THE SOCIAL RISKS OF PREMARITAL SEX
AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS IN BEIRUT:
STRATEGIES AND NEGOTIATIONS

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The moment we realize that we constantly construct our multiple realities which we live and flourish in, we will then be able to appreciate and acknowledge our differences, our subjectivities, and be open to question truth, objectivities, values, identities and so on.

Only then, we will be able to see the world with multiple lenses.
ABSTRACT

The Social Risks of Premarital Sex among University Students in Beirut: Strategies and Negotiations

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This thesis examines the social risks university students in Beirut associate with premarital sex, as well as exploring the various strategies they employ when dealing with these risks. Based on 34 in-depth semi-structured interviews with 18 female and 16 male students, this study contributes to sociological research in two main ways. First, it goes beyond the sexual health-risk paradigm, which dominates academic scholarship, and instead enhances our understanding and conceptualisation of ‘sexual behaviour’ and of ‘risk’ by addressing the issue of premarital sex from a ‘social risk’ perspective. Second, it explores premarital sex in a religiously and demographically diverse, yet relatively conservative and patriarchal context. It does this without merely focusing on ‘Muslim women’ and ‘honour killings’ – two of the most featured aspects in the literature. The thesis also draws on Mary Douglas’s socio-cultural work on risk, along with sociological work on gender and power.

The findings indicate that decisions about engaging in, or refraining from, premarital sex are shaped by social pressures and control, and dictated by social norms and moral values. Transgressing the latter imposes social risks, which were perceived in three main ways: Moral risk, where one’s respect and reputation might be jeopardised as a result of transgressing social expectations and moral boundaries; Shared risk, where one’s loss of moral reputation might expose one’s family to social shame, blame and dishonour; and Future risk, where women might become ‘unmarriageable’, once they lose their virginity (intact-hymen) or reputation. The findings also reveal that students negotiate their sexual lives and respond to these risks using various strategies, including: a) negotiating non-vaginal-penetrative sex and intimacy, b) undergoing hymen reconstruction, c) performing purity and chastity and d) negotiating temporary religious marriages. The findings demonstrate that, although sexual behaviour can lead to social exclusion, students manage these risks carefully to protect themselves and their families.
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CHAPTER 1
Introduction: setting the scene

In this chapter, I introduce the research topic and its objectives. I outline the rationale behind the research, indicating its links with the relevant literature. I explain my interest in conducting this research study, and highlight its original contribution. I then provide a thesis outline, presenting a brief introduction to each of the thesis chapters.

1.1 Introduction and rational

In the past four years, living in the UK, I often had friends, colleagues, acquaintances and other people asking me about my research topic: "So what's your Ph.D. about?!" “It's on the social risks of premarital sex among university students in Beirut." I usually answered them briefly, and I would pause for a few seconds, checking for signs of facial or verbal interest, before elaborating further on my research topic. What caught my attention, at these times, was the number of puzzled facial expressions I received as an immediate reaction, especially from European friends and acquaintances with no mixed cultural background. I then used to jump straight into explaining more about the social context of Beirut, the capital of Lebanon, where my study was carried out so it would sound more sensible to them. ‘Health risks’, they thought, made more sense, but ‘social risks’ were not necessarily on their radar. Conversely, my British friends with Asian origins, such as Indians and Pakistanis, seemed to easily relate to my research topic and even identified some of their own similar stories, which they themselves had either experienced or had heard about within their own communities in the UK. These minimal conversational interactions reflected our disparate and diverse interpretations of our multiple socially constructed realities.

Literature on premarital sex among young people in industrialised countries, in the west, holds that having a sexual relationship is, on the whole, a socially acceptable form of
behaviour and is generally perceived to be a personal decision and choice (Widmer, Treas and Newcomb, 1998; Wells and Twenge, 2005; Pew research center, 2014). In Lebanon, a religiously and demographically diverse (Corstange, 2012; Harris, 2009; Shehadeh, 2010), yet relatively conservative and patriarchal society (El-Kak, 2013; Accad, 1990), engaging in premarital sex, among never-married individuals, carries, besides the associated health risk, significant social risks, specifically for young women (Yasmine et al, 2015). Sex and sexuality are a taboo subject (DeJong and El-Khoury, 2006), and honour related values are somewhere embedded within the Lebanese culture (Rbeiz and Harb, 2010; Baydoun, 2011-2012). At the same time, Lebanon, one of the smallest Arab country in the Middle East, is not a typical, traditional Islamic society, like the majority of the countries in the Arab World. It has its differential characteristics which make up its unique social, cultural, and political structure (Harris, 2009). These characteristics include its religious and demographic diversity which embraces a significant Christian population; and its free-state religion. Lebanon also adopts a considerably democratic political system (Harris, 2009), and has a relatively liberal lifestyle, despite its moderately traditional and patriarchal culture (Khalaf, 2006). I will elaborate on these characteristics in detail in the next chapter.

Moreover, in a rapidly changing world, the large scale of societal changes – caused by modernisation and globalisation (Assaad and Roudi-Fahimi, 2007; Wellings et al, 2006; El-Kak et al, 2001) are continuing to take place, in the last few decades. These societal changes have included a changing trend in sexual behaviours, attitudes and perceptions (Wellings et al, 2006). Whilst social change is inevitably a part of society, it is argued that, as a consequence of modernisation and globalisation, the speed of social change has increased, and the consequences of such change have intensified in the Arab world (El-Kak, 2013). Young people, in general, are those most affected by this change (Assaad and Roudi-Fahimi, 2007; Wellings et al, 2006; El-Kak et al, 2001). They are more involved in sexual relationships outside marriage than before (Wells and Twenge, 2005). Lebanon is no exception. It does not exist in isolation from countries affected by globalisation and societal change, especially in light of contemporary global open access to the internet and satellite dispersed media (El-Kak, 2013). The latter has helped to vastly spread and transfer, what is perceived to be, “western cultural norms”, such as attitudes to morality, sexuality, and
women's liberation, from more liberal to more conservative societies (Aghacy, 2006). This has occurred at a time when conservative societies were not necessarily well prepared to deal with these newly imported modernised concepts. Any lack of preparedness was a result of the absence of sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) policies, inadequate research, and, most importantly, lack of comprehensive sex education curricula and programs in and out of schools (Assaad and Roudi-Fahimi, 2007; DeJong et al, 2015; DeJong and El-Khoury, 2006).

Besides, there has been a significant shift in the ‘Singulate mean age at marriage’ (SMAM) among the Lebanese between 1970 and 2007, according to the United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2015), where the mean age increased from 28.5 to 32.3 for males and from 23.2 to 28.3 for females, respectively. This is one of the highest mean ages at marriage in the Middle East (El-Kak, 2013). It is also estimated that 20% of Lebanese women, aged between 35 and 39, are still unmarried (Roudi-Fahimi and Kent, 2007). Some relate this shift to increased enrolment in higher education and increased employment, especially for women (Roudi-Fahimi and Kent, 2007; Rashad, Osman, and Roudi-Fahimi, 2005; El Feki, 2015). The shift has also been perceived in relation to the poor economy and the high expense of contemporary marriage (Roudi-Fahimi and Kent, 2007). Delayed marriage, in many countries, has led to an increased prevalence of premarital sexual intercourse (Wellings et al, 2006; El Feki, 2015). This prevalence was higher among men than women, and higher in developed countries than developing countries (Wellings et al, 2006). Moreover, delayed marriage and difficult economic conditions indicate that young people go into a ‘waithood’ phase, which Singerman (2013) refers to as ‘a ‘prolonged adolescence’, as a result of delayed marriage, delayed employment, delayed independence, and sometimes delayed adulthood (Singerman, 2013; Joseph, 2011). Therefore, societal change caused by globalisation, delayed marriage, changing social roles for women, and the overall tough economic situation have contributed to an extended time-lapse between puberty and marriage. This has increased the likelihood of premarital sexual relationships in a setting where societal and cultural norms define sexual rights and choices, and legitimise sex only within the official institution of marriage (El Feki, 2015).
This was evident in an increased number of works investigating different aspects of premarital sex and sexual debut among university students in Lebanon in recent years. Findings from these research studies revealed that young people in Lebanon are engaging in premarital sex with significantly higher percentages of sexual activity among males compared to females (for example, Salameh et al, 2015; Salameh et al, 2014; Ghandour et al, 2014; Yasmine et al, 2015; Awwad et al, 2013; Barbour and Salameh, 2009).

Yet, in Lebanon, little attention is given to young people, in general, and little is known about their sexuality and their sexual behaviours. On one hand, they are the least targeted and least recognised population by the government. This lack of recognition is evident in the absence of sex-education and programs in school curricula, as well as the absence of governmental services or policies tailored towards young people (DeJong et al, 2005; Baydoun, 2008). On the other hand, sex-related matters are an under-researched area, specifically among Lebanese adolescents and unmarried young people. Access difficulties, the age of consent, response rates and securing a robust representative sample, remain some of the major challenges to researchers, amongst others, due to the sensitivity of the topic and the social taboos surrounding it. Yet, despite all these challenges, the fact that more researchers are being able to look at this area is interesting in itself, as it suggests that the society is acknowledging that there has been a change in sexual norms. These studies help in assessing the situation, and fill in some gaps in terms of informing research and providing data. However, the picture remains unclear and the research gap is still immense.

All the above cited research studies were quantitative. They aimed to assess the situation rather than getting an in-depth understating of it. Almost all the cited studies suggest that some young people in Lebanon are having premarital sex, yet not without some risk. Engagement in premarital sex among never-married individuals is not merely associated with sexual health risks (for example, contracting sexually transmitted infections (STIs) and HIV, unintended pregnancies, unsafe abortion and sexual violence). This is especially so when one takes into consideration the absence of proper and comprehensive sex education in and out of schools. Premarital sex also implies significant social risks, specifically for young women, due to the still traditionally conservative sexual norms and
patriarchal structure of a society that places a high emphasis on women’s virginity in the form of ‘preserving the intact hymen’ (Yasmine et al, 2015; Awwad et al, 2013). The gradually developing body of research on sex and sexuality in Lebanon in the past few years has focused mainly on assessing youth knowledge, attitudes and health-risk behaviours towards premarital sex and sexual debut (for example, Salameh et al, 2015; Salameh et al, 2014; Ghandour et al, 2014; Yasmine et al, 2015; Awwad et al, 2013; Barbour and Salameh, 2009). However, studies which give special attention to the social risks associated with premarital sexual behaviour have remained limited (for example, Yasmine et al, 2015; Awwad et al, 2013). Some of these studies, though, recommend the conducting of further qualitative research for future studies (Yasmine et al, 2015). Therefore, among other sexuality-related areas of study, the value of investigating the under-researched area of social risk, should not be undermined because social risk impacts the overall sexual health and wellbeing of young people. With this in mind, my research study focuses on exploring the specific, perceived social risks associated with the engagement in premarital sex among young Lebanese.

1.2 Aim and objectives of the research study

The overall aim, therefore, of my qualitative research study, is to contribute to the existing knowledge on issues related to the social risks of engaging in premarital sex among never-married heterosexual university students in Beirut. The study examines the different aspects of social risks which university students associate with premarital sex. The study also explores the various strategies and negotiations students employ in dealing with these risks. The importance of gender in understanding the research is also assessed throughout the data analysis. The research objectives are to:

- Explore the attitudes of university students towards premarital sex
- Identify the social risks associated with the engagement in premarital sex for both female and male participants
- Explore the strategies and negotiations students employ when managing these social risks
• Understand the underlying issues, which influence and shape students’ decisions in taking risks (that is, their decision to engage in or refrain from having premarital sex)
• Assess gender differences in students’ strategies and decisions

1.3 Research questions

My main research question is:
What social risks do university students in Beirut associate with premarital sex and how do they manage these social risks?

My research sub-questions are:
• What are the attitudes and behaviours of university students towards premarital sex?
• What are the underpinning issues, which may shape or influence students’ decisions in taking risks, as well as their ways of responding to these risks?
• How do gender differences and power relations influence these risks and ways of managing them?

To answer these research questions, I conducted and analysed 34 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 18 female and 16 male university students from diverse religious and socio-demographic backgrounds. I used the theoretical framework of risk to interpret my data and discuss my findings, with a specific focus on Mary Douglas’s socio-cultural work on risk. I also linked my findings to other sociological work on gender and power.

1.4 Research interest

Being a Lebanese woman strongly supportive of sexual health and rights, the social challenges and risks young people, particularly single Lebanese women, face, in terms of managing their sexual lives, always caught my attention. Research on sex and sexuality, in
challenging social contexts, has constantly triggered my curiosity and been of great interest to me since my early university years. This interest grew when I pursued my Masters in Public Health (Health Behaviour and Education) at the American University in Beirut (AUB), one of the leading academic and research institutions in the Middle East.

After my graduation, I worked as a research assistant and a senior research assistant at the Department of Health Promotion and Community Health (HPCH) at AUB. Being involved in different research projects for more than six years strengthened my research and analytical skills, and increased my knowledge of various research processes and research opportunities. This involvement also exposed me to the different challenges researchers in Lebanon face, and motivated me to pursue my postgraduate research studies in the area I am most passionate about: sex and sexuality.

I am known among my friends and social contacts for my interest in sexual health and support for sexual rights, as well as for my social connection with health professionals, including gynaecologists. I was often contacted by friends of friends or acquaintances to help refer them to a gynaecologist, either for an abortion or for hymen reconstruction. I was perceived as someone whom they could trust and whom they would not be judged by.

The dearth of research on sex and sexuality related matters was another motivating factor in my choice of research topic. In 2011, when I started my PhD studies, research conducted on sex and sexuality within the Lebanese context was scarce, but this was not due to a lack of research significance or lack of research interest. It was, rather, because interested researchers were facing major access challenges, as mentioned earlier, with the schools’ and universities’ administrations and sometimes even with the ministries of health and of education. These access challenges included: difficulty in acquiring ethical approval, the refusal of conducting such sensitive research in schools or universities’ premises, the banning of sex-related research questions, and the disapproval of parents (in case parents’ consent was required for pupils). Research publications on sexual attitudes, knowledge and behaviours among university students started to emerge gradually, with a significant increase between summer 2013 and December 2015, where at least five new peer-reviewed
articles were published (for example, Salameh et al, 2015; Salameh et al, 2014; Ghandour et al, 2014; Yasmine et al, 2015; Awwad et al, 2013). I believed that my research study represented an opportunity to contribute to this increasing body of knowledge, through filling the identified gaps in the literature.

On a side note, I must admit that when I first started my research studies at the Department of Sociology at the University of Leicester, my sociological background knowledge was rather limited. My initial research proposal represented a mixture of research interest in health and social risk before it was refined and focused with the proper guidance and feedback, mainly from my supervisor. At certain points, I had to introduce myself to some new friends and acquaintances like Beck, Giddens, Foucault, Weber, Durkheim, Butler, Douglas, Connell, Weeks and Goffman, among others, and familiarise myself with some of their work. Frankly, it was not an easy task. Yet, delving into matters of ’sex and sexuality’, from a ‘sociological’ perspective rather than a ‘public health’ perspective has been, and continues to be, such a challenging, inspiring and exciting process and experience. To me, this research study is a piece of work that has broadened my knowledge horizons, challenged my capabilities, stretched my boundaries, revealed my strengths and weaknesses, dismantled and reshuffled some of my convictions, provoked my critical thinking, tamed my ego, and contributed to my intellectual maturity in the process. For that, I feel proud.

1.5 Research originality and its added value

My research study contributes to a growing body of literature on risk in the field of sociology. Most of the empirical research on risk, which I came across in the sociological literature, focused either on environmental or health hazards. Only a limited number of studies addressed risk and sexuality. The ones that did address this subject area, essentially focused on the ‘health risks’ associated with sexually risky behaviours. However, little focus has been given to the ‘social risks’, or as some scholars referred to it, the ‘social consequences’ associated with engagement in, what might be perceived as, ‘promiscuous
sex’ (depending on the social context). A handful of qualitative studies were carried out in the Arab world and Middle Eastern countries. I elaborate more detail on these studies in the thesis’ literature review chapter. As such, the scarcity of the literature which has investigated the ‘social risk’ of sexual behaviour, positions my research study as adding value to the existing literature. My study suggests an innovative understanding of sexual behaviour and attitudes by applying a sociocultural view of risk.

In brief, the originality of my research is demonstrated in two central aspects. First, by looking at the ‘social risk’ of premarital sex, my research goes beyond the sexual health-risk paradigm, which dominates the academic scholarship. Therefore, it extends the sociologically oriented risk literature by applying its insights to a new area. Second, it explores premarital sex in a religiously and demographically diverse, yet relatively conservative and patriarchal, context without merely focusing on ‘Muslim women’ and ‘honour killing’ – two of the most featured aspects in the literature. As such, my research study provides a better understating and conceptualisation of the young people’s sexual behaviour in relatively conservative contexts. The findings of this study can be used as research evidence to build on further, future research, and eventually, influence political and maybe social change.

1.6 Thesis Outline

My thesis consists of nine chapters including an introduction chapter. Chapter 2 provides contextual background on the Lebanese sociocultural context, where my research study was carried out. First, I give a brief overview of the related history, which I think is essential in comprehending the complexity of Lebanon’s current political, social and economic situation. I then focus on explaining some of the central features of Lebanese society, which are imperative to understanding my key findings and analysis later in the thesis. This includes talking about the sectarian Lebanese society, social norms and gender roles, cosmetic surgery, family, marriage and dating.
Chapter 3 sheds light on some of the existing literature, which addresses topics on social risks of engaging in premarital sex in different cultural contexts, but which has a specific focus on the Expanded Middle East and North Africa (EMENA) region, including Lebanon. In this chapter, I explain the difficulty behind finding a definition of the ‘social risk’ concept in the literature, before I define it for the purpose of my study. I then provide a brief overview of the relevant literature in the EMENA, while addressing studies, which have highlighted the attitudes and behaviours of young people towards premarital sex. In this chapter, I also emphasise some of the key debates in the literature, which have addressed the subject of social risks of engaging in premarital sex, virginity and sexual boundaries, hymen reconstruction, and the emphasis on women’s looks and physical appearance.

Chapter 4 focuses on the theoretical aspects of the notion of ‘risk’. In this chapter, I provide an introductory overview of some of the most influential theoretical frameworks on risk in the field of sociology, namely, the work of Beck and Giddens on the ‘Risk Society’, Foucault on ‘Governmentality’, and the work Mary Douglas on ‘Risk and Danger’, as well as Douglas’ work on ‘Purity and Pollution’. Following this introductory overview, I explain why I mainly draw on Douglas’ socio-cultural approach to risk, while highlighting some the relevant components of her work. I then provide examples from relevant empirical studies which point out different approaches and understandings of risk in people’s everyday life. Through these examples I focus on the social constructionist approach to risk, gendered risk, and voluntary risk-taking. Finally, I discuss some works on constructed sexuality, as well as, gender and power.

