhardt, 2006; Swearer, 1995). Especially influential are doctrines of rebirth and *karma* (the belief that one's actions in this life or previous lives affect current or future lives), which are core to Thailand's "moral ethos" (Swearer, 1995). In turn, these beliefs inform the *five precepts* (a set of moral guidelines) to which Thai Buddhists strive to adhere, which entail abstaining from killing, stealing, lying, intoxication, and sexual misconduct.

Mounting evidence suggests, however, that as Thailand has undergone dramatic economic, sociocultural, and technological change in recent decades, cultural and moral values have transformed—particularly among young people and those living in urban areas (McKenzie, 2018, 2019a, 2020a; McKenzie et al., 2019a, 2019b). In contrast with traditional Thai cultural-moral values of collectivism, gendered power imbalances, and relational religiosity, urban Thai adolescents center autonomy in their moral reasoning (McKenzie, 2018, 2019a), endorse gender egalitarianism (McKenzie, 2020a), and experience religion as primarily internal (McKenzie et al., 2019b). Such research suggests that, per Greenfield's (2009) prediction, those residing in more globalized Thai ecologies hold Gesellschaft-adapted cultural and moral values—some of which are at odds with traditional Thai values.

## Current Study

In rapidly globalizing world regions, young people increasingly endorse global values of individualism, personal choice, self-expression and self-fulfillment, and gender equality (Abu Aleon et al., 2019; Hansen et al., 2012, 2014; Kaasa & Minkov, 2020; Manago, 2012, 2014; Moghadam, 2003; Nsamenang, 2002; Rosenberger, 2001; Weinstock et al., 2015). Yet psychological adaptation to globalization is unlikely to be uniform, as the particular global values that young people endorse and local values that young people maintain are culture-specific (McKenzie, 2019b, 2020a). This study explores value transformation and maintenance in rapidly globalizing Thailand by examining how late adolescents in variously globalizing contexts morally evaluate and reason about the culturally salient issue of sex work.

This study utilizes a within-nation cross-cultural design by including young people residing in geographically nearby rural *Gemeinschaft* and urban *Gesellschaft* contexts. Doing so offers an assessment of similarities and differences in value judgments among young people who have grown up exposed to core Thai values, yet have been unequally exposed to global discourses and values due to differing degrees of intercultural contact (in person and through media). Late adolescents are included because they are both especially influenced by globalization (Fuligni & Tsai, 2015; Jensen et al., 2011) and moving toward solidifying their values and identities (Erikson, 1968; Knight et al., 2010).

Adolescents' moral evaluations of sex work were examined quantitatively, and the values they endorsed when reasoning about the morality of sex work were examined qualitatively. Given the taboo nature of sex work in Thailand, we hypothesized that rural and urban adolescents alike would evaluate sex work as an immoral profession. Because the moral values analysis was inductive in nature, it was guided not by hypotheses but rather an interest in understanding how cultural values are tailored to differentially globalized Thai ecologies. Based on the literature discussed in the introduction, however, it may be expected that local Thai values (of dignity maintenance, shame avoidance, family loyalty, sexual conservatism among women, and prioritization of Buddhist doctrines and precepts) would be invoked by rural and urban Thai adolescents, but that they would be more central in the moral reasoning of rural adolescents. It may also be expected that global values (of gender equality, personal choice, and self-fulfillment) would be more central in the moral reasoning of urban than rural Thai adolescents.

## Method

### *Cultural Communities*

Data collection for this study was part of a year-long ethnographic project that took place in two districts in northern Thailand: Mae Kiaw<sup>2</sup> and Chiang Mai. Data collection was preceded—this visit and while residing in Thailand several years prior—by the first author learning Thai and northern Thai (*Kam Muang*: คำเมือง) languages, making preliminary site visits, and building relationships with informants. Though these communities are just 25 miles apart and have a shared history, local language, and local cuisine, they constitute distinct ecological contexts.

With a population of roughly 21,000 spread across six subdistricts, Mae Kiaw is sparsely populated. Rice fields and low-lying mountains pervade the district. At the time of fieldwork, there were no shopping malls, supermarkets, or global chains in the district. During the first author's extensive fieldwork, no *farangs* (ฝรั่ง: white foreigners) were encountered. Professions in Mae Kiaw are somewhat restricted, and levels of formal education are relatively low. Census data indicate that the predominant profession in the district is farming, and that over 67% of the population has completed primary education or less.

Chiang Mai City is the capital of Chiang Mai Province and Thailand's second largest city. Including the metropolitan area, its population is roughly 1 million. The city's cultural and historical significance, paired with its modern conveniences (e.g., shopping malls, supermarkets, and global chains like 7-Eleven, McDonalds, and Starbucks), renders it a popular destination for Thai and international tourists alike. Professions of Chiang Mai inhabitants are diverse, and levels of education are quite high. Census data show that the most common profession is wage labor (typically service industry work). More than 61% of the population has completed at least some high school, and 23% of the population has a bachelor's degree or higher.

### *Participants*

Adolescents were recruited through two secondary government schools: one in rural Mae Kiaw and one in urban Chiang Mai. After building rapport with administrators and teachers, the first author visited classrooms and held focus group discussions in order to build rapport with students and finalize the interview protocol. Adolescents interested in participating in the study provided contact information for themselves and their parents. Those adolescents who met location-based criteria,<sup>3</sup> and whose parents consented to their child being interviewed, were invited to participate.