Chapter 5 outlines the methodological approach taken during this research. I discuss the thesis’ research approach and design. I justify how I chose my target group and I explain how I developed my research questions. I also elaborate on the recruitment strategy, the field work and data collection process, and data analysis. Finally, I highlight issues on ethical considerations, reflexivity and research rigour.
Chapters 6, 7 and 8 are my findings chapters, where I present some of the core themes, which emerged in response to my research questions. In chapter 6, I present my participants’ general views and perceptions of themselves, their peers, and people of their age. I also address their attitudes towards premarital sex. I touch, to some extent, on their expressed fears and the dilemmas they face. This chapter provides a good explanation of the social context from the perspective of the young people, sets the ground for a better understanding of other sections of the thesis, and the themes identified within. It illustrates some of the underlying issues, which may shape or influence students’ decisions in taking risks, as well as their responses to these risks. In chapter 7, I explain how the notion of ‘risk’ was interpreted in my research study before moving on to address the three different types of perceived social risk, associated with premarital sex, as such: a) Moral risk, where one might suffer the loss of one’s reputation by transgressing social and moral expectations; b) Shared risk, where one’s loss of moral reputation might expose one’s family to social shame, blame and dishonour; and c) Future risk, where women might become ‘unmarriageable’, once they lose their virginity or reputation. In the last chapter of the findings, chapter 8, I focus on my participants’ responses to the social risks of premarital sex, and the strategies they employed to get around such risks. Examples of these strategies include negotiating sex and intimacy, undergoing hymen reconstruction, performing purity and chastity and negotiating temporary religious marriages. In these three chapters, I also shed light on some of the relevant underlying issues, such as gender inequality, trust, power relationships and social performance which were found to affect relationship dynamics, and influence students’ decisions in taking risks and the ways they responded to and managed these risks.

Chapter 9 is the discussion and conclusion chapter. I take the opportunity to wrap up some of the sociological meanings and interpretations in relation to my empirical findings, which I highlighted in the findings chapters. I establish links with the existing sociological literature, and I highlight some of the implications of my research findings. Finally, I draw my research to a conclusion and suggest some possible directions for future research in this area.
CHAPTER 2
Lebanon: background and social context

This chapter aims to briefly introduce the reader to the background and social context of Lebanon, the country where my research study was conducted. I provide an overview of Lebanon’s historical background, which helps in comprehending the complexity of its current political, social and economic situation. I then briefly explain some of the central features of Lebanese society, which I think are fundamental to achieving a better understanding of the research findings later in the thesis.

2.1 Lebanon the country: the historical background making its present

Lebanon is unique in so many respects. It is characterised by differential features that make up its unique social, cultural, economic and political structure (Harris, 2009). In this chapter, I elaborate more on these specific characteristics, in an attempt to provide an explicit and clear understanding of the historical background and sociocultural context of Lebanon.

Lebanon is one of the smallest country in the Middle East with a surface area of 10,452 km², and a population of 4.822 million people (World Health Organisation, 2013) of which 1.3 million people living in the Capital Beirut and its suburbs alone (Fawaz and Peillen, 2003). The official language is Arabic, as 95% of the population are Arabs (including the Palestinian refugees who constitute 10% of its population), 4% are Armenians and 1% are classified as “others”, according to the CIA World fact book (2012). Recently, the break out of the Syrian conflict had an impact on the overall demographic, political, social, economic and security situation in Lebanon. Demographically, Lebanon, a neighbouring country of Syria, hosted the highest number of Syrian refugees in the region since the break out of the Syrian conflict in 2011. The number of registered refugees is 1,067,785 (UNHCR, 2015); however, this rises to around 1.2 million refugees in the estimate of
Amnesty International (2015). That is equivalent to almost 25% of the Lebanese population.

Historically, Lebanon was once under the Ottoman Empire’s rule and part of its territories for almost 400 years (1520-1918). It was then subjected to French mandate for more than 20 years (1920-1943) before it finally gained its independence on the 22nd of November 1943. This historical background had exposed Lebanon to the influence of both Oriental-Islamic (Ottoman Empire) and westernised (French mandate) cultures and customs (Shehadeh, 2010). Historically, Lebanon has also been vital to commerce between the west and the Levant since the 19th century. Beirut, the capital, has grown to be a crossroads between the West and the Levant vis-à-vis the International Trade movement, and played an important role as a monetary hub with an advanced Banking system before the breakout of the Lebanese Civil War. Lebanon is not an industrial country, and does not have any natural resources. However, the national economy currently relies on, and is maintained by, three vital industries: the internationally renowned private sector, the expanding well-trusted banking system, and tourism (Tarabulsi, 2007; Kassir, 2010).

Lebanon is a multi-sectarian country. It has more than 17 religious sects (Harris, 2009). The main ones can be identified and summarised as follows. Among Muslims there are the 1- Sunnis, 2- Shiites, and 3- Druze, and among Christians, there are the 4- Catholics and 5- Non-Catholics. Among the Catholics there are the Maronite, Greek Catholic, Armenian Catholic, Syrian Catholic, Latin, and Chaldean. Whereas, among the non-Catholics there are the Greek Orthodox, Armenian Orthodox, Protestant, and the Syrian Orthodox (Chamie, 1980). The Lebanese population is predominantly Muslim; however, Lebanon has always been a home for a significantly large Christian population (Shehadeh, 2010; Moghadam, 2003), unlike the vast majority of the countries in the region (Moghadam, 2003). In the absence of a census, it is estimated that each of the three largest sects, that is, Christian, Muslim Sunnis, and Muslim Shiites constitute about 25-35% of the population each (Farha, 2009). According to the CIA Fact book on Lebanon (2012), Muslims constitute about 54% of the population, while the Christians constitute more than 40.5% of the population.
Lebanon does not have a state religion (Shehadeh, 2010). At the same time, it does not adopt a secular constitution. The country’s social and political structures are controlled by sectarianism and clientelism - a social order which depends on relations of patronage and is usually associated with political corruption (Barrington, 2013). This hinders all efforts to reform the political system, hence, “the majority of the public is in a clientelistic relationship with government politicians, depending on them individually for services and favours, rather than on a modern functioning state civil service” (Salem, 1998:18). Power in Lebanon is shared amongst the largest sects, as agreed upon in the national pact of 1943 (an unwritten understanding). The pact is considered a constitutional custom, which designates the president of the republic as a Maronite Catholic, the Prime Minister, a Muslim Sunni and the Speaker of the House a Muslim Shiite. Paul Salem (1998: 22) summarises this arrangement accurately, stating that “the Lebanese state remains largely a confederation of confessional communities that operates on the principal of cooperation and consent among the most influential communities.” These communities, as I explain later, are all religious, and religion plays an important role in shaping cultural norms and moral values.

Anything that is viewed as ‘personal’ comes under religious codes and not secular ones. In other words, in Lebanon, anything other than family related matters, which are known in terms of ‘personal status’, would be subject to civil and secular law. The latter deals with issues related to penal codes, citizenship, contracts and obligations, labour law, and inheritance related to Christians (Shehadeh, 2010). However, the state allows religious groups to practice their authority in matters related to ‘personal status’, such as marriage, divorce, inheritance, child custody, guardianship, and adoption. Anything related to these matters, citizens are able to refer back to their own religious laws and courts (Mikdashi, 2014).

Lebanon is also a country that has been experiencing conflict and instability for at least four decades (1975-present). It has been rocked by 15 years of civil war, experienced various military attacks by Israel (Ellis, 1999). Political disputes in Lebanon more often involved violence, either through political assassinations or internal sectarian conflict. During the
past five years, the sectarian rift has been aggravated as some Lebanese groups got bogged down in the Syrian turmoil. These Lebanese groups are Hezbollah, the Shiite Iranian-funded party backing Al Assad’s regime, along with other Lebanese radicalised Sunni fighters, who joined the overwhelmingly Sunni opposition in their fight. The engagement of Lebanese groups in the Syrian conflict, be it on the opposition’s or the regime’s side, aggravated the segregation of Lebanon’s Muslim communities, namely, Sunnis and Shiites. This was also reflected in the more extreme religious positions of the two sects, as if they formed the basis of a long-waited opportunity to bring hidden sectarianism to the surface. A considerably noticeable shift was witnessed recently among Lebanese Muslims, where religiously ‘moderate’ groups had become more fanatic. This was manifested in people’s everyday discourse and sometimes in their manner of dress (for example, the increase of veiled women). The sectarian rift was intensified by recurrent bombings in Lebanon and the ongoing civil war in Syria, which together with the mass displacement and refugee crisis had many repercussions in terms of Lebanon’s national security. As a result of all these elements of instability, the country has not been able to advance on a normal trajectory of social and economic change. The deteriorated political, security and economic situation has also led to a drastic increase in migration.

Migration has therefore affected Lebanese society, especially as a large number of the young leave to find economic security and jobs in the Persian Gulf region or the West (Khalaf, 2006). They may also travel in order to take up educational opportunities. This is besides the massive waves of immigration during the outbreak of the civil war in 1975, where Kasparian (2003 cited in Farha, 2009: 94) estimated the number of Lebanese emigrated as between 1975 and 2001 to be 900,000. It was first thought that the Christians constitute the highest number of immigrants; however, the latest study, which was conducted in 2006, revealed that both Muslims and Christians represented an almost equal percentage of immigrants (59.7% and 61.3% respectively) (Farha, 2009). This created a huge influx of Lebanese migrants in and out of the country.

Immigrants also had an influence on Lebanese society both socially and economically. Socially, for instance, the Lebanese, who returned and continue to return to the country,
have often brought with them new norms, values, attitudes, and behaviours learnt abroad (El-Kak et al, 2001). Some of these foreign values may not be in harmony with Lebanese traditional culture, especially in terms of liberal attitudes towards sex and sexuality. This was evident through findings of a survey which revealed that the health behaviours (including engaging in premarital sex) of university students who lived abroad, for one year or more, differed significantly from students who never lived outside Lebanon (El-Kak et al, 2001). Another recently published study, which aimed to investigate factors associated with the use of alcohol and drugs in the first sexual experiences of university students in Beirut, supported this claim (Ghandour et al, 2014). The study found that students who reported “living abroad after the age of 12 for a period of 6 months or more (especially if in more than one place)” were more likely to report using alcohol or drugs during their first sexual encounters. However, this was not the only socio-demographic factor positively associated with the use of alcohol or drugs in initial sexual experiences. Being a male, non-Arab foreign nationals, living alone, and being less religious were also positively associated with this behaviour (Ghandour et al, 2014). This indicates that there are a number of factors accelerating social change as I highlighted in my introduction chapter. The influx of migrants is one of them.

2.2 Lebanese sectarian and cultural diversity

Before the civil war (1975-1990), the majority of Beirut neighbourhoods and geographical areas were religiously and demographically mixed. However, after the civil war, Beirut was divided into two parts, east and west Beirut. East Beirut was occupied by a Christian majority, whereas west Beirut was occupied by a Muslim majority. The Muslim neighbourhoods themselves, in west Beirut, were further divided into areas predominantly occupied by Muslim Sunnis (for example, Ras Beirut). Others were predominantly occupied by Muslim Shiites (for example, Beirut southern suburb) (Seidman, 2012). The sectarian division of the geographical areas relatively applies to the rest of the territories creating sectarian ghettos across Lebanon. Although some areas and villages accommodate
mixed religious sects and socio-demographic variety, on the whole, the domination of one religious sect in each geographical area remains, to this day, significant.

Due to this geographical sectarian segregation, people can often identify other people’s religion or religious sect in relation to the area they originate from. If an area is mixed, the individual’s family name guides an understanding of their religious sect. In a country, where sectarianism is well established at the social, political and institutional level, knowing one’s religious sect forms some people’s basis for social interaction. Sectarianism is strongly manifested in ‘othering’ those who are different with varying levels of sectarian bias and intolerance. ‘Otherness’ is demonstrated in everyday life through minimal daily interactions. For instance, given the sociable nature of the Lebanese people in general, any interaction with a stranger would mostly involve statements and questions like: “whereabouts are you from?” or “we have not had the honour of knowing your name”. Such leading statements or questions aim to discern the individual’s religious sect through attempting to recognise, in combination, the person’s name, family name and locality. Identifying one’s religious sect through name and locality is very common in a country where asking directly about one’s religion or sect is deemed as impolite and inappropriate. It is a common strategy, used in the process of ‘othering’ people, bringing to the surface hidden fears and tacit divisions.

Alas, sectarianism is strongly present among young people, who were not even born during the civil war. In an initial representative study, which aimed to provide a descriptive analysis of the socio-demographic, sociocultural and social-psychological profiles of Lebanese youth aged between 18 and 25 years, Harb (2010) found an alarmingly high level of sectarian bias among the Lebanese youth:

“A third of participants expressed negative emotions towards, and low acceptance of, other sects (hostile prejudice); two thirds of the youth would not consider marrying someone from a different sect; and 80% of participants scored higher than the midpoint on sectarian in-group bias” (Harb, 2010: 17).
The findings of Harb’s (2010) study reflect that sectarianism is socially reinforced and well sustained. The findings also reflect a strong sense of belonging to one’s sectarian group, which shares similar social and religious norms and values.

Nevertheless, the geographical and sectarian segregation reflects a multi-cultural and diverse Lebanese society, ranging from the very conservative to the very liberal. As such, the social, cultural and moral values constructed by these religious communities vary from one area to another. What is socially acceptable in one community might be deemed inappropriate in others. For example, a woman’s wearing of revealing clothing in Ashrafieh (dominantly Christian area) is acceptable and widespread, whereas it is deemed immoral in Dahyieh (one of Beirut’s suburbs – predominantly Shiite). Similarly, with headscarves, the majority of women in Dahyieh wear hijab (head scarfs) and Abayas (an Islamic custom), but you rarely see women with hijab in Ashrafieh. Whereas in Hamra, for example, a relatively mixed area, which accommodates a lot of students from all over Lebanon, a whole range of liberties and conservatism co-exist with one another. Everything seems to be ‘normal’ in Hamra.

However, the above examples do not indicate that all Muslim communities are more conservative than Christian communities. This might be true for the majority of closed communities in certain aspects (for example, the way women dress and their freedom of mobility). However, when it comes to matters related to sex and sexuality, both conservative Muslims and Christians demonstrate similar views. Here, it is important to differentiate between communities, as a ‘collective’ body, and individuals. Individuals, regardless of their religion, may demonstrate totally different views to those found in the communities they belong to. Evidence of this individualistic diversity was strongly present in my findings.
2.3 Lebanese Society

Lebanese society, as indicated above, is characterised by its religious, cultural, political (Rubin, 2009) and socio-demographic diversity. There is a very high emphasis on social relations, networks and connections in this very small country. Despite its geographical ghettos, the Lebanese people are not completely isolated from each other. Conversely, people from different backgrounds do meet, interact, work and collaborate together at various platforms, such as schools, universities, workplaces and through businesses, as well as at national, social and political platforms. Such interactions, between different groups of different religious, social and political backgrounds, lead to the identification of some social and cultural similarities as Lebanese. This identification alleviates the antagonism brought by civil war and sectarian segregation, as well as it gives rise to leniency and tolerance. Besides, when they interact, people learn about each other’s norms, values and traditions.

Lebanon, as I mentioned above, has witnessed different wars in the past four decades and continues to bear the consequences of the ongoing conflicts and disputes in the region. Despite this, Lebanon has been perceived as a model of democracy, freedom and western modernisation in the Arab world, especially its capital, Beirut. Its westernisation is demonstrated in its westernised educational systems (francophone and American systems) and Beirut’s famous nightlife (sleepless nightclubs, pubs, mixed parties, alcohol drinking, liberal suggestive clothing and fashion conscious appearance of women, and so on) (Khalaf, 2012). There are also mixed beaches, modern architecture, western chains of restaurants, cafes, and shopping centres, western movies, magazines, books, and new media. Finally, there are movements in secular civic society aiming to implement influential ‘western concepts’, such as defending human rights, fighting against corruption and sectarianism, and fighting for democracy and freedom of speech.

Lebanon’s gendered culture also appears to differ from other parts of the Arab world in a number of respects. Lebanese women generally enjoy moderately wider freedoms (social, economic, political) in their everyday lives (Khatib, 2008). For example, Lebanese women
vote, work and enjoy freedom of mobility (such as travelling without male permission, studying, camping, hanging out, partying and other activities). They can have their own businesses and live on their own, especially if they are working or studying in Beirut away from families in rural areas. They engage with a fashion culture, and what a woman wears is a personal preference, whether she wears a bikini or a hijab. Lebanese women interact freely with men, and they participate in public events (Tlaiss and Kauser, 2011) and sporting activities. Lebanese women play a leading role in their communities, and are also engaged in politics be it on a local level (municipalities) or national (parliament). However, “although Lebanese law does not discriminate against women regarding political participation and voting, women's involvement in politics in Lebanon is marginalised” (Khatib, 2008: 438).

Yet, in spite of its westernised character and uniqueness, Lebanese society, on the whole, continues to adopt traditional norms and values (El-Kak, 2013), which, to a large extent, still frame and limit people’s attitudes and behaviours (Sidawi, 2007). Lebanese society continues to uphold gender discrimination in everyday life (Khatib, 2008; Abouchedid, 2007). This is demonstrated in traditional social gender roles, violence against women, and disproportionate political involvement and representation (Shehadeh, 2010). Men also occupy more spaces and higher positions in the public and political spheres. Even within the civic laws, the states failed to ensure gender equality on issues related to passing maternal citizenship to children, domestic violence and marital rape, extra-marital adultery, the right to have an abortion, and the right to enjoy one’s own choice of sexual orientation and gender identity (Khatib, 2008). Moreover, the state continues to reinforce traditional sexual norms through adopting religious-based ‘personal status’ laws, as I mentioned earlier. When religious authorities control matters classified as ‘personal status’ (such as marriage, divorce, heritage), gender discrimination becomes inevitable (for example, unequal inheritance for women in Islam and difficulty of divorce among Christians) (Human Rights Watch, 2015).

And just like any other gendered, patriarchal and honorific culture, men are perceived to be more dominant and in control over women, who are perceived to be more submissive
(Joseph, 1994, Sidawi, 2007). Women are expected and socially obliged to preserve their chastity and sexual purity until marriage, as their sexual purity or virginity is directly associated with the “family honour” and women’s virtue (Moghadam, 2003; Abouchedid, 2007; Wehbi, 2002). Men are perceived to be the protectors and defenders of the “family honour”. However, these social privileges that men enjoy do not extend to women (Awwad, 2011). If a woman had sex and lost her virginity before marriage, she would have to bear the social consequences of being “non-marriageable” (Wehbi, 2002) to being shamed, ostracised and, in extreme cases, killed for messing with her family’s honour (Awwad, 2011; Wehbi 2002). Therefore, men play their socially constructed masculine role of defending their honour, through dominating and controlling “their” women (Awwad, 2011; Sidawi, 2007), specifically their sister, daughter and wife. The males in the family, particularly, fear social shame and defame. There is a famous colloquial expression to reflect these worries: “no one puts our heads down”. Women, on the other hand, fearing the harsh socio-cultural consequences of exposing “family honour” to shame, tend to play a socially constructed feminine role of submissiveness, obedience and respect to preserve their sexual honour. However, it is worth reminding the reader that this is just a general overview. As mentioned earlier, Lebanon is very religiously and culturally diverse. Therefore, what might be perceived as sin and transgression by some might not be seen as such by others.

Consequently, the majority of Lebanese society tends to adopt traditional norms and values towards sex and sexuality (Yasmine et al, 2015; El-Kak, 2013). Among young people, attitudes towards sex, in general, and premarital sex, in particular, are caught between perceptions of right and wrong. This is due to the wider duality in dealing with social norms and values, religious beliefs, and contradictions in the social environment (Sidawi, 2007). This duality is manifested in different attitudes and behaviours. For instance, the same Lebanese society that values women’s virginity before marriage, encourages an appealing and suggestive physical appearance for women, even among veiled and religiously conservative groups (Khalaf, 2006; Seidman, 2012). Khalaf (2006) refers to this duality as a “reflection of a deeper and more nagging societal conflict; almost a textbook instance of anomie: i.e. a disjunction between normative expectations which condone,
indeed cajole, young women to be *sexually attractive* but condemns them if they become *sexually active*” (2006: 185). Sidawi (2007), on the other hand, argues that Lebanese society endorses what she calls “deformed modernism”, where “aspects of modernism imported from the West coexist with elements of customs” (2007: 28). The failure of modernism relates to the failure in “dislodging” traditions, which entails substantial challenges on the social, cultural, economic, and political levels. Therefore, being trapped between modernisation and cultural traditions, which are submissive to patriarchal values, results in duality in cultural norms and social values (Sidawi, 2007).

Indeed, this duality was evident in the findings of my research study. Most of my participants referred to it as “*double standards*” and described Lebanese society as “*schizophrenic*”, as I explain later in my findings chapters. However, this duality was not only demonstrated in “*being sexually attractive but not sexually active*”. It was also evident in young people’s attitudes and behaviours towards premarital sex, as well as in the ways they responded to the social risks associated with premarital sex. I referred to that as “*performance*”.

2.4 Lebanese women insatiable for cosmetic surgeries

The contradiction within Lebanese society, which demands women to be beautiful and physically attractive, yet preserve their virginity and remain virtuous until marriage is a sign of presenting women as both modern and traditional at the same time. The social encouragement and high emphasis placed on physically appealing looks for women (Khalaf, 2006; Seidman, 2012) is translated into the increasing trend towards the adoption of all kinds of cosmetic and plastic surgery among Lebanese women (Doherty, 2008). This trend is especially evident among the middle and upper classes. Beirut has been labelled as the “cosmetic enhancement capital” of the Arab world (Doherty, 2008). This reveals the degree to which Lebanese women care about their beauty, physical appearance and sexual attractiveness (Robinson, 2012).
This interest in physical appearance in contemporary Lebanese society is, without any doubt, strengthened and reinforced by all types of media channels, especially via the internet and satellite. These media promote a certain ideal image of women’s bodies and sexually attractive looks through their commercial advertisements, video clips, movies’ sexual scenes, stars and celebrities, pornography, and so on. These images mainly promote the ‘ideal’ western look of a slim beautiful Euro-American woman with a small nose, straight hair and coloured eyes (Doherty, 2008). Accordingly, maintaining the perfect weight, wearing high heels, elegant or suggestive clothing, fashionable accessories, wearing makeup and having stylish hair, have become essential to achieving the “sexually attractive look”. However, natural beauty does not always follow this ideal image of a woman’s body and beauty. As a result, Lebanese women have become insatiable for cosmetic surgeries, such as rhinoplasty, breast silicon filling, breast lifting, liposuction, facial Botox and lifting, lip fillings, cheek lifting and filling, laser hair removal, eyebrow tattooing, and others.

Feminists, who have addressed the topic of cosmetic surgery, have had different views. Kathy Davis, for example, has argued that “cosmetic surgery should be viewed as a dilemma: disempowering and empowering, problem and solution all in one” (Davis, 2012: 36). She meant that women’s choices should be respected when they choose to have cosmetic surgery at a certain point in time (because some surgeries help women to escape their suffering). However, at the same time, the social, cultural and situational constraints, which lead women to make such a choice in the first place should be problematized (Davis, 2012). Davis based her argument on findings from her empirical research on cosmetic surgery with numerous Dutch women. Whereas Susan Bordo (1997) in her earlier work criticises such an approach. She argues that women’s choices and experiences should not be perceived as neutral. Their experiences of their bodies as not beautiful or inadequate are socially constructed. Measuring women’s bodies against the contemporary ideals of femininity and not acknowledging bodily differences are integral to contemporary body culture, which reinforces narrow, gendered norms (Bordo, 1997).
Roseanne Khalaf (2006), on the other hand, has argued that this increased attention to physical appearance and eroticisation of the body among female Lebanese university students has been further influenced by Lebanon’s sex ratio imbalance between men and women. The sex ratio imbalance is due to wars, political instability and disproportionate outmigration. Therefore, some women maintained their femininity to remain the “objects of male desire” and competed with each other to attract men.

“Once again it is the growing pool of single women who must, in one way or another deal with the scarcity of eligible men. The eroticisation of the female body and other associated ploys to embellish their sex appeal seem like an appropriate strategy to gain competitive edge over their cohorts when it comes to soliciting the attention of the scarce and coveted male” (Khalaf, 2006: 186).

This competition to find the right man, who will eventually become a husband, demonstrates the importance of marriage in Lebanese society, as I shall now explain.

2.5 Family, dating and marriage in Lebanon

In Lebanon, there is a very high emphasis placed on the importance of the family (Kazarian, 2005), as it has a fundamental role in meeting the social, emotional and economic needs of both men and women (Sabbagh, 1996). The family in Lebanon governs, to a large extent, the social identity of individuals. In other words, individuals do not only carry the name of their family; they also represent the social, religious, economic and sometimes political persuasion of their family (Kazarian, 2005). The latter depends on which political party the family supports. The vast majority of the political parties in Lebanon are sectarian as opposed to secular. Often but not always, families support political parties, which represent their religious sect. This is particularly true for the Muslim Shiites, Muslim Sunnis and Druze. However, in the case of Christians, Christian families would still support Christian political parties, but these political parties are not necessarily further divided by Christian sect (for example, Christian Maronite’s vs. Christian Catholics).
These political parties control the Lebanese public by establishing a great sense of group belonging, and demanding obedience and loyalty, while endorsing ‘clientelism’ (Kazarian, 2005). Families in Lebanon usually maintain a beneficial relationship with the sectarian political parties (Chorev, 2013) because families who do not support a political party are mostly excluded and left behind. This also ensures “that these families, as well as the socio-political phenomena they represented, remained relevant” (Chorev, 2013: 306). In other words, it is difficult for politically independent families or individuals to obtain much gain in status in Lebanese political and social life. In a country where systems function on the basis of clientelism (wasta), being excluded indicates that one would have a minimal or non-existent chance of getting a governmental job, for example. Nor would one be externally rescued from hardship or troubles, or even to be able to get official paperwork done sometimes. On the other hand, the family’s reputation, social image and social class play an important role in accessing benefits at the often interrelated social, political and economic levels. As such, the social identity of individuals, as determined by their families, is highly significant. Consequently, family members carry the responsibility of maintaining and improving their family’s social image and reputation.

Now considering that marriage is a key and central issue in Lebanese society (Wehbi, 2002) regardless of religion or gender (Kazarian, 2005), the question of “who to marry” becomes one of the fundamental questions, which need to be carefully assessed and investigated. Most families care about having a spouse from a good family: well educated with a good socio-economic status and financially well established, from the right origin, the right age, and so on (Drieskens, 2008). However, this adds to the level of complexity when trying to find the right partner, as is evident in a study carried out by Barbara Drieskens (2008) on “Changing Perceptions of Marriage in Contemporary Beirut”. The findings of her study revealed that Lebanese women account the main reason for celibacy as the difficulty of meeting the right person, who fits in with both their personal and their parents’ preferences. Marrying someone of the same religious persuasion was ranked among these difficulties. For example, the majority of Muslim women and Druze women are not allowed to marry a man from outside their religious sect. There is a little more leniency on this matter among Christians, though (Drieskens, 2008). Whilst Islam allows
men to marry a Christian or Jewish woman, Muslim women are not allowed to marry a non-Muslim man. Druze, on the other hand, forbids both men and women from marrying any person who is non-Druze, regardless of their sex.

However, I argue that this is not merely a religious issue. It is also an obvious mark of sectarianism, which is deeply rooted in Lebanese society, where each religious sect confines their marital relationships to people from the same religious persuasion. This is especially true for women, but it is also applicable to men. For example, in my findings, some of the participants provided examples of how non-religious families continued to refuse wedding their children to someone from outside their religious sect. The study published by Harb (2010), which I referred to earlier, supports this argument, as it shows that two thirds of young people would not consider marrying someone from a different sect. 80% revealed significant sectarian in-group bias. And because the Lebanese law system (personal status) reinforces this sectarianism, individuals who choose to marry a partner outside their religion cannot get married in Lebanon. Instead, they have a civil marriage outside of Lebanon – commonly in Cyprus. Many of these couples, especially women, are then socially excluded by their families, as Drieskens (2008) shows in her study. Therefore, the discrepancy between young people’s perceptions of marriage, especially of young women, and that of their parents’ is one of the main hindrances which face young people today. Having to find a partner who is from the same religious sect, well educated, financially well established, from a good family, and shares similar values and similar ideas on marriage, becomes very difficult.

This is not the only reason for celibacy and delayed marriages in a society which exerts huge social pressure on young men and women - from the nuclear and extended family - to get married, settle down, and have children. The harsh economic crisis, migration of young men and its effect on demographic balance (Omar, 2001; Khalaf, 2006), as well as women’s increased presence in the labour market and higher education (Roudi-Fahimi and Kent, 2007; Rashad, Osman, and Roudi-Fahimi, 2005) have also made marriage a difficult process. Women, for example, in Drieskens (2008) study, stated that another reason for
celibacy was women’s aspiration to study and work before committing to marriage and a family.

Nowadays, in Lebanese social circles, it has become widely recognised how critical it is to find the right future partner, especially among highly educated, independent women, and Lebanese migrants working in the Gulf, Africa, and in other parts of the world. This is indicated by the existence of complex dating issues. The chances of dating after graduating from university, and as young men leave the country to work abroad, become even further reduced. Most male immigrants end up in traditional, arranged marriages due to their limited visits to the country every year (Yassin, 2012). However, Wehbi (2002) refers to a study which suggested that 40% of the unmarried women they sampled perceived work as a potential place to find their future husbands. Other ways of meeting potential husbands or wives, specifically for migrants, is during summer vacations when Lebanese living abroad come back home for a short visit (Ouis, 2009). Meeting up could happen through different social gatherings such as attending weddings and parties, joining social networks of friends, and going to summer beaches. Therefore, with these difficulties in finding marriage, premarital sex becomes an inescapable reality.

Nonetheless, as I mentioned earlier, being single and sexually active is not a choice (Seidman, 2012) that women can take without being exposed to the associated social risks and sometimes health risks. The stigma of losing one’s virginity in a premarital sexual relationship is a major aspect of this problem, as most non-virginal women become non-marriageable (Wehbi, 2002; Seidman, 2012). Whilst the significance of marriage in Lebanon might be associated with the desire of individuals to establish a family, I argue that its significance goes beyond the need for family. I think that marriage becomes important as it is the only legitimate space and environment where young people, especially young women, can be totally independent of their parents and can enjoy their sexual and intimate lives without being exposed to social risk. In this way, young people, especially young women, avoid the feelings of fear, guilt, and anxiety associated with sex before marriage, as the findings of my study reveal. In the next chapter, I highlight some of the
studies which addressed the social risks of engaging in premarital sex, specifically among young women, in the Arab world and Middle East (that is including Turkey and Iran).
CHAPTER 3
Literature Review

This thesis examines the social risks which may confront Lebanese young people when they engage in premarital heterosexual relationships. This chapter sheds light on some of the existing literature, which addresses similar topics in different cultural contexts, but which has a specific focus on the Expanded Middle East and North Africa (EMENA) region, including Lebanon. Before I define what I mean by the term ‘social risk’, in the case of my research study, I begin the chapter by explaining the difficulty behind finding a definition of ‘social risk’, as a concept, in the literature. I then provide a brief overview of the existing literature in the EMENA, while addressing studies, which have highlighted the attitudes and behaviours of young people towards premarital sex. Then I move on to emphasise some of the key debates in the literature, which have addressed the subject of social risks of engaging in premarital sex, virginity and sexual boundaries, hymen reconstruction, and the emphasis on women’s looks and physical appearance.

3.1 Social risk: difficulty of definition

There is a global agreement that sexual attitudes and behaviours are significantly affected and framed by social acceptance and cultural values and norms (Hatfield, Luckhurst and Rapson, 2010; Rostosky, Regnerus, and Wright, 2003). A literature review on premarital sex clearly reveals that social acceptance of premarital sex, specifically among young people, varies widely between societies and cultures, even within the western world (Widmer, Treas and Newcomb, 1998). For instance, premarital sex, as long as it takes place within a number of socially acceptable parameters, is perceived as an acceptable behaviour in most western cultures (Widmer, Treas and Newcomb, 1998; Higgins et al, 2002). Whilst these rules may vary depending on gender norms, there is not a significant gender difference in Western societies and cultures, where individual freedoms and liberties are considered as respected (Finer, 2007). Whereas, in profoundly religious and patriarchal
societies, premarital sex is not only gendered, there is also little space where sexual
encounters before marriage can be considered acceptable (Parla, 2001; El Feki, 2015;
Hatfield, Luckhurst and Rapson, 2010). In some societies, premarital sex is also a serious
legal offence, which may lead to, in extreme cases, imprisonment, the death sentence or
honour killings – also known as honour crimes (Hatfield, Luckhurst and Rapson, 2010;
Mahdavi, 2007). The variation in attitudes towards premarital sex was evident in a study on
“Global views on morality” conducted by Pew research center (2014) in 40 countries. As
part of the study, there was a question on premarital sex. The study’s findings revealed that:

“People in predominantly Muslim nations overwhelmingy agreed that premarital
sex is unacceptable, with nine-out-of-ten or more people in Indonesia, Jordan,
Pakistan, the Palestinian territories, Turkey and Egypt believing this. On the other
hand, people in Western Europe were more accepting of premarital sex. Roughly
10% or fewer in Germany, France, and Spain stated that premarital sex is morally
unacceptable” (Pew research center, 2014).

In Lebanon, women are socially expected to preserve their chastity and virginity (intact
 hymen) until marriage and refrain from having premarital sex (Khalaf, 2006; Seidman,
2012; Yasmine et al, 2015). Women and, to much lesser extent, men, who are exposed as
having transgressed social norms by engaging in socially unacceptable sexual behaviour,
might be at risk of facing various types of social punishment or social isolation. Such
‘social reprimand’ not only leads to distress in young people’s lives as individuals, but
causes anguish for their families and maybe even their close social networks (Seidman,
2012; Khalaf, 2006; Wehbi, 2002). Thus the notion of risk, which I denote in my research
study, is not related to whether the sexual behaviour itself is perceived as a health risk or a
threat bringing about sexually transmitted infections, diseases, unintended pregnancies or
sexual violence. In my work, the notion of risk is attached to non-compliance with socially
constructed rules and boundaries, which are set by social groups within society. The
transgressor, if exposed, might therefore suffer a punishment that is decided and
implemented by their society.

For the purpose of my research study, I sought to understand how the term ‘social risk’ was
defined in the literature. I was aware of the different terms or meanings, which other
scholars might have used as an alternative to this term. For example, beside using the keyword ‘social risk(s)’ in my literature search, I also used keywords like ‘social consequences’, ‘social implications’, ‘social factors’, ‘social dangers’ and the ‘social threats’ associated with premarital sex. To get better results, I also mixed and combined other keywords such as ‘virginity’, ‘honour’, ‘shame’, ‘reputation’, ‘sex before marriage’, ‘sexual behaviour’, ‘sexual attitudes’ and ‘sexuality’, among other keywords. My aim was to retrieve a wide range of studies addressing the social risks in relation to engaging in premarital sex, with a specific focus on the Middle East region and Arab World, including Lebanon.

The studies which came closest to providing a definition of the term ‘social risk’ were those addressing the social and internal stigma surrounding people living with HIV or other medical illnesses (Burris, 2000; Herek, Capitanio, and Widaman, 2003). Unfortunately, a very limited number of studies aimed to define the term ‘social risk’ in a context where social risk meant the possibility of causing harm to the individual through social punishment. This could include social exclusion, stigma, as well as verbal and physical abuse. Whilst a good number of studies have touched on some of the social implications or social punishment for engaging in an unacceptable sexual behaviour (for example, Mahdavi, 2009; Ouis, 2009; Yasmine et al, 2015; Awwad et al, 2013), none of these studies defined ‘social risk’ or looked at it from a sociological perspective on risk. The difficulty, then, of finding a definition of ‘social risk’, in relation to sexual behaviour, reveals that the associated research has given less attention to the notion of sexual risk from a social and cultural perspective. Instead, the majority of the empirical work on risk, as I elaborate upon in the next chapter, was more concerned with the notion of risk as a health and environmental hazard, as well as an occupational, economic, and, recently, security risk (for example, through the risk of terrorism).

The reason behind this gap in the literature might be related to the fact that the notion of ‘risk’ was conceptualised and intellectualised by western social theorists and from a western perspective. And since social risk, in relation to sexual behaviour, is not a generally obvious concern in the majority of western societies, the concept has not been
tackled. The lack of empirical work on sex related risks, which goes beyond health risks and occupational hazards, was highlighted by Sanders’ (2004) empirical work with sex workers. Sanders (2004) examined ‘emotional risk’ besides health risks and the risk of physical violence among sex workers. She argued that the sex workers she interviewed were more concerned with preventing emotional risks because they thought that risks related to health and violence could be effectively managed. Although Sanders refers to the risk of “being discovered” (that is, keeping sex work hidden) as one of the emotional risks, I argue that much of what she explains about the potential consequences of “being discovered” fit under social risk, and therefore create an overlap between emotional risk and social risk. For example, Sanders (2004) states that the risk of “being discovered” might expose sex workers to divorce or to being discredited by their children. Whilst these risks carry a great emotional burden for sex workers, I think these risks can also fit under the definition of social risks. Sander’s study is an example, which draws attention to the absence in the literature of attempts to clearly define the notion of social risk. This is not to say that there should be a standardised definition of social risk. However, a sufficient explanation of what this concept might mean, and an acknowledgment of its presence in relation to different contexts of meaning, would be very helpful to inform further research. For example, whilst I define the notion of social risk in its association with sexual behaviours in a conservative context, social risk might be defined or understood differently in relation to marriage and family units in westernised contexts. As an example, Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (1995) highlight this in their work “The Normal Chaos of Love”.

For the purpose of my study, I define social risk in terms of “the possible danger that an individual will be exposed to social punishment, or social marginalisation following their engagement in a socially unacceptable sexual behaviour” – namely, in the case of my research, premarital sex. It is also important to note that my definition of ‘social risk’, by itself, is conceptualised with the negative attribute of ‘danger’. This is because I am referring to a society with a strict social control over moral and sexual boundaries. Although transgressing these boundaries (risk-taking) might be thrilling, fun and pleasurable in the moment, but, at the same time, it might expose the transgressor to social
punishment (social risk). In other words, the action of ‘risk-taking’ itself – that is, engaging in premarital sex - could be associated with positive aspects (for example, with pleasure) as well as with negative ones (for example, with social exclusion, if exposed). Sometimes this action of ‘risk-taking’ could be associated with both positive and negative aspects. Therefore, fundamental to a better understanding of the social risks of engaging in premarital sex, is an understanding of attitudes towards premarital sex in different societies and communities. I argue that when social control over sexual boundaries is lenient, social risks become insignificant. This was highlighted in both Mary Douglas’s (1966) work on purity and pollution and in Jeffery Weeks’s (2003) work on sexuality, which I will elaborate upon further in the next chapter. For Douglas (1966), bodily control is a form of social control. When social control over social and moral boundaries is relaxed, so too is social control over the body. Weeks (2003), on the other hand, highlights the same concept in his writings in relation to the ‘social regulation of sexuality’. He provides an example of “petting”, an intimate sex play where all clothes stay on, which was a widespread phenomenon before the 1960s among morally conservative people in the west. Weeks argues that:

“Petting is dependent on the belief that while intercourse in public is tabooed, other forms of play, because they are not defined as the sex act, may be intimately engaged in. But petting itself becomes insignificant when the taboos against sexual intercourse before marriage are relaxed, as they have been in most Western societies since the 1960s” (Weeks, 2003: 25-26).