A total of 40 adolescents (ages 16–19,  $M_{\text{age}} = 17.30$ ), evenly divided across cultural communities, were interviewed. All adolescents were entering their final year of high school. In both communities, participants included more females than males (75% female in the rural community, 60% female in the urban community). The overwhelming majority of participants (97.5%) reported their ethnicity as Thai; the remaining 2.5% reported their ethnicity as Thai—Chinese or multi-ethnic. With regard to religious affiliation, 90% of participants reported that they were Buddhist, 7.5% were Christian, and 2.5% were Muslim.

Evincing the distinct ecologies across cultural contexts, parent education levels, parent professions, and annual family income (gathered via a questionnaire completed by the parent who provided consent for their child to be interviewed) varied widely. Whereas most rural parents (60%) had completed formal schooling by primary school, most urban parents (75%) had earned a Bachelor's or graduate degree. Most rural parents (75%) worked part-time as freelancers and engaged in blue collar work—most commonly as farmers or wage laborers. Urban parents, meanwhile, tended to work full-time (65%) and to hold white collar jobs (e.g., as government workers, teachers, electricians). Reflecting differential embeddedness in a global economy, the average self-reported annual family income was lower for rural families (\$2,250 USD) than for



urban families (\$16,480 USD). The difference between rural and urban family incomes is striking given the distinct household compositions across communities, as most rural households were multigenerational (80%), whereas most urban households were nuclear (60%).

### *Interview Procedure*

Data analyzed for this study consist of semi-structured interviews, which were conducted several months after the initiation of fieldwork. Interview questions and culturally salient moral issues were determined and refined via discussions with informants, research assistants, focus groups, and pilot interviews—all which took place during the initial months of fieldwork.

To ensure their comfort, participants determined interview location and language. Among rural adolescents, the vast majority (90%) elected to be interviewed at home and all were interviewed in Kam Muang. Among urban adolescents, most (65%) elected to be interviewed at school and most (75%) were interviewed in English. A local research assistant accompanied the first author for each interview, and a native speaker of the participant's preferred language led each interview. When in Thai or Kam Muang, the first author asked follow-up questions on occasion during the interview and conversed with participants before and after interviews. Interviews were administered after written consent was obtained from adolescents and their parents. Following the interview, participants were given a "thank you" gift (e.g., hat, notebook, wallet).

The topic analyzed for this study was participants' perspectives of sex work. Participants' moral evaluation and moral reasoning about sex work was assessed by asking, first, if they know anyone who is a sex worker now or was a sex worker in the past. If they said yes, they were asked to briefly describe them and discuss what they think about them and their job (or former job). If they said no, they were asked if they had ever seen sex workers in Thailand, and they were asked what they think about them and their job. Next, participants were asked whether they think it is morally right or morally wrong for Thais to engage in sex work, and why. If participants mentioned harm, they were asked what kind of harm they had in mind, and harm to whom. If they mentioned duty or obligation, they were asked whose duty to whom they had in mind. Finally, if participants suggested that sex work is morally right or acceptable, they were asked whether there are any situations when sex work is morally wrong. Conversely, if they suggested that sex work is morally wrong or unacceptable, they were asked whether there are any situations when sex work is morally right or justified.

### *Analytic Approach*

Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed by a native speaker of the interview language. For interviews that took place in Thai or Kam Muang, a native-speaking research assistant first transcribed and translated the interviews into English. The first author then compared each interview transcript to the original audio record to ensure transcription accuracy and detail.

*Moral evaluation.* To investigate cultural differences in moral evaluations of sex work, a post hoc statistical examination was conducted. Numerical codes (1–5) were created for participants' evaluations of sex work, such that 1 = totally morally wrong; 2 = mostly morally wrong, a little right; 3 = equally (or neither) morally wrong and right; 4 = mostly morally right, a little wrong; and 5 = totally morally right. Those who suggested that sex work is completely immoral received a code of 1, while those who discussed some ways in which it could be morally right received a code of 2 or 3, depending on their framing. Codes 4 and 5 were not invoked, as no participants suggested that sex work is mostly or completely morally right. (For examples of participant discourse and accompanying moral evaluation codes see Table 1 in Supplemental Material.)

Inter-rater reliability was assessed for 20% of randomly selected interviews by the first and second author; Cohen's Kappa was 1.0. A chi-square test of independence was then conducted to determine whether there is a link between culture (rural, urban) and moral evaluation (1–3).

*Moral values.* To investigate the moral values that underpinned adolescents' moral evaluations, and to investigate both convergences and divergences across participant groups, inductive thematic analysis was employed to examine moral discourse (Boyatzis, 1998). This qualitative analytic approach is grounded in a social constructionist epistemology. Investigators included the first author (who holds a PhD in psychology and engages in long-term ethnographic fieldwork in northern Thailand) and the four co-authors of this article (all whom were members of the first author's research lab at the time of data analysis). Triangulation among multiple investigators fostered reflexive dialog, and enabled the interrogation of divergent interpretations of participants' moral discourses. Throughout the data analytic process, investigators conversed about their evolving interpretations of the data, as well as how their pre-existing knowledge and experience influenced these evolving interpretations.

Because the analytic approach was inductive, codes emerged from the analysis. The coding process began with all authors making preliminary analytic notes based on individual readings of the interview transcripts. Iterative discussions of these analytic notes yielded the overarching focus on similarities and differences in moral values endorsed by rural and urban Thai adolescents, given its strong representation in the data. After each investigator individually coded participant interviews, a group discussion aimed to collapse conceptually related individual codes for each participant group. The set of codes for each participant group was then combined and further collapsed, yielding a total of 39 distinct codes (see Figure 1).