As such, attitudes towards sexual behaviour, which I will explore later in this chapter, would tell us a lot about how rigid or relaxed social and moral boundaries are in a certain culture or society. But first, before I delve into young people’s attitudes towards sex, I present a brief overview of the existing literature in the Middle East and Arab World.
3.2 Literature review from the Extended Middle East and North Africa region

Since my research study was conducted in Beirut, I looked more closely at the relevant literature on traditionally conservative social contexts, on the basis that these contexts might share, to some extent, some of Lebanon’s cultural morals and social values. I focused on the research studies that had been carried out in any of the 21 countries of the Extended Middle East and North Africa (EMENA) region. The region’s Middle East countries include Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and West Bank and Gaza. The Extended Middle East countries include Afghanistan, Iran, Pakistan, and Turkey. The region also consists of the Gulf States, of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. Finally, the North African part of the EMENA includes Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco, and Tunisia (El-Kak, 2013: G45). These countries share some similarities, such as the dominant Islamic religion (El-Kak, 2013; Jones and Tell, 2010), their patriarchal social system, the co-existence of tradition and modernity (Sadiqi and Ennaji, 2011) as well as the sharing of other cultural norms and values, such as the high importance they attribute to the family (Joseph and Slyomovics, 2001). However, at the same time, they remain tremendously diverse in many respects (Joseph and Slyomovics, 2001), such as their cultural, historical, ethnic, political and religious make up.

Although the countries in the EMENA region have a variety of religious affiliations (Muslims, Christians, and Jews, amongst many other minorities) the vast majority of these countries are predominantly Muslim (El-Kak, 2013; Jones and Tell 2010; Moghadam, 2003). Lebanon, though, stands out as an exception with its significant Christian population (Nydell, 2012), which constitutes around forty percent of the Lebanese population, according to the CIA Fact book, 2012. The majority of EMENA countries are “Arab” countries, with the exception of Turkey, Iran, Pakistan and Afghanistan. Different countries in the Middle East have different types of political regimes that range from theocracy (such as Iran and Saudi Arabia) to secular republic, such as Turkey (Moghadam, 2003). Turkey is the only country which claims to be secular in the Middle East (İlkkaracan, 2008; Moghadam, 2003). The vast majority of the Arab states are ruled by the Islamic “Shariaa” (Moghadam, 2003; Dialmy and Uhlmann, 2005). Islam is the official state religion in the
Islam, therefore, shapes most of the EMENA’s social norms, cultural values, morals, and people’s social practices, including their sexuality. For instance, any sexual behaviour outside the legitimate framework of marriage is counted as ‘adultery’, and is strictly prohibited in Islam for both men and women (El Feki, 2015). It is also punishable under Islamic law (Sharia’) (Dialmy and Uhlmann, 2005; İlkkaracan, 2008). Adultery and sexual immorality is not only restricted to Islam and Muslims (İlkkaracan, 2008), as most religious codes impose rules to control sexual behaviour (Cubbins and Tanfer, 2000). In the same way, Christianity perceives premarital sex as a “sin”, for example (Mernissi, 1982). However, in countries where the Islamic Sharia’ is implemented, the punishment for adultery can be very harsh - ranging from imprisonment to the death penalty, which is found in Iran (Mahdavi, 2007). Moreover, the regulation and control of sexuality is not merely religious but also socio-cultural. In most of the EMENA region, “the only publicly accepted sexuality is strict heteronormativity, its cornerstone family-endorsed, religiously-sanctioned, state-registered marriage. Anything outside this frame is ‘haram’ (forbidden), ‘illit adab’ (impolite), ‘ayb and hchouma’ (shameful) – a seemingly endless lexicon of reproof.” (El Feki, 2015: 39).

It is due to the existence of these briefly mentioned social realities of the Middle East and Arab countries, that there has been an increased interest, among researchers in past twenty-five years, in examining the sexual politics and rights, gender inequality, and traditional practices in the Middle East (İlkkaracan, 2008). A thorough review of the literature revealed an abundant body of knowledge and writing that touches on women’s matters and social position in the Middle East and Arab world. More specifically, these writings focus on women’s political participation, their activism and engagement in civic society, legal reforms and gender equality, women’s employment and economic development. They also focus on patriarchy and the changing family, family honour reflected in the existence of
honour killings, sexual violence (verbal and physical), female genital mutilation, Islamic feminism and feminist movements, citizenship, women under Islamic law, and sexual and reproductive health. The literature also highlights women’s social, cultural and religious action for change. The mainstream of these writings was approached from a feminist perspective, emphasising gender inequality, social hierarchy and/or patriarchy, power relations and gender roles, the sexual suppression of women, and the effect of religious laws, specifically Islamic Sharia’ (see Afshar, 1993; Saadawi, 1980; Khalaf and Gagnon, 2006; Moghadam, 2003; Sadiq and Ennaji 2011; İlkkaracan, 2008; Joseph and Slyomovics, 2001; Ahmed, 1992; Accad, 1990; İlkkaracan, 2002; Baron, 2006; Dialmy and Uhlmann, 2005). This wide range of literature reflects a vibrant diversity in the EMENA region, and unearths the tensions of these countries in terms of women’s rights, activism and women’s public and political participation.

This diversity is also reflected in the way sexuality is policed. Despite the dominant and apparent social taboos and restrictions around sex and sexuality - manifested in the social, religious, political and institutional regulation of sexuality - the level of the sexual policing and control varies from one country to another, as Jones and Tell (2010) argue:

“With such variety in the regulation of heterosexuality, the sexuality represented by women's bodies, and homosexuality in the Arab world, it is almost impossible to draw easy and obvious conclusions. In some countries or regions, women's sexuality is displaying the marks of Western commercialism and fashion, while simultaneously other women in those countries or in other countries in the region are returning to a more traditional form of feminine sexuality that is focused on modesty and the covering of the body” (Jones and Tell, 2010: 142).

Nevertheless, it is important to note that, when I narrowed down my search to exclusively include sexual risk (and its alternative key wording), the vast majority of the research studies focused on sexual health risks (for example, Aras et al, 2007; Barbour and Salameh, 2009; Ghandour, et al, 2014; Mohammad et al, 2007; Mahfoud, 2010), rape and sexual violence against women (for example, Wehbi, 2002; Rebeiz and Harb, 2010; Awwad, 2011), and honour killings (for example, Abu Odeh, 2010; Kuczycki and Windle, 2011; Faqir, 2001; Baydoun, 2011-2012; Eisner and Ghuneim, 2013; Devers and Bacon, 2010;
Ouis, 2009). The latter was portrayed as one of the social risks that is directly associated with socially unacceptable female sexual behaviour. Honour crime remains at the heart of controlling women’s sexuality in the EMENA. However, honour crimes are not highly significant in Lebanon, even if, from time to time, the press publishes stories, which ignite heavy debate on this subject (Drieskens, 2008). Besides, on 4 August 2011, Lebanon became one of the first Arab countries to annul article 562 of the criminal penal code, which used to provide a reduced punishment for a person who claimed to have killed or injured a female relative (wife, sister, daughter) to protect the family’s honour.

Overall, it was challenging to find extensive qualitative research, which explored young people’s attitudes towards premarital sex and the social risks associated with it due to its taboo character. This suggests that the difficulty, which faced researchers conducting studies in this area (Al-Shdayfat and Green, 2012), might be found in the simple lack of related in-depth empirical research. Besides, my search of the literature was restricted to publications that were either written and published in English or translated into English. Certainly, this approach has its limitations, as my literature review excluded, by default, French publications (specifically those associated with Arab countries where French is the language of instruction in the educational system, such as Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria), as well as some Arabic ones which may have been published in countries where data is analysed and reported in the Arabic language (for example, in Jordan, Egypt, Syria, and the Gulf countries).

Therefore, in the following section, I present a brief overview of some of the literature on attitudes and behaviours towards premarital sex among young people from different cultural contexts in the Middle East. I also explore studies which highlighted issues on the social risks of engaging in premarital sex; how virginity is being negotiated through new arrangements between the sexes, identifying new moral boundaries, and hymen reconstruction; and the sexual presentation of the female body in response to male sexual desires: being sexually attractive but not sexually active.
3.3 Attitudes and behaviours towards premarital sex

A handful of quantitative research studies from Turkey, Iran, Tunisia and Lebanon revealed that a significant number of young people in the EMENA region are engaging in premarital sexual intercourse. These percentages were much higher among males compared to females. For example, findings from a study conducted among Turkish university students, in the south eastern part of Turkey, a relatively conservative area, have shown that engaging in premarital sexual intercourse was approximately ten times higher among males compared to females (Eşsizoglu et al, 2011). Another study showed that 26.3% of university students, from Dicle university in the south eastern region of Turkey, were sexually experienced [41.6% males vs. 3.5% females] (Yaşan, Essizoglu and Yıldırım, 2009), compared to 33.8% sexually experienced students [56.8% males vs. 3.2% female] in central Turkey (Golbasi and Kelleci, 2011), 36.6% in Izmir [61.2% males vs. 18.8%] (Gokengin et al, 2003), and more than 46% in Istanbul, central and western Anatolia [68% males vs. 25% females] (Askun and Ataca, 2007). Rates of premarital sexual activity among university students are higher in the western regions of Turkey, compared to regions on the eastern side, where the Islamic traditional communities reside (Eşsizoglu et al, 2011; Yaşan, Essizoglu and Yıldırım, 2009).

Similarly, a research study conducted in four female universities in Tehran revealed that 10% of female university students had had sexual intercourse, while 23% had some kind of sexual contact, and 52% had had a boyfriend (Farahani et al, 2011). Another study revealed 49% of unmarried people in Shiraz, southern Iran, had had premarital sexual relationships (40.3% males vs. 8.7% females) (Honarvar et al, 2016).

Whereas, in their study, Masmoudi-Soussi et al (2006) explored sexual attitudes, knowledge and behaviours among single undergraduate students in southern Tunisia. The response rate was very low (44%) suggesting that issues around sex and sexuality are significantly avoided, and that people abide by social taboos and constraints. Premarital sexual relationships were perceived as unacceptable by 58% of students, mainly for religious and moral reasons (63%), and due to fears of contracting STIs (33%). Twenty-two
percent of the students admitted engaging in a complete sexual relationship [49% males vs. 6% females]. Only 17% of the students considered a premarital sexual relationship as crucial to the development of their sexual experience. This was specifically evident among males (35%) compared to females (6.5%).

In Lebanon, an increasing number of quantitative research studies, investigating sexual behaviours, knowledge and attitudes towards premarital sex among Lebanese university students, have started to emerge in the last few years, particularly between years 2012 and 2015. These studies revealed that Lebanese young people are engaging in premarital sexual activity, but with major gender differences, as a significantly higher percentage of sexual intercourse was reported among males compared to females (Salameh et al, 2015; Salameh et al, 2014; Ghandour et al, 2014; Yasmine et al, 2015; Awwad et al, 2013; Barbour and Salameh, 2009). For example, findings from one of the most recently published cross-sectional studies, conducted among 2700 never-married university students from 17 universities across Lebanon, revealed that a considerable percentage of students declared being “regularly sexually active” (20%) or “had engaged in sexual activity” (15%). When segregated by sex, it showed that 65.2% of males had had sex (35.3% “regularly sexually active”, 29.9% “had tried it”), and 34.8% “had never engaged in sexual activity”. Similarly, the findings revealed that 14.9% of females had had sex (9.6% declared being “regularly sexually active”, 5.3% “had tried it”) and 85.1% “had never engaged in sexual activity” (Salameh et al, 2015).

These findings concurred with the findings of another research study, which aimed at assessing the health risk among Lebanese university students, where 31% of males and 8.6% of females declared having regular sexual activity (Salameh et al, 2014). On the other hand, findings from Salameh et al, (2015) were slightly lower than those from an earlier cross-sectional study conducted in 2009 among university students in both public and private universities in Lebanon by Barbour and Salameh (2009). The study, which aimed at evaluating the knowledge, attitudes and practices of students regarding contraception, revealed that 73.3% of males and 21.8% of females, declared having previous sexual relations compared to 65.2% and 14.9% in Salameh et al (2015). This might be because the
latest study by Salameh et al (2015) was conducted among more universities from all over Lebanon, including those in rural areas.

Gender discrepancies in reporting sexual activity were evident in all the quantitative studies I reviewed. In their study, Barbour and Salameh (2009) argued that the reasons why males declare having more sexual relationships than females might be due to religiosity (females tended to be more religious than males). Socioeconomic status was also an important factor (the sample had more females from public universities with lower SES), along with participants’ adherence to social norms that project inequity between men and women. However, I argue that all the above self-administered quantitative studies from Turkey, Iran, Tunisia and Lebanon might have encountered some bias in their responses. The percentages presented in all of these studies could be under-reported by women and over-reported by men. This is because, in traditional patriarchal societies, being a sexually experienced male indicates potency, strength, manliness, and virility - all of which are signs of enhanced masculinity (Mernissi, 1982). Whereas maintaining purity and virtue is at the core of conventional femininity for females (Mernissi, 1982; Ahmed, 1992; Abu Odeh, 2010). In her article “Virginity and Patriarchy” Fatima Mernissi (1982) phrased it accurately: “The deflowered virgin becomes a lost woman, but the man, like the legendary phoenix, emerges from the fray purer, more virile, better respected” (Mernissi, 1982: 186).

Moreover, not all the studies above defined what was meant by “sexually experienced” in their surveys. Therefore, even the interpretation of what is counted as “sexually experienced” or “having had premarital sex” also would have affected how young people reported their sexual activity.

The above studies suggest that young people, in general, are sexually active outside marriage, even in the most conservative contexts, such as Iran. However, there is still a huge gap in the literature in assessing and understanding young people’s sexual attitudes, behaviours, knowledge, their health risks and social risks, especially in more conservative social contexts such as in Syria, Jordan, Egypt, Libya, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq, Bahrain, United Arab Emirates among others. Also more qualitative studies are required to provide us with an in-depth understanding of how young people perceive sexual behaviour, and
how they respond to the health and social risks associated with it. In the next section, I look at studies which addressed the social risk of engaging in premarital sex.

3.4 Social risks of engaging in premarital sex

Questions of social reputation, social honour, and social exclusion seem to be a key issue for young women trying to negotiate a sexual identity in societies where women’s sexuality is highly policed and monitored. In Lebanon, Yasmine et al (2015) conducted a cross-sectional study among 895 non-sexually active university students, who had not yet engaged in any form of penetrative sexual intercourse. Intercourse was defined in the study as any form of oral, vaginal or anal sex. The study aimed to explore the reasoning behind postponing sexual debut among students from one of largest private universities in Beirut, while assessing the gender differences in that respect. The study’s findings revealed that the reasons for not engaging in any sexual intercourse were mainly socio-cultural. 47% were worried about gaining a bad reputation, 58% were worried about social rejection, 70% reported that premarital sex ran contrary to religious teaching, and 61% were worried about parental disapproval. Women were four times more likely than men to be worried about having a bad reputation and losing self-respect, five times more likely to consider themselves too young to be engaging in sex, six times more likely to be concerned with parental disapproval and with thinking that sex is disgusting. Moreover, women were three times more likely than men to be worried about societal disapproval and approximately 2.5 times more likely to report that sexual intercourse is against their beliefs and that they would feel guilty afterwards (Yasmine et al, 2015: 9 & 11).

The authors argue that the findings from this study show that the reasons for postponing engagement in premarital sex are associated with fears and social pressures, especially among young women. The findings also confirm the existence of gender discrimination and inequality in a patriarchal society, which deems women who engage in premarital sex as ‘morally corrupt’, and treats men as ‘sexually experienced’. This quantitative study is one of the first studies in Lebanon and Middle East which shed the light on the reasoning
behind engaging in or refraining from premarital sexual intercourse among university students. As such it suggests a list of social reasons, among other reasons, which influence young people’s decision for postponing penetrative sexual intercourse. This, however, requires further in-depth investigation.

In an ethnographic study titled “But What If Someone Sees Me?” Women, Risk, and the Aftershocks of Iran’s Sexual Revolution, Mahdavi (2009) also found that reputation was a concern. Mahdavi’s study aimed to understand the changing conception of risk among urban Iranian heterosexual women (aged 18-25), in light of the increased prevalence of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs) in Iran. The study revealed that a growing number of Iranian women are engaging in unprotected premarital sexual activity increasing their risk of contracting STIs and HIV. However, young women’s main concerns were not essentially the health risks in relation to their sexual behaviour. They were mostly concerned with the social risks associated with their sexual behaviour. The social risks were illustrated in their fears of being exposed (for example, being seen or caught with a male partner by a family member or by the morality police, being seen purchasing condoms or other family-planning products), and ruining their reputation (and by default, their family’s reputation). They also had fears of gossip and shame, fears of being stigmatised, and fears of physical and emotional violence. Mahdavi (2009) identifies these social risks as the main barriers to prevention and accessing health care services, such as obtaining HIV testing, purchasing condoms, and accessing harm-reduction centres, for example. In the study, many of the female participants admitted undergoing black-market abortion. However, all this was not of high importance to the female participants. The author emphasises how the social risks out-weighed the health risks among the majority of her women participants, concluding that, to young women, “safe sex referred to ‘socially safe’ sex” (2009: 12). This indicated that her participants considered themselves ‘safe’ when they simply succeeded in maintaining a good reputation. They hid their socially unacceptable behaviour, regardless of any health-risks, which seemed to be insignificant to them or of much less importance, most probably due to their lack of sex education.
Similarly, in their study, Bakass, Ferrand and Depledge (2013) reveal that young Moroccans feared some of the sexual health risks (STIs and unwanted pregnancies), which were associated in one way or another with social implications. For instance, unwanted pregnancies almost always resulted in abortion to avoid the associated social stigma, which later haunts both mother and child. The authors highlighted stories on the accidental loss of virginity, such as the accidental breaking of the hymen during non-penetrative sex, and rape. In both cases, women would want the man to whom they lost their virginity to marry them. Otherwise, they would face the consequences of being abandoned by the lover, being immediately divorced by the husband and subjected to intolerable humiliation. The research study (Bakass, Ferrand and Depledge, 2013) also addressed stories of a few exceptional liberal Moroccan women who deliberately broke the taboo and engaged in a full penetrative sexual relationship, some of whom were less worried about virginity in the presence of hymen reconstruction. Not all these women, though, were lucky enough to escape the social consequences of being socially abandoned and left unmarriageable.

Another qualitative study which examined the perceptions of Palestinian youth (16-24 years) towards sexual behaviour in West Bank (Massad et al, 2014), revealed that the participants reported the top three negative consequences of engaging in sexual activities as: a) health related risks (such as contracting STIs and unwanted pregnancies), b) social stigma or disruption to social relations, such as bringing shame to the family (mainly for women), and c) feelings of “sadness, regret, or mental repercussions”. Whereas the top three positive consequences were associated with “personal pleasure and relief of desire; novelty, excitement, and risk; and increased status or prestige of manhood and masculinity – men only” (Massad et al, 2014: 5).

The above studies touched on some of the social implications associated with premarital sex. Beyond the health risks of engaging in premarital sex, women being aware of the social risk suggests that women would have to negotiate sexual boundaries when engaging in premarital sex. Negotiating such boundaries becomes important to avoid or minimise the risk of social abandonment and exclusion, social shame, loss of the woman’s reputation as well as her family’s, legal punishment, and verbal and physical violence.
3.5 Virginity and the boundaries of sexual behaviours

Whilst women’s virginity, in the form of preserving the intact hymen, remains central to preserving a good reputation and avoiding social risks, young people tended to negotiate the boundaries of their intimate and sexual relationships. Using qualitative semi-structured interviews, Bakass, Ferrand and Depledge (2013) aimed at examining the new arrangements of sexual debut between Moroccan men and women, aged between 18 and 40 years, with varied marital status (that is, married, unmarried, divorced and widowed) and from different socioeconomic educational backgrounds. All participants had experienced sexual relationships. The findings revealed that the major risk for women before marriage is ‘losing virginity’ in the form of intact hymen, due to the great social emphasis placed on female virginity. When negotiating sexual relationships, two rules were at the core ‘arrangements’ of any premarital sexual relationship: 1) agreeing to mandatory secrecy of the sexual relationship, and 2) preserving the woman’s intact hymen as young women’s priority remains marriage. Both men and women were careful about preserving the woman’s virginity (intact hymen). This mutually agreed concept was fundamentally acknowledged and accepted by men considering that the vast majority of men will only marry a virgin. Therefore, the majority of the participants admitted practicing “mutual caressing” or what participants called “brushing”. In some cases, other forms of non-vaginal-penetrative sex were practiced to preserve virginity such as anal sex. Non-vaginal-penetrative sex was also perceived as a protection against unwanted pregnancies and STIs.

One of the interesting findings of the study revealed that the first [sexual] partner for women is likely to be their future husband. Women were fearful of rejecting sexual contact with their lovers or unmarried partners, as this could have put them at risk of being abandoned by the man and consequently not marrying him. Both Moroccan men and women considered sexual relationships outside marriage a chance to build a stronger emotional bond with the partner and eventually marry them. Nevertheless, unlike women, men do not always want to be confined by a non-penetrative sexual relationship, as they want to gain more sexual experience. Full vaginal penetrative sex is usually practiced with a sexually experienced woman, such as a divorced woman or a sex worker depending on
the circumstances. Men would usually lose their virginity at earlier ages than women (Bakass, Ferrand and Depledge, 2013). This reflects the importance of men being sexually experienced. They gain this experience by accessing the bodies of certain women, such as sex workers and women who are divorced. This shows that there is a distinction between women: those who are worthy of social protection and rights (good, virginal women), and those “others”, who have not adhered to accepted moral values and thus are not accorded the same treatment as those who remain virgins.

Bakass, Ferrand and Depledge (2013) study focuses on the consequence of being unmarried as a result of losing virginity (hymen). Although honour, shame and social exclusion were concisely mentioned in the study, further elaboration on these concepts would have been beneficial. Gender roles and power relations were evident throughout the study, which is not surprising, considering the patriarchal structure of Moroccan society, and the ways in which masculinity and femininity are expressed. For instance, men played dual masculine roles. One, by being “protective” of the woman they are intimately engaged with, through ensuring non-vaginal penetrative sex, and the other, by wanting to be sexually experienced as a “man” and having full penetrative sex with non-virgins. Femininity, on the other hand, was also ensured through submission to a man’s sexual needs and pleasures, even if that put the woman at risk of losing - what they perceive as the most valuable - their intact hymen, and bearing harsh social consequences as a result.

The authors conclude that the new “arrangements between the sexes” seem to accommodate the demands of both social tradition and individual sexual desire. However, in reality, these arrangements do not promote women’s liberation; instead they reassure male domination in society through the acceptance and adoption of the fact that men should only marry virgins (Bakass, Ferrand and Depledge, 2013).

Other research also suggests that young people make clear distinctions between sexual behaviour that is vaginal and inclusive of penetrative sex, and sexual activity that does not. For example, in a cross-sectional study, which aimed at investigating the attitudes of Lebanese university students towards hymenoplasty, premarital sex, and virginity, Awwad,
et al (2013) found that 61% of male participants and 27.3% of female participants approved premarital vaginal intercourse. However, 55% of the females approved premarital sexual flirting without vaginal intercourse, indicating the physical importance of virginity in the form of the intact hymen over chastity. Overall, 57% of males stated that they would agree to marry a non-virgin, compared 78% of females. This suggests that there are still a high number of young men (43%) who would not marry a woman if she did not have her hymen intact. Reasons for disapproval were related to personal, social and health issues, such as lack of trust in the partner, religious reasons, fear of sexually transmitted disease, fear of social embarrassment, and fear of family embarrassment. This study was carried out among 600 university students (300 males, 300 females) randomly selected from five main universities in Beirut representing diverse religions and regions (2013: 1628).

Moreover, Massad et al, (2014) shows that Palestinian males (16-24 years) in West Bank, tend to engage in premarital sex much more than females, and they mostly do so with sex workers. Young women, though, reported engaging in premarital sex as a counter reaction to the societal oppression they encounter. However, in the study, it was not clear whether or not premarital sexual behaviour meant vaginal intercourse. On the whole, vaginal intercourse was perceived to be rare outside the framework of marriage compared to oral and anal sex due to the risk of pregnancy. Virtual sex (phone and internet) on the other hand, seemed to be commonly practiced among Palestinian youth.

The studies above revealed different ways of negotiating sexual boundaries in the relationship. Often, these negotiations were concerned with protecting women’s intact hymen. However, another study conducted among Turkish students revealed that the new negotiations of sexual boundaries go beyond breaking the hymen to establishing new sexual and moral boundaries and performing virginity as I will now explain.
3.6 The construction of new sexual morality

Young women, who are straddling both modern and traditional cultures, are concerned to appear virginal in order to maintain their reputation and form a solid, respectable identity. Virginity in the form of intact hymen, as I mentioned earlier, comes central to these narratives. Gul Ozyegin’s (2009) research in Turkey points to interesting dilemmas young women face in traditional cultures, as they manage their sexuality. The study aimed to explore the types and associated meanings of contemporary challenges to virginit norm among an elite group of educated and upwardly mobile single women at one of the most prestigious universities in Turkey. Ozyegin (2009) suggests there are many contradictions and tensions these young women face, when seeking sexual freedom and autonomy in opposition to the expectations of their parents and male partners. Young women negotiate and respond to the challenges they face when transgressing societal demands for the maintenance of their virginity by adopting, what the author calls, “virginal facades”. This helps them manage the conflict between the traditional societal expectation of virginity and the new “emerging premarital sex culture”. By “virginal facades”, the author refers to the purposefully ambiguous identities of “virgin-hood” women develop, allowing them to:

“navigate the shifting and un-delineated boundaries of what is permissible and prohibited. I call these identities virginal facades to capture the dynamic nature of putting on appearances, pretensions and creating or permitting silences that enable young women to accommodate their own desires and negotiate the often conflicting expectations of parents, men and peers” (Ozyegin, 2009: 113).

Yet this new “premarital sex culture” only moralises the loss of virginity in the context of “love and emotional investment”. Therefore, it shifts the morality and notion of purity associated with the “physical virginity” to the “morality of virginity”. In other words, Ozyegin (2009) argues that there are new definitions of purity and impurity, where a girl who loses her virginity in a long-term love relationship is considered morally a virgin (pure). On the other hand, a woman who loses her virginity during a casual encounter becomes impure (Ozyegin, 2009: 115). This was also evident in a colloquial saying among young men and women interviewed which holds: “virginity is not between the legs; it
resides in the brain” (ibid.: 109). The study also reveals how the social class of the family affects feelings of emotional “indebtedness” towards parents and feelings of “guilt” towards secret sexual relationships or loss of virginity. Such feelings were particularly affiliated with those originating from lower class families.

Yet Ozyegin concludes that it is difficult to answer the question of whether or not virginal facades empower or disempower women. On the one hand, the vagueness of the “virgin-hood” identity allows a wider margin within which to negotiate sexual freedom, and permits embodied sexuality, as well as being a means to protect women’s reputation and honour. On the other hand, “putting on virginal facades ultimately reinforces the valuation of virginity and diverts attention away from articulating a discourse of desire and pleasure as well as exploring social and emotional risks of sexual intimacy” (Ozyegin, 2009: 119).

In brief, this study suggests two main things: First, sexually active young women do not disclose their virgin- hood identity and continue to perform virginity depending on their audiences. Second, they defined new boundaries for sexual morality. The conservative society dictates that women’s sexual morality is embedded in the physical preservation of the intact hymen. These young women perceive sexual morality as engaging in sexual relationship within the framework of love and marriage. But, because the tension between the traditional and modern sexual morality retains, these young women put on their masks of virginal purity.

3.7 Reconstructing the hymen

Virginal facades and avoiding penile-vaginal intercourse are not the only ways in which young women may negotiate the loss or maintenance of their virginity. Studies from the EMENA countries such as Iran, Lebanon, Turkey, Egypt and Morocco, amongst others, revealed that women are increasingly demanding hymen reconstruction surgeries before marriage (Kaivanara, 2016; Awwad et al, 2013; Cindoglu, 1997; Kandela, 1996; Mernissi, 1982). Hymen reconstruction, which is also known as ‘hymen repair’, ‘hymenorrhaphy’
and ‘hymenoplasty’, is considered a form of gynaecological cosmetic surgery, in which a hymen is artificially restored (Eich, 2010; Cook and Dickens, 2009). Such surgeries may at many times be a life saver for young women in cultures which value the purity and virginity of the bride and consider it an essential precondition for marriage (Cook and Dickens, 2009), especially in cultures which still display the stained blood sheet on the first day of marriage, or impose virginity examination on young women. However, hymen reconstruction is not merely requested by young unmarried women in traditional Middle Eastern cultures but in western cultures as well (Moorst et al, 2012; Eich, 2010), where it is mostly legal and treated as a cosmetic surgery (Christianson and Eriksson, 2015; Cook and Dickens, 2009). However, hymen reconstruction is an illegal and forbidden practice in most Arab countries (Christianson and Eriksson, 2015), and can be an issue of moral dilemma and controversy (Moorst et al, 2012; Christianson and Eriksson, 2015; Cook and Dickens, 2009).

In Lebanon, though, hymen reconstruction is treated like any other cosmetic surgery, but there is intense secrecy and confidentiality surrounding it. Awwad et al (2013) found that 25.7% of male students compared to 19.1% of female students approved of hymenoplasty. The reasons for approval revolved around the following, with no significant gender difference: “It saves one from social embarrassment” (69.6 %); “it preserves a woman’s rights, autonomy and sexual freedom” (72.2 %); “it is harmless like plastic surgery” (61.7%); “it saves one from one’s husband’s prejudice” (67.8%); “it saves one from physical harm and death” (63.5%). Whereas the reasons for disapproval mainly revolved around moral and ethical reasons: “It is a form of deceiving and cheating” (79.3%); “betrays honesty in the relationship” (79.8 %); “only for victims of sexual assault” (58.8 %); “not approved by religion” (50.5%); and “reinforces social injustice and gender inequality” (47.7%). When male participants were asked about their declared action if they discovered after marriage that their wife had undergone hymenoplasty and hid it from them, 46.3% stated they “would divorce her”; 47% answered they “would forgive her”; 5.3% reported they “would hurt her” and 4% claimed “they would kill her”. Muslim males were more likely to report “divorcing her”, and Christians were more likely to “forgive her”. However, religious affiliation was not significant among males, who reported “hurting” and
“killing her”. These latter two responses were associated with males of a lower socio-economic status. The authors concluded that “the necessity to comply with hegemonic community expectations to avoid disapproval, disownment, and/or physical harm has been the motive for some women to seek various forms of hymen reconstructive procedures” (Awwad et al, 2013: 1632). Although this study showed how the social class of males and sometimes their religious affiliation may influence the way they react to hymen reconstruction, the study did not necessarily look at the level of religiosity of these individuals.

Women tend to turn to the cosmetic surgery industry to correct any evidence of sexual penetration. Yet researchers are unsure if this practice is a form of resistance or collusion with patriarchal states and gendered norms. Kaivanara (2016) argues that women who use hymen reconstructive surgeries are challenging the restrictive social norms and gender roles of Muslim states (such as Iran, where the study was conducted). However, at the same time, women are continuing to conform to these social rules to “re-establish the symbolic requirements of marriage”. She thus raises interesting points about the extent to which women are colluding with existing gendered norms. Undergoing hymen reconstruction after engaging in premarital sex might mean women are using “their bodies as a mark of resistance to the state and its hierarchies… defying dominant punitive rules by renegotiating their feminine identities in complex new social realities”. However, the extent to which they are resisting by “employing sexuality to promote their power” (Kaivanara, 2016: 82) is questionable. Whilst these young women seem to be challenging the social and moral taboos around sexuality, they are actually complying with a patriarchal system by reassuring society of the importance of women’s virginity before marriage, thereby reinforcing existing power relations. Cindoglu (1997) also agrees with Kaivanara (2016) and notes that women (in Turkey) demanding hymen reconstruction surgery are demanding more control over their own bodies, but that it is merely a strategy for women “to gain a better position in a patriarchal society, where the virginity of the bride is so important” (Cindoglu, 1997: 260), and to take away a major obstacle in the face of marriage without compromising premarital sexual pleasures.
The difference between communities, who value the “hymen” as a symbol of sexual purity and honour in the West, and those in the Middle East is that women’s virginity in developed countries is not regulated by legal penal codes, as such penal codes oppose laws supporting women’s sexual rights. Virginity and honour among conservative communities in the west is merely “socially” policed, more accurately, by the woman’s family and kin rather than by the state. Whereas, in the vast majority of the countries in the EMENA region, women’s virginity and sexuality is controlled and regulated through multiple layers of authority starting with the family and kin to the state itself through its different institutions (legal, religious and educational).

So far, all the above studies have provided strong evidence and good examples of how women in traditional patriarchal societies and communities continue to bear the biggest burden when engaging in sexual intercourse before or outside marriage. We can conclude that the social risk of engaging in premarital sex is profoundly gendered. However, these studies do not necessarily suggest that men do not undergo some social risks as well – as in the case of Iran (Mahdavi, 2007; Mahdavi, 2009), which punishes both men and women for adultery, and in the case of forced marriages in Morocco (Bakass, Ferrand and Depledge, 2013) and other places. Nevertheless, the intensity and severity of the social risks women encounter seem to be greater than those of men. Besides, most of the Arab countries demonstrate flagrant discrimination against women in their legal and penal codes, especially through penal codes associated with controlling sexuality and monitoring morality.

At the same time, whilst women’s sexuality is being monitored and controlled, a dichotomy in social scripts is becoming more apparent in some countries in the Middle east and Arab world, due to the coexistence of traditional norms and values along with modernity. This dichotomy demands women to be sexually attractive yet at the same time to preserve their chastity and virginity until marriage.
3.8 Looking sexy but not having sex

Looking sexy, while preserving chastity, is not only prominent, but was also a common theme, that came out from research on sexuality in the Middle East. Roseanne Khalaf’s (2006) research among Lebanese students at the American University of Beirut, one of the most prestigious universities in the Middle East region, asked “why female students conform to the highly fashionable, exaggerated dress code that serves to exhibit the body in provocative ways”. Lebanese female students tend to wear suggestive fashionable clothing and display their bodies, beauty and their sex appeal to attract men. But it was also important to keep men at a safe distance, ‘men can look but not touch’ Khalaf (2006: 185). Khalaf found that many female students enjoyed playing the role of a seductive temptress. Male students, on the other hand, were aware of the games their female friends play and, as one male student put it, he was captivated watching “sexy females exhibiting themselves all day long” (ibid.:185). However, other male students perceived this obsession with body image as tasteless because most women look alike, as they dress in the same vulgar way. Women’s purposeful seductiveness is highly competitive, as expressed by some of the students: “the competition for this scarce commodity (men) is so intense that many women on campus are engaged in a competitive game of ‘outdoing’ each other” (ibid. :184). Female students, who described men as a “scarce commodity”, were referring to the frustrating demographic reality of the sex ratio imbalance (that is, one male for every four females) between men and women in Lebanon due to wars, political instability and disproportionate outmigration (Khalaf, 2006).

Khalaf (2006) argues that the ways in which women are eroticising their bodies goes beyond merely being a trendy and fashionable craze, as it rather reflects a deeper societal conflict: “[it] is almost a textbook instance of anomie, that is a disjunction between normative expectations which condone, indeed cajole, young women to be sexually attractive but condemns them if they become sexually active” (ibid.: 185). As I pointed out in the previous chapter, Lebanese society, which is straddling both traditional and modern cultures, dictates two conflicting cultural scripts on women: one which demands women conform to traditional gender norms of virginity, and another that encourages women to be
modern, educated, and good looking. However, not all women conformed to this dichotomy in the same way. Whilst some female students maintained their femininity to remain the “objects of male desire” and competed with each other to attract men, a considerable number of female students refused the role of being passive and submissive, and portrayed themselves as active agents, directly resisting the norms, which devalue their autonomy and well-being (Khalaf, 2006). This acute division between conservative and liberal female students reflected the diversity among female students in the study. But what was also interesting was that none of the female students, even the conservative ones, pointed out the likelihood that men would be interested in them or men would be happy with them in non-sexual ways (Khalaf, 2006).

Salamandra’s (2006) ethnographic work, on the other hand, which explores consumption, display and social distinction among a group of elite women in Damascus, Syria, found a similar practice that sexualised women’s fashions among the elites. She notes that this was often about wealth and social class: “Elite names remain elite, and new names become elite through public displays of wealth” (ibid.: 153). Cultures of consumption are centred around spaces such as hotels, cafes and restaurants in communities where people do not know each other in person. Instead, they know about, and of, each other due to the way they present themselves and their wealth in society. Women, more often than men, are the ones who reflect their family’s wealth and status through their physical appearance, beauty and self-representation. Here, women’s value becomes part of the reputation of the family, which is displayed in public as part of their social identification. Women’s appearance of chastity remains the most important: “the appearance of sexual purity becomes a form of capital for a young woman” (ibid.: 154). Preserving chastity requires young women to withhold one-to-one interactions with men before their engagement and to return home early by sunset. Any premarital relationships should be concealed and overshadowed by secrecy. Failing to display and affirm chastity does not only harm the young woman’s future in being unmarriageable, but can be also used against her family. Women’s sexual purity and chastity is of central importance in opposing families who use “women’s sexual purity” to shame each other and ruin another family’s social image and reputation.
On the other hand, young unmarried women are encouraged to attract a wealthy future husband with a good social status. Most of the time, displaying women’s sexual appeal is key to doing so. Young women use some semi-private mixed spaces, such as private health clubs or expensive hotel pools, as venues to attract men through displaying their bodies’ attractiveness and overall beauty. Only in these closed private spaces, do women and men exchange gazes; however, they are not allowed to socialise. Moreover, young women do not only display their beauty for men, but equally for other women, as mothers and sisters play an important role in finding a good bride. Damascene’s elite women are constantly comparing themselves and competing with each other, which is sometimes reflected in an ambiguous hostility. The emergence of new social classes and the mingling of them with older ones has increased competition within the elite marriage market. As a result, this has pushed unmarried women into an apparent display of their bodies while limiting their involvement in public life to preserve their chastity’s social value (Salamandra, 2006).

Nevertheless, the conflict generated by the discord between increasing access to new trends and venues of consumerism, and the traditional values of sexual modesty, family honour, and patriarchy was reflected in the way women dressed. The dressing style of women ranged between two extremes. One is displayed as highly sensual or sexual, which is demonstrated in “tight, figure-hugging and sometimes cleavage-revealing clothing in vivid colours, heavy makeup, teased and moussed long hair, high heels, multiple gold or gilt accessories” (ibid.: 156). Whereas the other extreme is demonstrated in wearing “white headscarves and simple blue or grey overcoats”, avoiding any kind of sexual attractiveness. In the words of a Damascene woman: “we have cockteasers and muhajibat [veiled women] and nothing in between” (ibid.: 157). In brief, Salamandra’s (2006) study revealed how elite Damascenes demonstrate their appearance of sexual virtuousness and purity as a form of social capital.