After codes were generated, they were revisited with the aim of determining patterns (or inferential "meta-codes" [Elliott, 2018; Punch, 2014]) by seeking connections between, and examining the meanings of, codes for each participant group. At this stage, evidence that was and was not consistent with codes was noted. Conceptually related codes were collapsed, refined, and named—resulting in a total of six patterns. Patterns were then combined to generate, name, and define themes. Themes were then finalized by assessing fit between each theme and the overarching focus on similarities and differences in moral reasoning among adolescents in variously globalized communities. Figure 1 provides a visual depiction of the code refinement process.

As an example: at the earliest stage of analysis, it became clear that considerations of shame and reputation were central in the moral reasoning of rural and urban adolescents. In the coding process, "shame" and "reputation" constituted 2 of the 39 codes. At the next stage of analysis, it was determined that these two codes co-occurred with distinct codes for each participant group. For rural adolescents, "shame" and "reputation" commonly occurred alongside "community," "family," "gossip," "nation," "respect," "role model," "school," "self," and "tradition" codes. For urban adolescents, "shame" and "reputation" occurred alongside "foreigners," "nation," and "stigma" codes. After revisiting the transcripts in which these codes occurred, these code clusters were collapsed into two patterns: *Rural adolescents: Sex work brings shame to sex workers and their family, community, and nation*, and *Urban adolescents: Sex work brings shame to nation*. Finally, these patterns were combined into a single theme that captured layers of shame emphasized by each participant group. This theme was named "Shame for Self and Society."

Three qualitative validity procedures, each which align with constructivist paradigmatic assumptions (Creswell & Miller, 2000), were employed in this study. They included: prolonged engagement in the field, thick description of participant discourse, and the inclusion of disconfirming evidence. Disconfirming evidence is integrated in the results section and revisited in the discussion section.

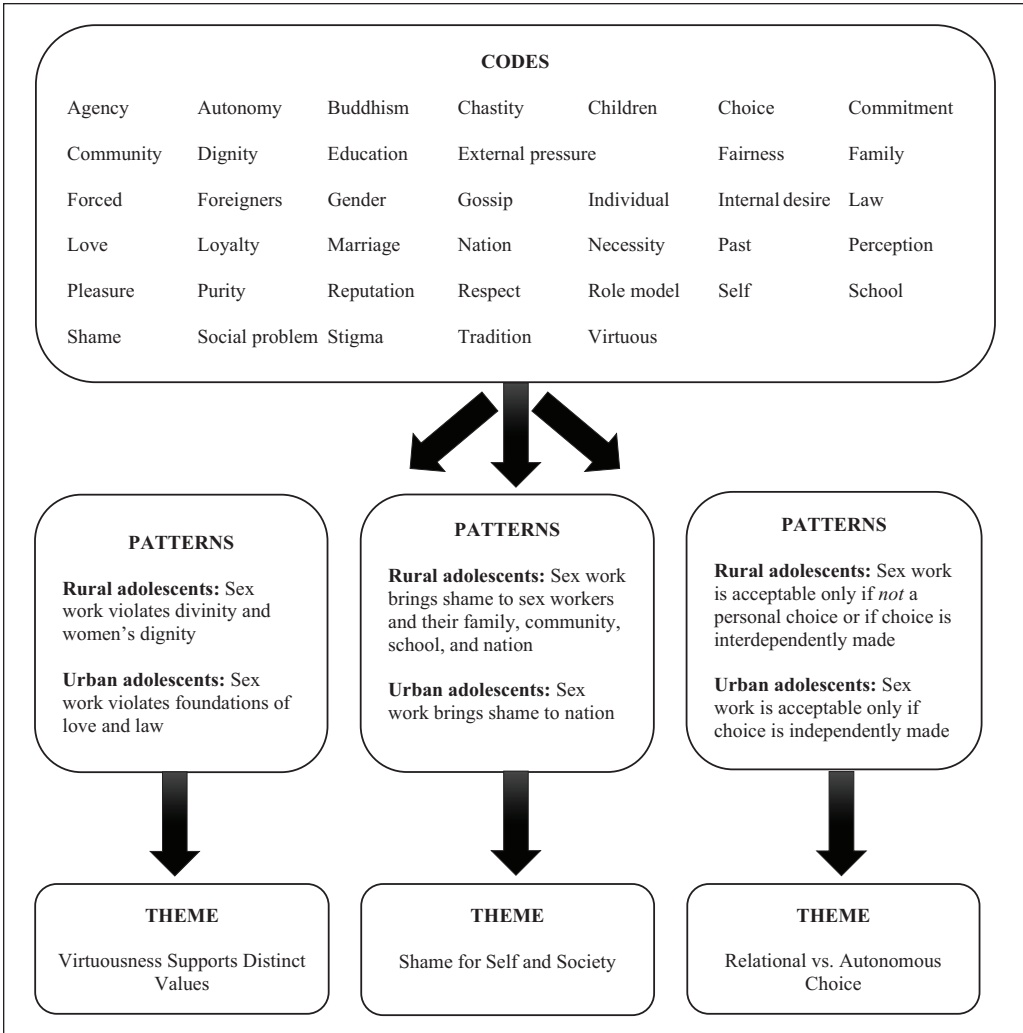


Figure 1. Thematic analysis process.

## Results

All participants were familiar with the topic of sex work, though the circumstances surrounding their familiarity differed. Whereas 40% of rural adolescents reported having at least one friend or classmate that they knew to be a sex worker, not a single urban adolescent reported personally knowing anyone who engaged in sex work. Urban adolescents' familiarity with sex work revolved primarily around seeing people that they suspected may be sex workers in Chiang Mai or elsewhere in Thailand while traveling.