Although the two studies seemed to have some aspects in common in terms of the contradictions or dichotomies of the cultural scripts (that is, being sexually attractive, not sexually active), Khalaf’s study of the Lebanese students revealed that female students are much more permissive than young women in Damascus. Some students expressed very
liberal views towards sex and sexuality (including reflection on same sex experiences). Moreover, in Lebanon, meeting in mixed public places is the dominant trend, and socialisation between the sexes is very common and mostly perceived as ‘normal’ and ‘expected’. Therefore, despite the conservativeness of some women, others displayed themselves as sexy without being sexual through adopting highly sexualised forms of dress and displaying themselves as sexual without having to actually be sexual. Being a virgin has social capital, yet being a beautiful, chaste, virgin has more advantages, as women still live in a gendered society, where marriage is all important and this is highly valued.

To summarise, the literature review presented in this chapter reveals that engaging in premarital sexual activity, in conservative societies, is socially risky behaviour, especially for young, never married women, for whom sexuality is perceived as “dangerous”, and needs to be controlled. Controlling women’s sexuality is a core concern in traditional patriarchal societies. The execution of this control is not merely limited to the males in the family (father, husband, brother and kin), but is also ensured by the state through all its institutions - ranging from the political and legal institutions (laws and penal codes) to the religious (morality and sin), medical (virginity tests and female genital mutilation) and educational institutions (absence of sex education; monitoring girls’ behaviours), among others (like the media). This entire governance of sex is regulated by gender-based hierarchies and power relationships. However, at the same time, young men and women both engage in premarital sex. Although, statistically speaking, men outnumber women in their premarital sexual activity, for the reasons which I mentioned above.

This chapter also looked at the ‘risks’ or ‘consequences’ associated with premarital sex in the literature. Apart from the health risks (including sexual violence) associated with premarital heterosexual activity, the vast majority of the literature focused on four major consequences of sexual behaviour, which were particularly relevant for women. These were 1- honour crimes due to the shame this behaviour brings to the woman’s family, 2- loss of reputation and social exclusion, 3- legal actions which differ from one country to another as per their local penal codes (these may range from imprisonment to death sentence), and 4- becoming unmarriageable.
I have also shown that women in different countries in the Middle East are straddling two cultures: traditional and modern, at different levels and in different ways. This sometimes resulted in dichotomies in the cultural and societal scripts in relation to women’s feminine roles. Women are expected to buy into a contradiction: they have to look beautiful and sexy yet refrain from having sex. This is a reflection of women’s sexual repression, their gendered presentation of the self, and the ongoing objectification of women by the use of a woman’s physical body to respond to and satisfy men’s sexual desires. To respond to this dichotomy, women had to negotiate their sexual lives by appearing to be ‘good’ and “virtuous” through enacting a traditional social image, which the society expected from them, even if, in reality, they were not conforming to these traditions. The literature has shown that women are willing to fake a virtuous image of being virginal and chaste by having hymen reconstructions, carefully negotiating sexual relationships, and maintaining ambiguous identities around their ‘virgin-hood’. This is how they contribute to the maintenance of traditional norms and values.

In my research study, I aimed to explore the extent to which the social risks presented in this chapter are reflected by university students in Beirut. If these social risks are deemed to be real, then why do university students still engage in premarital sex? How do they negotiate these risks, and what strategies do they use to manage them? These questions will guide my findings and analysis chapter.
CHAPTER 4
Theoretical framework

In the previous chapter, I highlighted some of the relevant debates on social risk and sexual behaviour, while addressing the importance of virginity and the hymen, and ways in which women negotiate their relationships and sexual boundaries. In this chapter, I explain how I position my empirical work in respect of the work of other scholars and theorists. I mainly address the theoretical aspects of risk from a sociocultural perspective, as raised and discussed in the sociological literature. Accordingly, I review three main sociocultural theories: ‘risk society’, ‘governmentality’, and ‘cultural/symbolic approach to risk’. I mainly draw on the latter approach to risk by Mary Douglas, and I explain how her approach best supports the discussion and arguments I raise in relation to my empirical work or findings. I then elaborate on the social constructionist approach to risk, and I discuss some works on voluntary risk-taking and gendered risk. However, whilst my research study primarily aims to investigate the ‘social risks’ of engaging in premarital sex, it also aims to explore how these social risks are being negotiated and managed in a relatively conservative society. Accordingly, I do not narrow down my theoretical literature review merely to ‘risk’. I also touch on some theoretical aspects of gender, power, and sexuality.

4.1 Why use a risk perspective?

As mentioned earlier, in the introduction, I am interested in looking at ‘risk’ because those engaging in premarital sex in Lebanese society encounter both health risks, due to the absence of sex education (Baydoun, 2008), and social risks (Yasmine et al, 2015; Awwad et al, 2013). The latter specifically concerns young women, due to the social taboos and moral restrictions that exist around issues of sex and sexuality (Yasmine et al, 2015; Seidman, 2012). Surveying the existing literature, which tackled the notion of risk in relation to sexual behaviour, revealed that the vast majority of these research studies mainly
focused on *health risks* in relation to risky sexual behaviour. Sexual *health risks* included contracting sexually transmitted infections, including HIV, unwanted pregnancies, abortion and sexual violence (for example Decker et al, 2011; Holland et al, 1998; Cooper, 2002; Mohammad et al, 2007; McGowan et al, 2004; Wagner et al, 2012; Coleman and Testa, 2008). Few studies focused on economic (see Deering et al, 2013) and/or emotional risks, especially in the case of sex work (see Sanders, 2004). Such studies examined individuals’ sexual behaviours by looking at the determinants of risky sexual behaviour (risk factors vs. preventative factors), knowledge, attitudes, values and practices. Moreover, many of the studies that looked at sexually related risks have targeted high-risk groups: mainly sex workers, people living with HIV, men who have sex with men, or people who inject drugs, besides adolescents. The largest portions of these studies were quantitative and were carried out by researchers from various disciplines, mainly from public health, medicine, pharmacy, epidemiology or clinical research. My research study goes beyond the health-risk nexus, and examines the risk of engaging in premarital sex from a social angle.

On the whole, and with the exception of a few studies, little attention has been given to the *social risks* associated with sexual behaviour, or what might be socially perceived as promiscuous sex (depending on the context). Only a few qualitative studies addressed the social consequences or ‘risks’ linked to premarital sex, as I highlighted in the previous chapter. These studies were carried out in conservative contexts such as in Morocco, Turkey and Iran, given the relevance of this topic in these contexts. However, these studies did not use a sociological approach to risk. They have not touched on the subject of risk-taking and risk-avoidance decisions, nor on risk management strategies. The scarcity of the literature, which investigated the *social risk* of sexual behaviour from a sociocultural approach to risk, positions my research study as adding value to the existing literature. As such, it suggests an innovative understanding of sexual behaviour and attitudes, by applying a sociocultural view of risk. Therefore, it extends the sociologically oriented risk literature by applying its insights to a new area.
4.2 Review of sociocultural risk theories

The notion of risk has been widely studied across different scientific fields and disciplines. However, the definitions, views, approaches to, and understandings of risk vary extensively across these disciplines (Althaus, 2005; Lupton, 1999a and 1999b; Wilkinson, 2010). For instance, the concept of risk in the mathematics and science disciplines such as engineering, physics, biology, medicine, epidemiology, and technological sciences, among others, is viewed as a rational and objective reality (Althaus, 2005; Lupton, 1999a). Other fields in the social sciences, mainly anthropology and sociology, study risk within social and cultural contexts. The latter perceive individuals’ perceptions of risk - including their risk-taking and risk-avoidance decisions, as well as risk negotiations - as shaped and formed through their continual interactions within their particular cultural and social milieu (Lupton 1999a; 1999b). In her article on “Disciplinary Perspective on the Epistemological Status of Risk”, Althaus presents a table, which summarises the different approaches to risk across different scientific disciplines (Althaus, 2005: 569). The author stresses that the central differences between these disciplines is the distinction between a ‘real and objective risk’, which accounts for the metaphysical feature of risk, and a ‘perceived, subjective or observed risk’, which accounts for an epistemological approach to risk (ibid.: 568-569).

Besides, there is no common understanding or consensus on how risk should be studied or defined, or even analysed in relation to different social and cultural settings (Wilkinson, 2010). This may suggest that the identification of risk and the application of these grand theories within the empirical research reveals a subject with a great opportunity for innovation, which potentially holds a wide spectrum of possible explanations. For the purposes of this research, taking into consideration that I focus on the social aspect of risk within a specific social and cultural setting, I looked into how the notion of risk is theorised in the sociological literature.

To understand the conceptualisation of “risk” from a sociocultural approach, I reviewed a number of sociological books on risk and familiarised myself with some of the main sociological grand theories of risk. This was very important to explore whether the theoretical framework of risk links to my empirical work, on the whole, and to determine
which theoretical approach best relates to my findings. As per the literature, the main sociocultural theories of risk, which continue to be influential in the field of the social sciences, are: The work of Ulrich Beck (1992) on ‘Risk Society’, Anthony Giddens (1990) on ‘Consequences of Modernity’, Michel Foucault (1991) on ‘Governmentality’ and the work of the anthropologist Mary Douglas on ‘Risk and Blame’ (1992) and on ‘Purity and Danger’ (1966). Whilst all these theorists have challenged the technical and scientific approach to risk adopted by other scientific disciplines (Lupton 1999a), there are substantial disparities in their approaches to risk. Not all of these grand theories were relevant to my work, as I explain below. However, I find it important to provide a brief overview of each, to explain which of these were excluded, and why I thought they were irrelevant to my work.

In her book, “Risk”, Lupton (1999b) categorises the above mentioned sociocultural theories into three main approaches: a) Risk Society perspective - grouping the work of both Beck and Giddens together, while acknowledging a few differences between their propositions, b) Governmentality perspective - mainly the work of some scholars who applied the Foucauldian theories on power relations and governmentality to the notion of risk, and c) the cultural/symbolic approach - mainly the work of the anthropologist Mary Douglas. I will address them, accordingly, in that order.

### 4.2.1 Risk society

The works of Beck and Giddens focus on the macro-sociological approach to risk, and are concerned with institutions, groups, corporations, and governments. Their work is substantially tailored towards western post-modern individualised societies. Their approach to risk is fundamentally concerned with risks generated as a result of technological and scientific advancements, resulting in what they called the ‘risk society’. The ‘risk society’ is essentially characterised by uncertainty and insecurity. Risk, according to Beck, is defined as a “systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernisation itself” (Beck, 1992: 21). Such risks could be environmental disasters - due to risks postured by nuclear and chemical pollutions and biotechnology- the spread of

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epidemic diseases, and genetically modified products (Beck, 1992). The risks could also be social risks such as unemployment, change in the pattern of marriage, and the breakdown of the family (as highlighted in the work of Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim, 1995); or security risks as a result of the threat of terrorist attacks, a subject highlighted in Beck’s recent work (Beck, 2006). These risks cannot be calculated because their scale of enormity is unpredictable. They are no longer limited in time or space as their effects can touch the lives of future generations, as well as cross the national boundaries towards a more global perspective. Beck (1992) argues that western societies have now progressed from the stage of modernity to a new stage of ‘reflexive modernity’. ‘Reflexive modernisation’ is defined as the “self-confrontation with the effects of risk society that cannot be dealt with and assimilated in the system of industrial society” (Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994: 6). According to Beck, the question of social accountability and responsibility is inevitable when it comes to risk (Beck, 2006). In reflexive modernity, the individual him or herself takes part in responsibility for managing the risks they might anticipate through self-provision.

Despite their influential work, Beck and Giddens’ approach to risk was criticised by a number of scholars for their macro-sociological and individualistic perspective which failed to pay attention to other factors influencing risk such as age, gender, social class, knowledge and experience (for example Lash, 2000; Alexander, 1996, Lash and Wayne, 1992; Elliott, 2002; Lupton 1999b among others). Lash and Wayne (1992) highlighted the failure of Beck and Giddens’ conceptualisation of the ‘risk society’ to account for the various ways people experience and respond to risk. Other scholars underlined the lack of any empirical research, which could test their grand theories (Lupton 1999a; Austen, 2009; Alexander, 1996). Their ‘risk society’ approach was also seen as being “ethnocentric in its sweeping claims, failing to recognise the diversity of national and sub-national interests and concerns” (Lupton and Tulloch, 2002: 333).
4.2.2 Governmentality and risk

Foucault’s writings on power relations and governmentality have inspired a number of scholars such as Dean (1999) and Ewald (1991). These scholars, when addressing the notion of risk in neo-liberal societies, which are characterised by “a political rule which champions individual freedom and rights against the excessive intervention of the state” (Lupton, 2006: 13), applied a Foucauldian understanding of power and governmentality in their work.

When Foucault wrote about governmentality, he was trying to explore the origin and the ways in which governmental systems were able to practice power “over and within the administrative structures and populations of western nation states” (Wilkinson, 2010: 53). However, scholars who wrote about risk, using Foucault’s writings, were influenced by his writings on the interrelationship between power and subjectivity. Foucault did not see power as enacted by the state or capitalism or as a domination of one group over another. To him power is present and enacted at all levels of modern society. Power is a relation. By using the term “power relations”, Foucault means that groups and individuals are conducted to behave in a certain way. However, at the same time, they themselves have chosen to endorse these behaviours (which they were directed to) as their preferable way of living:

“Government did not refer only to political structures or to the management of states; rather, it designated the way in which the conduct of individuals or of groups might be directed: the government of children, of souls, of communities, of families, of the sick. It did not only cover the legitimately constituted forms of political or economic subjection but also modes of action, more or less considered or calculated, which were destined to act upon the possibilities of action of other people. To govern, in this sense, is to structure the possible field of action of others” (Foucault, 1982: 790).

In other words, governmentality shapes and guides people’s choices; however, at the same time, people are active in their choices and in self-governing themselves. A governmentality approach to risk indicates that individuals become actively involved in avoiding risk, and are responsible for taking part in risk management through self-
governance. Experts have a vital role to play in guiding people and providing them with the relevant knowledge for risk avoidance and management; however, the individuals themselves are given the responsibility and a moral obligation to listen to the experts’ advice, to seek knowledge, and to govern themselves (Denney, 2005; Lupton, 1999b). This has been referred to as attaining the “conduct of conduct” (Wilkinson, 2010: 54). For example, the risky behaviours identified in health promotion require attention from experts and professionals who, in their turn, make the necessary effort to direct people so that “people conduct themselves along a select course of action and towards a particular set of goals” (Wilkinson, 2010; 54). Those who fail to avoid risks due to negligence or bad self-governance become victims of moral vilification (Lupton, 1999a).

I argue that, the concept of governmentality itself can help explain some aspects of the power relationships in the Lebanese society. In other words, the way power is enacted in the society may dictate who is at higher “social risk”. For example, the Lebanese society as a whole may use its power to pressure families and individuals to abide to its socially constructed norms and values. As a result, they avoid being exposed to “social” risks. Those who fail to abide by the rules become at risk of moral vilification. However, in this case, the society is putting individuals, who do not abide by its rules, at risk, to protect its social norms and values. The society’s conduct is not tailored to protect individuals from risk, without them being submissive to its rules. Here, I emphasise the term “social” risk, because social risks are not universal risks as is the case with “health risks” for example. Health and environmental risks, as addressed by the risk society and governmentality, are more or less, “real” and “universal” risks. Certain toxins pollute the air; certain bacteria and viruses cause certain diseases, and so on. On the contrary, social risks are context and culture specific. If premarital sex is deemed socially risky in Lebanese society, it may not be so in Swedish or Norwegian societies, on the whole.

Therefore, whist the concept of governmentality may partially be applicable to my work, it does not necessarily explain why engaging in premarital sex is socially risky. It cannot explain what moral meanings exist behind it. It cannot explain how social risks can be managed and why they are managed that way.
4.2.3 Cultural/symbolic approach to risk

The cultural approach to risk has been mainly developed by the anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966, 1992). Her work on risk criticises the ‘individualist’ approaches to risk (Lupton 1999b). In her work, Douglas highlights the importance of the ‘collective’ over the ‘individual’, where she considered that risk-taking is not merely an individual decision, but a decision which involves others, especially members within an individual’s social network (Douglas, 1992). She criticises modern ways of assessing risk, which reduce risk merely to scientific calculations of probability at the individual level, without taking into consideration cultural context and cultural difference. She argues that analysing the notion of risk, aside from its moral, cultural and political context, in an attempt to seek objectivity, is invalid. Such an approach fails to explain why people would still take part in what has been identified as “risky”. The scientific approach also fails to take into consideration any aspect of choice or preference, which an individual makes within their social context and through their interactions with others:

“To invoke very low probabilities of a particular dangerous event makes surprisingly little difference to the understanding of a choice. This is not because the public does not understand the sums, but because many other objectives, which it cares about have been left out of the risk calculation… It fails to take account of persons’ interaction with one another, their advice to one another, their persuasions and intersubjective mobilisations of belief” (Douglas, 1992: 40).

As such, Douglas’s work on risk recognises the diversity of cultures in the ways individuals and social groups identify and experience risks and danger, expectations, obligations, judgments, motives, commitments, compromises and punishments. To her, understanding the perception of risk necessitates an understanding of what is considered “safe enough for a particular culture” (ibid.: 41) rather than approaching it from a “culture-free individual” perspective (ibid.: 42). In other words, Douglas stresses an understanding of risk from a cultural perspective, as each society or community has its own authorities, social and political structures, boundaries, values and obligations. What might be permissible and not risky in one culture (premarital sex, for instance) might as well be “risky”, dangerous” or “sinful” in another.
Douglas’s work on risk has integrally derived from her earlier work on “Purity and Danger” (1966) where she addressed cultural meanings and symbolic notions in relation to pollution, purity and danger. Douglas (1966) uses the symbolic notions of purity and pollution to reflect on social order and disorder, dangers and threats, and to reflect on external boundaries, cultural margins, internal structures and control. Central to Douglas’ work on purity, pollution, and danger is the attention she gives to the physical human body as a symbol or a reflection of the social system and body politic. She uses the structure of the human body and its openings, which represent its most vulnerable margins, as a symbol, which reflects on other complex structures in society, especially when it comes to mirroring the structural designs of hierarchy or symmetry:

“The body is a model which can stand for any bounded system. Its boundaries can represent any boundaries, which are threatened or precarious. The body is a complex structure. The functions of its different parts and their relation afford a source of symbols for other complex structures.” (ibid.: 116).

Throughout her work on purity and pollution, Douglas (1966) suggests that the societal order is symbolised by order in the sexual body. Besides addressing bodily pollution in general, she also places high emphasis on sexual pollution and purity and identifies different types of sex pollutions. One of these is concerned with ensuring that the body (physical and social) remains intact, through controlling its entrances and exits. Another type of sex pollution is concerned with adultery and incest, that is “keeping the internal lines of the social system straight” (ibid.:141). To Douglas, “bodily control is an expression of social control. If the social control over the body is relaxed, so too are controls over the openings of the individual body” (Lupton 1999b: 40).

Douglas (1992) points out that the word ‘risk’ means ‘danger’. However, in our modern world the latter has been replaced by the term ‘risk’ because we are moving towards a more globalised world, which is making us exposed and more vulnerable. Therefore, new measures of protection need to be taken to account for these changes. Douglas also highlights that the term ‘risk’ has a secular reference in modern secular societies, which replaced the religious reference of the terms “sin” and “taboo”. These terms were used in
contexts where the authority of the religion was presiding, as the latter became inappropriate as a uniform vocabulary for moralising and politicising dangers in western culture (Douglas, 1992: 26). Douglas differentiates between the modern use of the “risk rhetoric” – in favour of protecting the individual against any harm from the community or violations executed by others - as opposed to the “sin/taboo rhetoric”, which is more interested in protecting the community or the public good from the transgressions of individuals:

“Being ‘at risk’ in modern parlance is not the equivalent but the reciprocal of being ‘in sin’ or ‘under taboo’. To be ‘at risk’ is equivalent to being sinned against, being vulnerable to the events caused by others, whereas being ‘in sin’ means being the cause of harm. The sin/taboo rhetoric is more often used to uphold the community, vulnerable to the misbehaviour of the individual, while the risk rhetoric upholds the individual, vulnerable to the misbehaviour of the community” (Douglas, 1992: 28).