### Moral Evaluation

The chi-square test revealed no significant relation between culture and moral evaluation,  $\chi^2(2, N=40) = 1.69, p = .43$ . As expected, rural adolescents ( $M = 1.70, SD = 0.80$ ) and urban adolescents ( $M = 2.0, SD = 0.79$ ) alike deemed sex work mostly morally wrong. As we shall see in the section



that follows, some core Thai values informed the moral evaluations of both participant groups. And yet, there were also important distinctions in the cultural values that informed the moral evaluations of each group.

### *Moral Values*

*Virtuousness supports distinct values.* Rural and urban adolescents alike suggested that sex work is not a virtuous job. Though both participant groups highlighted the expectation that women in particular should exercise sexual restraint, the reasons why sexual restraint was deemed important diverged across participant groups.<sup>4</sup>

*Rural adolescents.* Rural adolescents reasoned that sex work is not a virtuous job because it violates divinity and women's dignity. This participant group commonly expressed that sex work contradicts Buddhist morality in general, and Buddhist precepts more specifically. Indeed, even the two rural adolescents who did not self-identify as Buddhist (one Christian, one Muslim) reasoned that sex work is immoral because it violates Buddhist values.

One concern frequently raised by this participant group was that sex work is inconsistent with the third precept, which mandates sexual responsibility. In particular, rural adolescents considered sex work to be sexually irresponsible if the client or the sex worker already had a partner or spouse. Some participants explained this concern succinctly, stating, for example, "If they become a mistress, then it is against the third Buddhist precept." Others offered a detailed explanation of this religious violation, and nested it alongside a past in which Thai women were more physically reserved and sexually restrained. One participant explained:

[Sex work] is immoral because it isn't in accordance with item 3 of the 5 precepts. Thai women should preserve their purity (รักษานวลสงวนตัว: *rak-nuan samuan-thua*)—they shouldn't do this kind of work. Women should be smart and thoughtful. . . In the past, committing adultery was forbidden because women and men followed traditional customs. They weren't even permitted to hold hands.

Upstanding Thai women, according to this line of reasoning, follow traditional customs by abstaining from sex until marriage and remaining loyal to one's spouse. By adhering to religious expectations, women preserve their purity—and their dignity.

Dignity was frequently invoked as a moral good among this participant group. Even the rural adolescents who reported knowing at least one person who engages in some form of sex work, and understood that they were driven to this work because of financial difficulties, typically ultimately deemed sex work as immoral because it threatens the sex worker's dignity. One participant who had friends that engaged in sex work explained that the job is "dignity-depriving." Another reasoned simply that sex work is immoral because "it doesn't look good."

Rural adolescents commonly reasoned that women should avoid sex work because sexual activity invites a critical and unforgiving gaze from others. These beliefs, alongside a devotion to divinity, underpinned their reasoning about why people—particularly women—should maintain sexual purity and practice sexual responsibility.

*Urban adolescents.* Urban adolescents reasoned that sex work violates rules of law and of romantic love. Discussions about the legality of sex work tended to be rather brief, with participants simply noting that sex work is immoral because it is against the law. Some even contrasted Thailand's laws with the laws of other countries, reasoning that "In the Netherlands, it's legal, it's OK. But in Thailand, it's illegal." For urban adolescents, moral ethics are tightly tethered to that which is sanctioned—and unsanctioned—by the government.

Urban adolescents also spoke about informal rules that govern romantic relationships, reasoning that sex work is wrong because it violates a foundation of romantic love: sexual fidelity. Some explained simply that sex work is immoral because “to be moral, we have to love only one.” Urban adolescents often drew attention to women’s role in upholding sexual fidelity and interpersonal commitment. One participant explained, “I’m not a woman, but I can think in their thoughts. I think women want to have one husband, one love. . .it’s better to have only one love like they did before.” Another participant reasoned that women inherently desire a committed and loving relationship, and that sex work—which entails sex outside of a committed romantic relationship—is unfair for women for this reason:

I think all they want [is to] find true love. . .Girls don’t want to have sex with boys that just want to have fun—just pay money. . .She doesn’t love [him], she has to sell her body. It’s not fair for girls.

Romantic love is also a virtue that, for some urban adolescents, exempted sex work from being exclusively morally wrong. Asked if there are times when sex work is not morally wrong, one participant responded, “It depends on them. If they want to, if they love each other, that’s OK.” For him, the idealization of romantic love renders sex work morally acceptable if the sex worker and client love one another.

*Shame for self and society.* Rural and urban adolescents alike framed sex work as a shameful job that is reputation-threatening. The focus of whose reputation is threatened, however, varied across communities.

*Rural adolescents.* Rural adolescents commonly suggested that sex work is wrong because in not respecting Thai traditions, they lose respect from others. Beyond focusing on the shame that sex workers bring to themselves, they also discussed the shame this work brings to a variety of community members and social contexts surrounding those engaging in this line of work. Framing the sex worker as nested in proximal (family, school, village) and distal (country) contexts, this participant group discussed the implications of sex work for each of those contexts.

Rural adolescents overwhelmingly focused on the family’s reputation and psychological well-being. One rural adolescent, for instance, explained that sex work is immoral because village members would likely notify the sex worker’s parents about their child’s profession, which would bring shame to the sex worker’s family. She said, “Parents, they—what is it?—there will be people telling their parents, and they’ll feel ashamed.” As illustrated in this quotation, rural adolescents perceive sex work as a profession that tarnishes not only individual-level dignity (as discussed in the previous theme), but also tarnishes the reputation and threatens the psychological well-being of the family—both the family of the sex worker and of the potential family of the sex worker’s clients.

Emphasizing the well-being of the families of sex workers’ clients, one rural adolescent suggested that “the people coming to her might have a family already, and it’s morally wrong for his children and wife.” Another explained:

Parents want their children to be a good person. If they do sex work and the [client] already has a family, that violates the third precept, causing other people’s family trouble. . .It makes others look at them badly and discredits their profile. People will look at [sex workers] like they’re bad people. Wherever they go, they’ll be gossiped about.

In addition to threatening the well-being of the sex worker’s and client’s families, moral concerns about the reputation of the sex worker in their community are featured. So too are concerns about violating core Buddhist virtues (as discussed in the first theme).

Beyond emphasizing the shame brought to the family and their loss of dignity in the eyes of the community, some rural adolescents suggested that sex workers bring shame to their school and set bad examples for others. One such participant explained that women “should do good things for society. . . for the institution.” Asked what institution she had in mind, she clarified that sex workers negatively impact the reputation of their educational institutions. In turn, several rural adolescents expressed concerns that sex workers cannot be turned to as role models because they set bad examples that others may follow. Members of this participant group believed that others’ views of people are important, and that moral—and immoral—behaviors are learned from others.

Finally, some rural adolescents focused on the gaze of non-Thais and discussed the shame that sex workers bring to the country. Suggesting that sex workers are responsible for a negative international reputation, one participant explained that the pervasiveness of sex work in Thailand “makes others look at Thais in a bad way.” Another participant was similarly concerned that sex work “deteriorates society” and “brings a bad reputation to our country.”

*Urban adolescents.* Whereas Thailand’s international reputation was one of the many reputational layers that rural adolescents discussed, urban adolescents turned their gaze to this single, broadest reputational layer. This participant group expressed concerns about the shame that sex workers bring to Thailand as a whole.

Highlighting the tarnished reputation of the nation when considering why sex work is morally wrong, one adolescent explained, “It gives Thailand a bad image—well, foreigners look at Thai women in a bad way. When I was in Pattaya,<sup>5</sup> I was shocked!” Others acknowledged that Thailand’s international reputation for sex work might draw foreigners to Thailand. One participant explained that this is problematic because “It makes Thailand out to be the land of sex. . . It makes foreigners think we’re like that, because sex workers were popular in other countries and foreigners come to Thailand, especially to Pattaya, to—yea—to buy [sex].”

Urban adolescents explained that the national stigma that emerges from the normalization of sex work is bad for Thailand. As one participant said, “It’s not good for society. If we see it a lot, right?—others will come to see, ‘Oh, Thailand is like this?’ It makes things worse.” Deriving their moral judgments in part from invoking the gaze and perspective of foreigners, urban adolescents perceive sex work as morally wrong because it endangers Thailand’s international reputation. Some urban adolescents drew attention to internal tensions they experience with regard to simultaneously valuing Thailand’s international reputation and individual rights (detailed in the next theme). One participant explained this tension:

I think—I thought [it was] their right to be a prostitute, but. . . I feel ashamed when foreigners say that Thailand is for prostitutes, like, “If you want a woman to sleep with, just come to Thailand and take some girl off the street.”

As this quotation illustrates, urban adolescents overwhelmingly perceive sex work and sex workers as perpetuating a problematic image of Thais and of Thailand.

*Relational versus autonomous choice.* Rural and urban adolescents alike discussed the morality of sex work as contingent on the presence or absence of choice. Framings of whether choice rendered sex work moral or immoral, and the particular kind of choice emphasized, however, differed across cultural lines.

*Rural adolescents.* For rural adolescents, sex work is deemed morally right—or at least morally understandable—if doing so is either *not* a personal choice or if it is a choice that is interdependently made and that serves interdependent aims. For this participant group, sex work is morally justifiable if the person does not really want to engage in this line of work, but does so because

financial circumstances necessitate it. An important consequence of sex work, according to rural adolescents, is that the money earned from it supports the sex worker's family.

Rural adolescents often emphasized that sex work is not exclusively morally wrong if one is driven to this work because their family is poor. As one participant explained, "It depends on their necessity and if they really need the money. . . sometimes their parents may not have money for them." Another said that sex work is morally right if "they don't really *want* to do this job. . . but they don't have money and it's necessary to do this job." According to this reasoning, sex work is justifiable if it is not grounded in autonomous choice—but rather the circumstances demand it.

Others suggested that sex work is acceptable if the choice to engage in this work is made with the aim of serving others. Rural adolescents foregrounded the needs of the group—and particularly the family—when considering acceptable choicefulness. Such a perspective at times rendered it difficult for rural adolescents to take a definitive moral stance on sex work. On the one hand, rural adolescents deemed this profession morally objectionable because it brings shame and psychological distress to the families of sex workers and their clients. On the other hand, they deemed this profession morally acceptable—or at least, understandable—because it can financially assist sex workers' families. One rural adolescent explained, "It's not right or wrong, as they do it. . . to buy stuff to support their family. The downside, which is wrong, is that they destroy other families—making other families suffer." Importantly, the justifications given for both the morally acceptability and unacceptability of sex work revolve around its impact on families.

Another rural adolescent similarly framed choice as nested within a broader family system. She explained that some people engage in sex work for the good of, and because it is sanctioned by, their family:

They might not have other choices. They're under pressure from family and stuff. . . There's this one [classmate], when she had to participate in school activities, she couldn't make it. But to go [coyote] dancing, she could do it. She can wear little clothes and her father allows her to go, but to participate in school activities like group work, her father doesn't want her to come.