Douglas (1966) perceives risk as a method of a cultural defence, whereby a community or group of people use it to protect themselves from perceived dangers and threats, which might ruin their social cohesion, disrupt social order or lead to deviancy. These threats can be anything alien to that community or group of people, and are mainly conceived as coming from the outside (Lupton, 2006). As such, risk becomes fundamental to remind individuals or members in society about their moral obligation not to disrupt the social order (Linsley and Shrives, 2009). As such, dangers or risks are associated with blame and responsibility. When things go wrong, there is always someone to blame. Apportioning blame - based on which actions are then taken, such as the administration of harsh penalties or punishment - is essential to the maintenance of social values or ideological domination, the imposition of social control, and the preservation of the social order.

Another central aspect of Douglas’ work on risk is the development of the ‘grid-group’ model with her colleague Widavsky. This forms an attempt to explain how different social structures might perceive and respond to risk. The ‘group’ dimension reflects the strength or weakness of the social groups’ bond and ties, whereas the ‘grid’ dimension represents “all the other social distinctions and delegation of authority the [people] use to limit how people behave to one another” (Douglas and Widavsky, 1982:138 cited in Lupton,
These other characteristics may include the role played by gender, age or class, for example, in imposing certain social restrictions on individuals (Lupton, 1999b). Overall, the model identifies four social structures: Individualists (low group - low grid), egalitarians (high group - low grid), hierarchists (high group - high grid) and fatalists (low group - high grid). The higher the grid, the higher the social constraints on individuals’ actions. An example of how this model might be used to respond to risk is that “in hierarchical societies blame will be ascribed to those who transgress internal or external boundaries and appropriately harsh penalties will be applied as punishment for endangering the group.” (Linsley and Shrives, 2009: 497). Whilst this model has been criticised for its rigidity, it provided some sort of a sample framework to show how various social groups within different socio-cultural contexts experience and responded to risk (Lupton, 1999b). In brief, Douglas’s cultural approach emphasises that “risk judgements are political, moral and aesthetic, constructed through cultural frameworks of understanding and implicated with notions of the body and the importance of establishing and maintaining conceptual boundaries” (Lupton, 1999b: 57).

The three sociocultural theories reviewed above range between realist and social constructionist approaches to risk (Lupton, 1999b; Zinn, 2008). Beck’s position, for instance, combines both realist and constructionist standpoints (Zinn, 2008). Tulloch (2008), though, describes Beck’s position as that of a critical realist. Whereas, “governmentality” adopts a strong social constructionist approach to risk (Lupton, 1999b). Douglas’s approach, on the other hand, is perceived by Lupton (1999b) to be that of a weak constructionist. Lupton explains that “Douglas sees risk as a socially constructed interpretation and response to a ‘real’ danger that objectively exists, even if knowledge about it can only ever be mediated through sociocultural processes” (1999b: 39). Indeed, Douglas (1966) in her writings asserts that the perception of danger and pollution (dirt) should be understood as a socially constructed process. For instance, when addressing the notion of pollution and dirt, she stresses the idea that nothing is dirty by itself and that “it [dirt] exists in the eye of the beholder” (Douglas, 1966: 2).
To summarise, the grand theories of risk society and governmentality focus on addressing the notion of risk only in post-modern or, in Giddens’ terms, ‘high modernity’ or ‘late modernity’ societies, where “individualisation” is one of these societies’ vital characteristics. Most of their work focused on emerging health and environmental risks as a result of modernisation and technological advancements. They perceived these risks to be “real” and “universal”. For example, increased risks of chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease and cancer, are affiliated with an unhealthy life style in the modern world. These grand theories focus their efforts on preventing such risks through assigning responsibilities to organizations, industries, governments, experts, health professionals as well as to individuals. It is everyone’s responsibility to take part in risk-avoidance. Being knowledgeable and informed about these risks is a major aspect of risk-avoidance. On the contrary, social risk, as addressed in my study, is context and culture specific, as I explained earlier. Whilst the grand theories’ approach to risk focus on efforts to prevent risks and protect individuals from harm (for example through “conduct of conduct” in case of governmentality approach), in the case of my research study, the society puts individuals at risk to maintain its social order. As such, the notion of risk here becomes a way of cultural defence as highlighted by Douglas.

Grand theories have not taken into account how other less progressive or less modern, collective societies identify, experience, and manage different types of risk, namely social risk. Lebanon still has a long way to go towards ‘late modernity’- not only in terms of technological advancements, but also in terms of social development (such as progressive approach to sexual rights and choices, as well as to gendered norms). Social risk, as explored in this study, is not associated with modernity. Therefore, the theoretical framework of risk which I would like to adopt has to allow for a greater focus on the collective meaning and development of notions of risk.

On the other hand, risk society and governmentality theories focused on a macro-sociological approach to risk. Whereas, my research study is concerned with the social interactions and individuals’ interpretations of risk at the micro-sociological level, as opposed to the macro-sociological level. Given that my research study also entails
substantial analysis and reflection upon the socio-cultural (values, beliefs, norms) and socio-demographic (gender and religiosity) components which are associated with risk, as well as the moral meanings, which construct these risks, I argue that my empirical research findings are best situated within some aspects of Mary Douglas’s socio-cultural analysis and approach to risk.

Her theoretical work did not marginalise the micro-sociological level of human interaction. On the contrary, it accounted for the significance of the social and cultural milieus in which individuals live and interact. Whilst Beck, Giddens and Foucault’s works have been centred around understanding and explaining *risk* in the context of western cultures and values, Douglas’s anthropological insight, in relation to *risk*, allows her conceptualisation to be applicable to many societies, western and non-western. In that sense, she erodes the dichotomy of: “West” equals “rational”, “objective”, “scientific” versus the “traditional” equals “irrational”, “subjective” and “mystical”. For Douglas, socio-cultural contexts shape, to a large extent, the way individuals perceive and define risk through social and cultural processes, the ways they make decisions and choices, and the ways they respond to them. In view of that, the relevance of Douglas’s work on risk remains sounder in its advocation of a social constructionist approach to risk, rendering it as flexible and adaptable to other social and cultural contexts. Douglas (1992) sees that there is a connection between one's view of the world, and how perceptions of risk are perceived and managed. Therefore, the context is all important and this means that the social constructions of sexual risk is embedded in the social context.

Despite its relevance, not all of Douglas’s theoretical work is applicable to my research study. However, substantial parts of her work, particularly that related to the symbolic conceptualisations of purity, pollution, and the body, helps to provide a better understanding of my research findings. In my analysis and discussion, I mainly focus on three aspects of Douglas’s work: a) the ways in which social risks are defined, perceived and experienced by university students, b) the ways in which social risks are associated with the symbolic notions of purity and pollution, and c) the associations between social risks, bodily boundaries, morality and blame or punishment.
4.3 Social constructionist approach to risk:

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, interpretations of the notion of risk are very diverse, complex and differently construed by a wide range of scholars across different disciplines, using various theoretical frameworks, some of which are contrasting. As such, there is no one fixed theoretical framework or golden standard one can follow in order to define and comprehend risk. It all depends on the context in which the notion of “risk” is being analysed and examined. Alas, the vast majority of the work which had been carried out to understand and conceptualise risk in the past decades was established and intellectualised by western social theorists and scholars and came from a western perspective. Mary Douglas’ socio-cultural approach to risk stands out as an exception, providing an opportunity and a space for researchers, who wish to apply and examine the concept of risk in various cultural and social contexts (including non-western societies). Therefore, considering the non-westernised social context of my research study, on the one hand, as well as examining the social aspect of risk in association to premarital sex, on the other hand, I adopt a social constructionist approach as the main theoretical framework for my study. While bearing in mind that the perceptions of risk are generated by a complex system of social and cultural beliefs, ideas and values (Douglas, 1992), the social constructionist position serves as a basis for understanding how ‘social risks’ are identified, perceived and experienced by young people in Beirut, and for comprehending the moral meanings associated with them, as well as exploring influences and differences (if any) by gender and religion.

Central to “social construction” is the idea that knowledge is generated or constructed through the constant social interactions of individuals in society (Schwandt, 2000). In his book, “An invitation to social construction”, Gergen (2009) explicitly explains how everything we know and experience is socially constructed, including notions of “objectivity”, “truth”, “reason” and “knowledge”. He says: “what we take to be the world importantly depends on how we approach it, and how we approach it depends on the social relationships of which we are a part” (2009, 2). In our daily life, as we communicate and interact, we constantly construct our world. Whom we talk to, whom we spend time with,
whom we interact with, whom we care for, whom we love, what our reputation is, and so on become fundamental to how we assign our priorities and construct our reality (Gergen, 2009). Therefore, groups of people give meaning and value to different things and various concepts such as language, flags, nations, borders, boundaries, and so on. This indicates that the knowledge, which we, human beings, have and adopt is socially constructed, and is constantly changing as we interact. And because people are constantly constructing their realities, social constructionism puts a high emphasis on the importance of space and time. This indicates that all socially constructed notions vary from one place to another, and are subject to change over time. Therefore, a lot of the notions we construct are never fixed. For instance, the symbolic meanings of certain facial expressions (for example, nodding), the way people salute each other, the language they use, the way people behave, all these vary from one place to another and between different cultures. What is considered as an appropriate dress code for women in the United Kingdom may not be appropriate for women in Iran. And what is now considered an appropriate dress code in the UK, may not have been appropriate in the 1950s or earlier, and so on. Therefore, the process of social construction is not rigid or static, the construction of meanings is vital, dynamic, fluid and always changing. Just like any other construction of meaning, concepts such as gender and sexuality are also socially constructed (Weeks, 2003; Sheppard and Mayo, 2013), and so is risk (Lupton 1999b).

Deriving from the same understanding of the constructionist approach, Lupton (1999b) argues that our knowledge and understanding of risk is generated by social interactions, ideas and beliefs within a certain society or cultural context. This indicates that risk is determined and constructed through culturally defined systems of beliefs, values, structures, boundaries, politics, institutions, and authorities. Even the language of “risk” itself is exploited differently across various cultures. This was highlighted by Douglas (1966; 1992), when she explained the different interpretations of the symbolic meanings of “pollution”, “sin”, “taboo” and “danger”, as well as when she compared the “sin/taboo” rhetoric in pre-modern culture and the “risk” rhetoric in post-modern culture. In the case of my research, for example, I explain in later chapters the way in which the “English” term of “risk” itself is interpreted and defined through the spoken/colloquial Arabic of young
Lebanese people. In this thesis, I also show how risk is experienced through the already constructed notions of gender, power, hierarchies, morals, taboos and boundaries, rendering it as a flexible and subjective concept, which only exists in the eye of its beholder. What might be perceived and experienced as “risky” for an individual during a certain period of time and within a certain community, may no longer be identified as “risky” under different circumstances or in a different period of time.

People guided by the social constructionist approach put a great emphasis on the spatial and temporal elements of risk, arguing that ‘risk’ is not a fixed phenomenon. They argue the constructed meanings of risk will be subject to change over time and space (Lupton, 1999): “We can only ever know and experience risk through our specific location in a particular socio-cultural context.” (Lupton 1999: 30). Accordingly, the perceived ‘social risks’ associated with premarital sex for a young Lebanese woman today, may no longer be seen as ‘risks’ in the next 20 or 30 years, if a sexual revolution took place, for example. The same applies to space or location, as the perception of risk is not universal. Social risks associated with premarital sex in Lebanese society may not even exist or be perceived as risks in some other societies, such as in Holland or Norway. Also, within the same society, there might be diverse social groups or communities, who perceive the risks associated with the same behaviour differently. Therefore, the social construction of risk is influenced by a wide range of factors, such as gender, to which I will return to later.

Scholars who adopted a social constructionist approach to risk challenged grand theories, which embrace realist approaches such as the ‘risk society’, technico-scientific and cognitive scientific theories. Douglas’s socio-cultural theory is an example, arguing that risk cannot be assessed or measured objectively and individualistically in separation of the cultural context, as it is socially, culturally and politically constructed (1992). Each society or community is unique and different in its values, structures, boundaries, and politics based on which notions of risk are determined and constructed (Douglas 1992, 1966).

Other scholars also challenged “risk society” and “governmentality” theories by carrying out empirical work on risk. For example, in one of the studies, which aimed to assess
school-students’ perceptions and definitions of a list of risks using a social constructionist approach, Austen (2009) concludes that young people in the study were not negative appraisers of risk. The young people rejected the negative labels associated with risk-taking, they were not essentially worried, yet their level of worries were dependant on the level of perceived risks, they did not promote feelings of uncertainty about risk, and they did not show feelings of scepticism towards those that provide expert knowledge. On the basis of these conclusions, Austen criticises the risk society theory, which presents risk as a negative concept, aligned with uncertainty and scepticism towards expert opinion (Austen, 2009). Findings from a different study, which aimed at examining the links between risk-taking, identity and social context among young people, who use drugs, suggests that the correlation between these three is complex and sophisticated, and existing risk theories fail to apprehend this complexity (Plumridge and Chetwynd, 1999). Another example is a study carried out by Lupton and Tulloch (2002), which aimed to understand how a group of Australians interpret and deal with a number of risks using a social constructionist approach. The findings from this study also challenged the risk society theory in many of its aspects, particularly on issues such as participants’ relative inconsideration of environmental risks, associating risk-taking with positive aspects, criticising the governments’ role in protecting it citizens from risk, and, most importantly, the influence of factors like gender, age, sexual identity, class on structuring participants’ perceptions of risk (Lupton and Tulloch, 2002).

Such studies, among others, suggest that the notion of risk is far more complex, and not limited to certain definitions and measurements, as well as individualistic and rationalistic assumptions. How risks and dangers are defined, perceived, experienced and responded to, vary greatly not only between different societies and cultures, but also between groups, individuals, social classes, genders, and from one day to another. Thus, when examining the ‘social risks’ associated with premarital sex, I kept my analysis open to all possibilities.

Moreover, scholars who use a social constructionist approach to risk, also pay attention to concepts like “voluntary risk-taking”, taking into account various emotions, social rules and boundaries. For example, in her work on “voluntary risk-taking”, Lupton associates risk-
taking with ‘emotional engagement’ such as fears, anxieties, nervousness, pleasure, contentment, satisfaction, happiness, worries, and so on. She argues that risk-taking is not always associated with negative attributes, such as, lack of awareness and knowledge, carelessness, ignorance, and irresponsibility. It can also be associated with positive attributes, such as, pleasures, self-improvement, challenge, exposure, crossing boundaries and breaking rules, and so on (Lupton, 2002). Whilst this aspect of voluntary risk taking is interesting, how social risk is an indispensable aspect of voluntary risk taking also needs to be addressed, especially when it comes to engaging in premarital sex in a socially conservative context, such as Lebanon. My research, therefore, extends our understanding of voluntary risk taking by highlighting that, when it comes to certain types of voluntary risk taking, the category of ‘social risk’ needs to be included.

In summary, a social constructionist approach to risk provides a flexible and creative theoretical perspective through which the perceptions, experiences, and negotiations of ‘social risks’ by young Lebanese adults can be investigated, analysed and discussed. Through a social constructionist framework, I further explore how cultural, social, and institutional rules construct a wide range of meanings to notions like purity, pollution, premarital sex, honour, virginity, morality, masculinity, femininity, margins and boundaries, beauty and sexiness. This flexibility and creativity, that the social constructionist approach provides, is effectively summed up by: “For the constructionist, our actions are not constrained by anything traditionally accepted as true, rational, or right. Standing before us is a vast spectrum of possibility, an endless invitation to innovation” (Gergen, 2009: 5).

### 4.4 Gendered risk

A number of empirical research studies on risk accounted for gender differences in risk-taking (for example, Lupton and Tulloch, 2002), and revealed how risk-taking and risk-avoidance are essentially gendered (Chan and Rigakos, 2002; Walklate, 1997, Lupton, 1999b). In their research article, titled “Risk, crime and gender”, Chan and Rigakos (2002)
highlight the gendered aspect of risk from a feminist analysis, arguing that risk is not neutral, nor universally experienced. Risk is fundamentally gendered, which requires “highlighting how men and women are required to confront and negotiate different types of risk in their lives”. The authors highlight some really interesting points about gendered risk. First, they argue that the notion of risk and “what constitutes risky behaviour is filtered through a masculine lens that conditions what we identify and define as risky” (ibid.: 743) leading to the assumption that women, in general, are risk averse compared to men. This argument was also emphasised by other scholars such as (Walklate, 1997; Miller, 1991, Sanders, 2004). Secondly, Chan and Rigakos (2002) argue that grand theories of risk, particularly those of the “risk society” and “governmentality”, as well as the work of other scholars, who addressed voluntary-risk taking, such as Stephen Lyng, with his concept of “Edgework”, (1990) failed to acknowledge the different types of risks between men and women, and failed to address why women, in certain cases, tend to take less risks than men. For instance, women’s fear of crime, which is specifically associated with sexual harassment and assault, sexual violence (Chan and Rigakos, 2002) including wife rape, date rape and murder (Walklate, 1997), provides an important insight into why women are risk averse in certain situations. Stanko (1997: 487 cited in Chan and Rigakos, 2002) argues that “the relational insecurity women experience with men is a routine feature of what it means to be female”. Similarly, if and when women are engaged in exceptional risk-taking, they are often associated with amorality, especially in the case of sexual promiscuity (Chan and Rigakos, 2002). How women experience risk is highly shaped by the politics of gender (Sanders 2004; Chan and Rigakos, 2002; Lupton, 1999b; Walklate, 1997), that is, gender power and hierarchies, as well as performed femininity and masculinity. For instance, (Lupton, 1999b) argues that risk-taking and risk-avoidance are closely associated with notions of masculinity and femininity:

“While men may engage in risk-taking in the attempt to conform to dominant forms of masculinity, women’s concepts of risk-taking are also highly related to assumptions about femininity. “risk-taking is less valorised for the performance of

1 Edgework activities are high-risk thrilling activities such as extreme or dangerous sports, wartime combat situations and business entrepreneurship and mostly attributed them to young men, according to Lyng (1990).
femininity: indeed, dominant notions of femininity tend to represent the careful avoidance of danger and hazard as important. Women are acculturated from an early age to avoid situations of danger and are represented as particularly vulnerable to such risks as sexual assault and mugging because of their gender. They are more often portrayed as the passive victims of risk than as active risk-takers” (Lupton, 1999b: 160-1).

Another example of how risk-taking can be gendered is reflected in Lyng’s concept of “Edgework” (1990). “Edgework” activities are those involving “a clearly observable threat to one's physical or mental well-being or one's sense of an ordered existence” (1990: 857). Lyng defines the “edge” as the borderline between life and death, consciousness and unconsciousness, sanity versus insanity (ibid.: 857): “in its abstract terms, edgework is best understood as an approach to the boundary between order and disorder, form and formlessness” (ibid.: 858). Miller (1991), Walklate (1997), and Chan and Rigakos (2002) reflected on Lyng’s definition of “edgework” to challenge what they considered to be biased or stereotyped gender assumptions. They argue that Lyng makes positive associations of the thrill-seeking activities to young men, specifically assuming that young men value edgework since “males are more likely than females to have an illusory sense of control over fateful endeavours because of the socialisation pressures on males to develop a skill orientation toward their environment” (Lyng, 1990: 872-873). Chan and Rigakos (2002) and Walklate (1997) argue that women might be less involved in the thrill-seeking activities; however, they are still engaged in danger seeking activities, specifically activities involving sex with men. This suggests that women, too, are obliged “to negotiate the line between order and chaos in their lives in choosing to become involved in certain sexual activities such as sex work for example” (Chan and Rigakos, 2002: 749).