Embedded in this reasoning is the understanding that family needs may come before personal needs and guide one's choices. Sex work and sex work adjacent activities such as coyote dancing (dancing seductively in bars and clubs, which may occur alongside sex work) are perceived as a necessary choice for some to make, as opportunities are limited and the family must be supported.

In fact, rural adolescents considered a range of social others when discussing their perspectives of sex work. Beyond speaking about the impact of sex work on sex workers' families and clients' families, this participant group spoke about the role their teachers play in shaping their perspectives of this topic. One participant explained that her teacher facilitated a kind of evaluative softening by having her class read a case study about sex workers. She said:

They have their own reasons . . . but if we look only from outside, we'll just think that, "Why do they do that? It's not good at all!"—Something like this, right? Like, it's wrong according to the ethics of Thai people . . . But them doing [sex work]—that's because they need money to send to their family, or for their education, or the money is used to raise their children. Well, there are many thoughts.

Like this participant, rural adolescents often engaged in dialectical thinking, recognizing that there are at least two sides when considering the moral justifiability of sex work. One side views the choice to become a sex worker as wholly wrong because it is against cultural, religious, and family values; the other entails a sympathetic recognition of the situation which led the person to become a sex worker, and recognition that this line of work may enable individuals to fulfill financial responsibilities to impoverished families. For rural adolescents, choosing to become a sex worker is understandable if its purpose is to serve the family.

*Urban adolescents.* Whereas rural adolescents emphasized interdependent choicefulness, urban adolescents idealized independent choicefulness, suggesting that the choice to engage in sex work is morally acceptable only if it is independently and agentially chosen. That is, this participant group deemed sex work justifiable if engaging in this work reflects a decision based on autonomous free will.

One participant succinctly explained, “I think sex work is OK—it’s your choice, your way.” Like her, urban adolescents commonly expressed that choices should be grounded in autonomous desires and with the aim of pursuing personal satisfaction. Highlighting the personal authority that individuals have to choose a profession, one participant suggested that sex work is not immoral when individuals enjoy it: “I think it’s OK. [If] they’re satisfied doing this job . . . I think it’s their right to be a prostitute.” Another similarly explained, “I feel like maybe they choose this job—maybe she’s happy doing it.”

For this participant group, the moral uprightness of sex work was evaluated in terms of whether or not it is volitional. According to this logic, sex work is morally acceptable if it represents an autonomous choice, and morally unacceptable if the decision to engage in this line of work is not autonomous. Some participants directly contrasted the presence and absence of individual choice, deeming the absence of choice as problematic. One adolescent explained, “I think if she wants to do it, it’s okay. But if someone forces a lady to do it, it’s bad.” Another said, “I think it’s OK if they are satisfied to do this job. I think it’s not OK if they were forced to do it.”<sup>6</sup> For this participant group, contemplating options and making decisions for oneself was a moral priority. Urban adolescents’ dialectical thinking revolved around prioritizing individual choice and problematizing obligation and coercion.

Revealed in urban adolescent moral reasoning is a paradox of choice. On the one hand, individuals were recognized as having the right to choose sex work if it brings personal satisfaction; on the other hand, sex work was deemed morally wrong because other choices are available. One participant stated, “Well, I’m not really agreeing with people who do it because there must be something else they can do other than selling sex.” Urban adolescents simultaneously perceive choice as an ultimate moral good, and perceive the choice to engage in sex work as morally wrong because of the presence of other professional choices.

Some urban adolescents recognized that sex workers may lack choices. One participant stated, “They don’t have choices—[they] have a background of a poor family and lack education.” This participant went on to explain, however, that becoming a sex worker in order to provide for one’s family is wrong because it is not an entirely willful choice. Among those who recognized that some individuals become sex workers in order to assist their family, the absence of individual, and agential choicefulness rendered sex work morally wrong in such a case.

## Discussion

While rural and urban Thai adolescents agreed that sex work is mostly morally wrong, the cultural values upon which they drew to reason about the immorality and morality of sex work diverged. Importantly, though, data also point to convergences in cultural values across samples. Taken together, results suggest cultural value continuity in the face of sociocultural change, and speak to the manner in which contextual realities (re)shape cultural values.

### *Continuity in the Face of Change*

In the first two themes, convergent cultural values among adolescents in each community are noteworthy. The first theme illustrates that rural and urban adolescents alike endorse Thai values of sexual conservatism and virtuous womanhood (Kanchanaga, 1979; Pinyuchon & Gray, 1997). This suggests that, even in the urban *Gesellschaft* context of Chiang Mai where young people are



exposed to and endorse global values of gender equality (Mahavongtrakul, 2020; McKenzie, 2020a), traditional cultural values are preserved. The second theme illustrates that adolescents in both communities mobilized Thai values of shame avoidance and reputation maintenance to evaluate the (im)morality of sex work (Pinyuchon & Gray, 1997; Ukosakul, 1999).

The endorsement of Thai values of sexual purity for women, shame avoidance, and reputation maintenance, alongside the shared moral evaluations of sex work, in the less globalized rural community and the more globalized urban community point to stability in cultural values in the face of sociodemographic and sociocultural change. These findings align with research which suggests that, while globalization pushes cultural values in the direction of Western ideologies, the process of cultural value change is gradual and does not necessitate local value eradication (Hansen et al., 2012; Huntsinger et al., 2019; Kaasa & Minkov, 2020; Manago, 2012; Manago & Pacheco, 2019; McKenzie, 2020a; McKenzie et al., 2019a). Findings therefore do not neatly align with Greenfield's (2009) hypothesis that traditional values are replaced by modern values as communities undergo sociocultural change. Rather, local values are to some extent reworked such that they align with global values (Gibbons et al., 1997; McKenzie, 2020a; Rao et al., 2013). The divergent values that co-occurred alongside core Thai values for adolescents in each community, however, speak to the influence of contextual realities. This is a point to which we now turn.

### *Contextual Realities (Re)Shape Cultural Values*

The distinct values endorsed and reasoning processes utilized by rural and urban adolescents in this study point to how cultural values are customized according to sociodemographic ecology (Greenfield, 2009, 2014) and speak to cultural value transformation in the globalizing Thai context. Theme one points to distinct value sets that underlie rural and urban adolescents' prioritization of sexual restraint. Rural adolescents reasoned about the importance of women's sexual restraint in particular by aligning that Thai value with other Thai values related to divinity and dignity. This participant group emphasized that sex work violates core Buddhist virtues—namely, the third precept which bans sexual misconduct. While past research has pointed to the integration of religion in rural Thai adolescents' everyday realities (McKenzie et al., 2019b), the present study shows how other core Thai values are psychologically linked to religion in this *Gemeinschaft* community.

Urban adolescents never tied sexual restraint to maintaining women's dignity, and infrequently tied sexual restraint to the importance of upholding religious virtues. The few who mentioned religion in the context of sex work discussed religion in vague terms (e.g., "It's against the morality of Buddhism") and discussed the violation of religious law alongside the violation of governmental law ("Sex work is against Buddhist morality and is illegal"). In addition to psychologically linking the importance of sexual restraint with the rule of law, urban adolescents also highlighted the role of sexual restraint in the context of romantic love—reasoning that sex should occur only in the context of established romantic love.

Although cross-cultural research suggests that romantic love is a universal (or a near universal) emotion, the emphasis placed on it and psychological experience of it is culturally influenced (De Munck et al., 2016; Karandashev, 2015; McKenzie & Xiong, 2021). About the emergence of the "romantic love complex" in northwestern Europe in the 17th and 18th centuries, McFarlane (2018) writes that romantic love is a "side-effect of the dissolution of feudal, peasant society and the emergence of the market principles of capitalism, of increasing individualism and individual property" (p. 126). In more recent years, the idealization of romantic love has been heavily popularized and spread via Western-dominated films and media. As new media are more integrated in the lives of young people growing up in urban than in rural Thai settings (McKenzie et al., under review), urban youth are likely more exposed to messaging about romantic love ideals.

The current study suggests that romantic love is indeed a salient value among adolescents residing in the urban *Gesellschaft* ecology. This marks a rather different take on love and



marriage than has traditionally been emphasized in Thailand, where the phrase “*dteng-naan gap krop-krua*” (แต่งงานกับครอบครัว), which literally translates to “marrying the family,” is commonly heard. This pervasive phrase illustrates the traditional belief that love and marriage occurs between two families, rather than between two people. For urban adolescents, romantic love and partnership is predicated on emotional connection between two people; indeed, attaching the local value of sexual restraint to the more global value of romantic love enables the maintenance of this cultural value even in a more globalized setting.

Rural and urban adolescents alike emphasized concerns about sex work as resulting in tarnished reputation, as seen in theme two. The focus on whose reputation is endangered by this profession, however, diverged across cultural lines. Rural adolescents primarily expressed concerns about shame and reputation on a local scale, reasoning that sex work is immoral because it brings shame to and reflects poorly on the family (Pinyuchon & Gray, 1997). Urban adolescents, on the other hand, exclusively expressed concerns about the shame that sex work brings to Thailand as a nation. This finding should be understood alongside urban adolescents’ embeddedness in a *Gesellschaft* environment and corresponding frequent exposure to foreigners—both in person and via mass media (McKenzie, 2020a). The global frames of reference that urban adolescents experience likely contribute to their global adaptation of the local value of shame avoidance and reputation management. As with the first theme, we see that urban adolescents psychologically adapt the local value of shame avoidance and reputation maintenance by aligning it with a more global orientation.

Theme three indicates that both participant groups emphasized choice when considering the morality of sex work. They had different ideas, however, about what *kind* of choice rendered the profession morally acceptable (or at least morally understandable). Rural adolescents framed sex work as valid if it is not an autonomous choice—either because it is financially necessary, or because the choice is relational in nature, or both. Among youth in this community, it is reasonable to engage in morally unacceptable behaviors (such as sex work) if those behaviors contribute to the well-being of others—particularly the (sex worker’s) family. This perspective aligns with the perspective of Thai sex workers themselves, who report feeling prideful about supporting their family with money earned through this work (Amendral, 2021; Ariyabuddhiphongs & Li, 2012). Rural adolescents’ emphasis on relational choice should be understood alongside traditional Thai values of interdependence, family loyalty, and filial piety (Kanchanachitra, 2014; Thanakwang, 2015), as well as their residence in a poorer *Gemeinschaft* community where sex work is a plausible—and indeed, familiar—way of helping one’s family live a better life.

“Relational choice” may strike some Western readers, for whom choice is necessarily autonomous in nature, as an oxymoron. Yet research with ethnically diverse samples in the U.S. points to the influence of culture on perspectives of choice. Iyengar and Lepper (1999), for instance, found that while Anglo American children were more intrinsically motivated when making personal choices, Asian American children were more intrinsically motivated when choices were made by relevant in-group members. Among Anglo American children, Iyengar and Lepper (1999) argue, personal choices serve not only to “express and receive one’s personal preference, but also [give] a chance to establish one’s unique self-identity” (p. 363). Among Asian American children, meanwhile, having choices made by in-group members may be preferred because “it provides a greater opportunity to promote harmony and to fulfill the goal of belonging to a group” (Iyengar & Lepper, 1999, p. 363). Like Asian Americans, rural Thai adolescents’ value of relational choice guides their judgment that sex work can be a pragmatic decision in cases in which family interdependence is at the core.

Urban Thai adolescents’ choice discourse, meanwhile, aligned more with the Anglo American children in Iyengar and Lepper’s (1999) research. That is, urban adolescents believed that sex work can be a valid profession if it is volitional. Among youth in the urban Thai community, valued choices are those that are derived from and reflect individual sovereignty and autonomous desire. This finding should be understood alongside the global spread of *Gesellschaft*-adapted

values of independence, autonomy, personal choice, and self-fulfillment (Abu Aleon et al., 2019; Greenfield, 2009; Kaasa & Minkov, 2020; Manago, 2014; Moghadam, 2003; Nsamenang, 2002; Rosenberger, 2001; Weinstock et al., 2015).

Findings suggest that local Thai values are endorsed by adolescents living in variously globalized Thai environments. In the more globalized urban context, those local values are adapted to align with global values of autonomous agency and choice, an emphasis on romantic love, and an international orientation. While urban Thai adolescents endorse values for gender and sexuality that prioritize personal choice and self-fulfillment, as do young people in other globalized world regions (Abu Aleon et al., 2019; Manago, 2014; Moghadam, 2003; Nsamenang, 2002; Rosenberger, 2001; Weinstock et al., 2015), they simultaneously maintain expectations of “virtuous (Thai) womanhood” and accompanying expectations of sexual purity and conservatism (Kanchanaga, 1979; Klunklin & Greenwood, 2005). Urban-dwelling Thai adolescents, then, preserve traditional Thai values by aligning them with global values that are more adaptive in a *Gesellschaft* context.

## **Limitations and Future Directions**

Four key limitations of this study should be noted. Rural and urban Thai environments were included as *Gemeinschaft*–*Gesellschaft* proxies to help us understand how changing sociodemographic ecologies influence cultural values. Given the overwhelming transformation in the *Gesellschaft* direction around the world (Greenfield, 2009), including the perspectives of those in communities at different points of the globalization continuum enables tentative conclusions to be drawn about cultural value continuity and change in the *Gemeinschaft*-to-*Gesellschaft* transition. It is important to note, however, that longitudinal research and cohort studies will be necessary to definitively speak about value maintenance and transformation.

Second, the focus exclusively on sex workers (and not other relevant persons in the sex industry) and the focus on sex work more generally likely influenced the values elicited. For this reason, the local and global values discussed by adolescents in the present study should not be presumed to capture the full range of values endorsed by members of these northern Thai communities. Future work should elicit a range of values by inquiring about other relevant individuals involved in the sex industry (e.g., those buying sex, sex traffickers) and by examining adolescents’ perspectives of other culturally salient issues.

Third, rural adolescents were personally familiar with sex workers in a way that urban adolescents were not. These differences are likely tied to the distinct economic circumstances in the rural and urban settings. It is possible that degree of personal familiarity with sex workers influenced the values from which adolescents drew to reason about the morality of sex work. It is noteworthy, however, that rural adolescents’ familiarity with sex workers did not appear to make them any more or less accepting of this kind of work (as revealed in the moral evaluation analysis).

Finally, the first author—who has extensive experience in Thailand and speaks Thai, but is not ethnically Thai—was present for all interviews. It is possible that her presence could have elicited participants’ thinking about global values—particularly among urban adolescents, who often requested to be interviewed in English. Though doing so would to some degree strip participants of their agency, future research could mandate a single interview language and have a single interviewer. As previously noted, multiple procedures were employed to establish validity in this qualitative project. Future research, however, would benefit from employing additional validity procedures such as member checking and auditing (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

## **Conclusion**

Findings highlight that Thai adolescents with varying exposure to globalization and to sex work converge on their judgment that this job is mostly morally unacceptable. Across variously

globalized communities, adolescents drew from Thai values of virtuous womanhood, shame avoidance, and reputation maintenance to reason about why this job is morally wrong. Importantly, though, adolescents in the globalized urban community psychologically linked these local values to global values of autonomous choice, romantic love, and international concerns. In the urban context, then, traditional Thai values were preserved via their perceived alignment with global values. Adolescents in the nearby less globalized rural community bound these local Thai values together with other Thai values of relational choice, women's dignity, and Buddhist divinity. Rural-dwelling adolescents centered familial needs and well-being, simultaneously deeming sex work immoral because it brings shame to the family and moral because it supports the family financially. More broadly, this study calls attention to how contextual realities shape—and reshape—cultural and moral values in this rapidly globalizing nation.

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### Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

### Notes

1. “Related Questions” (also known as “People Also Ask”) are questions generated by Google based on common search queries.
2. To protect the identities of those in this small district, “Mae Kiaw” is a pseudonym.
3. To ensure a sufficiently “urban” sample in Chiang Mai, only those adolescents who lived in a 10-mile radius of their school (located in the city center) were eligible to participate. In rural Mae Kiaw, it was necessary to expand the radius to 20 miles given that it was the only high school in the district.
4. Though the interview questions did not refer to sex workers' sex, participants unanimously referred to females when speaking about sex workers.
5. Pattaya is a coastal city just south of Bangkok that is known for its thriving sex industry.
6. When speaking about being “forced” into sex work, some urban adolescents referred to individuals being pushed into sex work to financially support their family; others referred to individuals being lured into commercial sexual exploitation.

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