Although these authors successfully highlight females’ engagement in risk-taking, Lyng (1990) did not necessarily claim that women do not take part at all in edgework activities. Lyng assumed that the type of “edgework activities” attract more males than females and younger adults than older adults. Such gender and age differences, among other sociodemographic factors (for example, sexual identity and class), were highlighted in some research studies, which examined the notions of risk and risk taking experiences. For example, in the study by Lupton and Tulloch (2002: 328), the findings indicated that “the
risks to which people felt they were exposed were very much phrased through their own position in the life course, their gender, age, sexual identity, class and so on”. The findings revealed that risk-taking was significantly higher as a youth and young adult, whereas risk-avoidance increased when family and other responsibilities became important (2002: 328). Probably the central point that Chan and Rigakos (2002), Miller (1991) and Walklate (1997) wish to assert is the failure of Lyng’s approach in capturing and understanding the more complex underpinning factors influencing women’s risk-taking behaviour. Such behaviour is mainly embedded in gender politics: “Whether it is the product of socialisation, patriarchal proprietoriness, or structural barriers in accessing risk-taking activities, women are generally not associated with risky behaviours such as car racing, sky-diving, or extreme skiing to name a few” (Chan and Rigakos, 2002: 743).

Moreover, other empirical studies have revealed the ways in which women have to continually negotiate and manage risks to protect themselves, specifically when it comes to sex and sexuality related risks, as in the case of sex workers (Sanders, 2004) criminal assaults and sexual violence (Sanders, 2004; Walklate, 1997), and intimate relationships (Lupton, 2002). For instance, in Lupton and Tulloch’s study (2002), male participants talked about sports activities, travel to foreign countries, and daring deeds as voluntary risk-taking experience. Female participants, on the other hand, commonly talked about foreign travel as voluntary risk-taking experience. However, they talked more about the risks they take in association with their sexual activity, as they seemed to be more concerned about unwanted pregnancies, contracting STIs, and the risk of violence or crime (ibid.: 327). In another study on risk and sex work, Sanders (2004) explores the different types of risks sex workers experience, including health risks, the risk of physical violence, and, most importantly, emotional risk. Sanders reveals the complexity of risk-taking decisions and choices, as well as the strategies used to manage or avoid these risks. While arguing that, despite the free-from-coercion economic choice of selling sex, the participants declared making, “it must be recognised that they were making decisions within a particular set of social, economic and political constraints that are defined by inherent gendered power relationships” (2004: 559).
Another form of gendered risk, which also reflects the complexity of risk-taking, is apparent in some of findings in relation to having unsafe sex in Holland’s et al (1998) research study, which addressed the construction of heterosexuality and power among young men and women in the UK (1988-1992). The research aimed to investigate young people’s understanding of their own sexuality and sexual practices (heterosexuality only), their perception of risky sexual activities, and how they negotiate these risks. The findings reveal that young women risk having unprotected sex with their male partners, not because they are unaware of the risk itself or being irresponsible, but to demonstrate a sense of trust, to please their partners, and to build an emotional bond with them. This was mostly evident among women who conformed to a feminine identity uncritically. This reflects one aspect of male power in a relationship, where risk-taking is voluntary rather than coercive, yet privileges men’s sexual pleasure over that of the woman’s who is not always happy without the use of contraception.

When it comes to risk and sexuality, the above studies, among others, provide well-established evidence on how risk is gendered, not only in the ways women decide to take or avoid risks, but also in the strategies they employ to negotiate and manage these risks. In that regard, examining the gendered aspects of the social risks of engaging in premarital sex among young Lebanese is of fundamental importance, considering the associated and inseparable links between morality, sexuality, gender and power. I argue that investigating the perception of social risks in association with sexuality provides an opportunity to unpack and outline gender inequalities and power relations among young Lebanese people. As such, I move on to address the social construction of sexuality and gender power relations.

4.5 The social construction of sexuality

Within the same framework of social constructionism, sex and sexuality are also seen as socially constructed. One of the leading sociologists, who addressed the social construction of sexuality, is Jeffrey Weeks (1977, 1986). In that respect, Weeks (2003) stresses three
main points regarding sexuality. First, he states that “sex can no longer be set against ‘society’, as if they were separate domains (2003: 18-19)”; secondly, he highlights the importance of recognising the complexity of sexual histories by acknowledging and being aware of the “social variability of sexual forms, beliefs, ideologies, identities and behaviour, and of the existence of different sexual cultures”; thirdly, he insists that the history of sexuality cannot be understood “in terms of a dichotomy of pressure and release, repression and liberation” (ibid.:19). By this Weeks indicates the complexity of socially constructed sexuality and the diverse meanings given to it by different cultures and societies: “Sexuality is not a given, it is a product of negotiation, struggle and human agency” (ibid.:19). Like Douglas, Weeks suggests that the meanings attached to the concept of sexuality vary widely from one culture to another. Therefore, each culture constructs its own boundaries and decides on what practices are perceived as moral or immoral, good or bad, healthy or perverted. Thus, attempts at synchronising western notions of sexuality with different cultures, reflect a failure in understanding the historical, local and socially constructed meanings shaping sexuality. Moreover, these notions of sexuality even vary within different western cultures and communities themselves, (Weeks, 2003).

Gayle Rubin (1984), on the other hand, in her chapter “Thinking Sex”, developed these labels and boundaries into hierarchies of sexual values, which she thinks exist in all societies. These sexual hierarchies aim to draw (imaginary) lines and identify the boundaries between the good and bad, the moral and immoral, the normal and abnormal, the insider and outsider. For instance, she provides an example of these hierarchies in American society, back in the 1970s-early 80s, suggesting that according this system:

“sexuality that is ‘good’, ‘normal’, and ‘natural’ should ideally be heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial... It should not involve pornography, fetish objects, sex toys of any sort, or roles other than male and female. Any sex that violates these rules is ‘bad’, ‘abnormal’, or ‘unnatural’. Bad sex may be homosexual, unmarried, promiscuous, non-procreative, or commercial. It may be masturbatory or take place at orgies, may be casual, may cross generational lines, and may take place in ‘public’, or at least in the bushes or the baths” (1984: 152).
And where to draw the lines or boundaries of sexual value is another dilemma, which changes with time and location. For instance, as social and moral values began to slightly change in the American society, certain behaviours, which are close to moral borders start creeping across it: “Unmarried couples living together, masturbation, and some forms of homosexuality are moving in the direction of respectability…. if it is coupled and monogamous, the society is beginning to recognise that it includes the full range of human interaction (ibid.:152).

I highlighted earlier that central to Douglas work on risk is casting blame and punishing the transgressor (or applying purification rituals in primitive or pre-modern cultures) as one way to maintain social order. Similarly, Weeks and Rubin both highlight how individuals are penalised when they do not conform to the expectations implied through constructed rules of sexuality. These penalties or sanctions can range from shaming to criminalisation. They are carried out by social institutions, which regulate sexuality, such as political institutions, educational institutions, family (marriage institutions), religious institutions, and so on.

Therefore, the social construction of sexuality suggests that we should understand “sexuality as a product of many influences and social interventions. It does not exist outside history, but is a historical product… [it is a product of] historical making, the cultural construction, and social organisation of sexuality” (Week, 2003: 28), which is identified by kinship and family systems, economic and social organisation, social regulation, political interventions, and the development of cultures of resistance” (ibid.: 21). What is perceived to be pleasurable, erotic, permissible, promiscuous, body boundaries, moral, immoral, pure, dirty, and so on is very subjective. None of these constructed concepts is static or universal. Instead, they differ from one culture to another, and they change over time through our constant interactions and experiences.
4.6 Gender power: performed hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity

My research study explores the social risks within the frame of a hegemonic heteronormativity. Examining a sensitive topic such as the social risks of premarital sex in a conservative patriarchal society, where gender and power hierarchies are well established and highly maintained, demands that I analyse the way gender and power relations influence risk-taking and shape the way social risks are being negotiated. It is very important to realise that gender power and hierarchy is not something carried out only at the individual level. It is institutionalised, recognised by the state, and practiced by the whole social system at the political, social, economic and religious levels. The Lebanese social structure is built, maintained and functions based on a gender based, essentially patriarchal, hierarchy.

Connell’s theory of ‘hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity’ has been used in a wide range of research studies which addressed hegemonic masculinity, feminism and patriarchy, sociological models of gender, HIV risk and sexual behaviour (Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005). It is essential for developing an understanding of the relationship between power and gender. This theory seems to be one of the influential theoretical approaches to understanding how social structure works within a patriarchal gender order. Connell (1987) identified different forms of masculinity and femininity based on a general structural fact that men are dominant over women. However, Connell acknowledged that the complexities of human relationships are not merely ruled by gender, but also by a variety of other factors, such as ethnic, generational and class variances. According to Connell, ‘Hegemonic masculinity’ is the most ascendant form of masculinity, and is only constructed in relation to women, and other subordinated masculinities. “Hegemony” does not necessarily indicate dominance and control using force and threats towards others. Its ascendancy can be found within religious codes, rules and policies, wage structures, cultural values, and social norms and practices. However, at the same time, hegemonic masculinity can be congruent with the use of physical violence and force. It is also important to highlight that hegemonic masculinity doesn’t mean absolute dominance, in the sense of exterminating others the society, but, rather, subordinating them because
hegemonic masculinity can only exist in the presence of other subordinated groups (Connell, 1987). Hegemonic masculinity is also limited to heterosexual men, and is attached to the institution of marriage. Whereas, homosexuals are key form of subordinated masculinity, disrespected and insulted by a hegemonic masculinity based system (Connell, 1987:186). Besides homosexuals, hegemonic masculinities have control over young men and women.

Unlike hegemonic masculinity, Connell argues that there is no hegemonic femininity in the same way that hegemonic masculinity is constructed, as all patterns of femininity are actually subordinated to, the global structural dominance of heterosexual men: “the concentration of social power in the hands of men leaves limited scope for women to construct institutionalised power relationships over other women (ibid.: 187).” This is on the one hand. On the other hand, Connell states that “power, authority, aggression, technology are not thematised in femininity at large as they are in masculinity. Equally important, no pressure is set up to negate or subordinate other forms of femininity in the way hegemonic masculinity must negate other masculinities (ibid.:187)”. However, Connell argues that there are multiple, diverse forms of femininity, one of which is the ‘Emphasised femininity’, which conforms and responds mostly to men’s needs and desires. In other words, emphasised femininity complies with the patriarchal hierarchy. Performing compliance can be demonstrated in different ways, such as being a house-wife and handling childcare, instead of being an independent, powerful working woman. Women can also express weakness in intimate relations with men, conform to men’s egos at work, or even transgress men’s ego based rules, and so on. What is interesting about “emphasised femininity” is that it helps maintain hegemonic masculinities. When women accept their subordinated and obedient role, their compliance feeds this structural hierarchy of power, domination and control of men over women.

This theory, supported by other examples from the literature and empirical studies, can provide a good explanation of gender power in heterosexual relationships. Hence, using gender based power, as a frame to understand the dynamics that exist between young men and women, will assist the thesis’ objectives of better understanding the role gender based power plays the risk-taking activity of premarital sex.
CHAPTER 5
Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodological approach taken during this research. Firstly, I will explain why qualitative, in-depth interviews were my data-collection technique of choice, and why I then triangulated qualitative with quantitative data. Secondly, I elaborate on my choice of target group, the recruitment process, pilot testing, fieldwork and data collection, data analysis, ethical considerations, reflexivity and issues of research rigour.

Through this research study, I aimed to answer the following questions:

- What social risks do university students in Beirut associate with premarital sex, and how do they manage these social risks?
- What are the attitudes and behaviours of university students towards premarital sex?
- What are the underpinning issues, which may shape or influence students’ decisions in taking risks, as well as their ways of responding to these risks?
- How do gender differences and power relations influence these risks and ways of managing them?

5.1 Research approach and design

In light of my research questions, and in an attempt at developing an in-depth understanding of young people’s perspectives, attitudes, experiences and even emotions (the way they feel) towards premarital sex, and the social risks associated with it, I chose to use an interpretive, qualitative methodological approach. The interpretive approach recognises reality as socially constructed (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, 2011; Neuman, 2014). It is an approach which synchronises with the overall social constructionist theoretical framework that I adopt throughout my research study. Neuman (2014) identifies the interpretive approach as “the systematic analysis of meaningful action through the direct detailed observation of people in natural settings in order to arrive at understandings
and interpretations of how people create and maintain their social worlds” (Neuman, 2014: 104). Using qualitative methods is fundamental to carrying out in-depth interpretations of students’ attitudes and perceptions towards premarital sex within the context they live in, as well as understanding the meanings which they give to their actions and way of thinking. Qualitative methods are characterised by their explanatory and illustrative nature since they rely on the rich data of the students’ narrative accounts. Consequently, these methods provide broader a perspective and comprehension of the narratives and attitudes that guide social behaviours (Silverman, 2004; Neuman, 2014).

To get a better understanding of the participants’ socio-demographic backgrounds and attitudes towards premarital sex, I triangulated my qualitative data against a short quantitative questionnaire, which mainly addressed my participants’ socio-demographic background, as well as addressing their attitudes and behaviours towards premarital sex. I elaborate more on this below.

Considering the sensitivity and privacy issues related to my research topic, located in a considerably conservative social context, I found that the most appropriate method for data collection was conducting one-to-one in-depth interviews with the participants. In-depth interviews are appropriate for sensitive topics, especially when the researcher aims to know in depth about the participants’ experiences and individual stories (Hennink, Bailey, and Hutter, 2011). This one-to-one method facilitates confidentiality and privacy while exploring the participants’ perceptions and encouraging them to talk about their stories, values, and beliefs.

I adopted a semi-structured format for my interview questions to ensure some level of consistency in covering the main themes I aimed to tackle in every interview. At the same time, I allowed myself the flexibility to ask my questions in a different way or with a different wording or in a different order. The order and wording of the questions were determined by the interaction dynamics and interview flow I perceived with the different participants. No single interview ran similarly to another. I stopped interviewing when I reached data saturation, and the themes started to become repetitive. The semi-structured
format helped me generate a list of similar codes, and extract a number of common themes across all the interviews at the analysis stage.

5.2 Target group and exclusion criteria

My target group was never-married Lebanese university students, both males and females, aged between 18 and 26 years, at different stages of their studies (sophomore, junior, senior and postgraduate), and of the three dominant religions in Lebanon: Muslims (both Sunnis and Shiites), Christians (Catholic, Maronite and Orthodox), and Druze. Both sexually experienced and not sexually experienced students were included in the sample, as the views of both were equally important for my study. Moreover, although my participants originated from different geographical areas in Lebanon and covered rural, urban and suburban areas, at the time of data collection, all participants were living in Beirut and studying in one of the main universities in Beirut as shown in Table 1 below.

Although I interviewed both males and females, in my findings and discussion, I place more emphasis on young women’s experiences, since young women are exposed to higher social risks in social contexts similar to that of Lebanon. At the same time, I was keen to explore the other side of the story told by young men. I was interested in capturing young men’s perspectives, as I thought that their views and perceptions were important pieces of the puzzle. Young men’s views, besides those of young women’s, helped me put together a clearer picture of the situation, establish a better understanding of different perspectives, and come up with a more comprehensive and profound data analysis.

Students with the following characteristics were excluded from the sample:

- Non-Lebanese nationals.
- University students who were below 18 or over 26 years of age (that is, freshman students, or post graduates above the age of 26).
- Ever-married participants, those in a civic partnership, and those in a same sex partnership.
• Newly enrolled students, who had not yet completed their first year at the university at the time of the interview. This was mainly because I aimed to interview students who had at least one year of exposure to the university experience, which might have provided them the chance to mingle with the opposite sex. I explain this further under the “Target group justification” section.

• Students who identified themselves as non-heterosexuals. This criterion was slightly delicate. Despite being very clear with my participants, and the people who were helping me to recruit students - that my research only focused on heterosexual relationships - I could never be absolutely sure of my participants’ sexual orientation. As long as the participants identified themselves as heterosexuals, they were included in the sample, regardless of whether or not they had hidden their real sexual identity. For instance, one of the female participants demonstrated very liberal views, and she was open about her sexual relationships. She talked about experiencing sex with other women at a certain point of her life, yet she identified herself as “straight” [in her words] or in other words “heterosexual”. There are many reasons, which cause young people to hide their sexual orientation. However, if they do hide it, it is mainly because it is socially unacceptable, as well as leaving them liable to being harassed by the police or subject to criminal law.

5.3 Target group justification:

Before addressing the reasons behind choosing my target group, I would like first to clarify what I mean by “young people” in this research study. The definition of “young people” or “youth” varies between different international agencies, and entities, which concern themselves with this section of the population. The United Nation Secretariat, for example, identifies young people as individuals ranging between 15 and 24 years, merely for the purposes of statistical consistency (Secretary-General’s Report to the General Assembly, A/40/256, 1985). They declare that the “youth” category is rather more fluid and not easily fixed in terms of an age group. Other entities within the United Nations (UN) such as ‘UN Habitat’ extends that age range up to 32 years, whereas, the ‘Africa Youth Charter’ defines
youth as people aged between 15 and 35 years (United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs-UNDESA). Therefore, my research target group, 18-26, falls within the internationally defined “youth” category. Although, it is important to note that sometimes I use the terms “young people” and “young adults” interchangeably. Having clarified the definition of “young people”, I move on to pinpoint the reasoning behind choosing university students, aged between 18 and 26 years.

Access to the target group, ethical considerations and appropriate approaches to data collection are some of the core issues, which I considered when choosing my target group. With that in mind, I provide a justification for my choice in the following points:

- **Interest in young people:** Besides my personal interest in carrying out research about and with young people, they are the most ignored population in Lebanon, specifically, and in the Arab world in general (Roudi-Fahimi and El Feki, 2011). When it comes to addressing issues related to sex, sexuality and sexual health and rights, young people in Lebanon have the least access to sexual and reproductive health care and related counselling (Baydoun, 2008), as they are assumed to be non-sexually active. In Lebanon, sexual activity can start at an early age (11-14 years) (Kahhaleh, El Nakib and Jurjus, 2009), though the mean age of first sexual experience among university students in Beirut is approximately 17.5 years (Ghandour et al, 2014). This is in addition to the scarce research that has been carried out to explore young people’s attitudes, perceptions, behaviours, needs, pleasures, fears and worries towards issues related to sex and sexuality. Therefore, shedding light on young people’s views and perceptions towards sex and sexuality, in general, is important. This research study contributes to at least one aspect of the massive area of research, which requires further investigation and attention.

- **Obtaining consent:** Considering the sensitivity of my research topic, targeting young people below the age of 18 has its own problems in terms of the ethical considerations of the research and access to the young people themselves. For instance, obtaining parental consent or approval for interviewing young people
under the age of 18 about sex related matters would be complex and problematic in the context of Lebanon. Consequently, gaining access to these young people (teenagers), through their parents or schools, would be very challenging. Asking about sexual activity would have been impossible, as indicated in previous experiences with other researchers, who carried out the Global School-based Student Health Survey in Lebanon (2005). Accordingly, the choice of university students over eighteen was more convenient. Normally, the enrolment age of students at any University in Lebanon is 18 years. In some cases, though, students might be enrolled at an earlier age (17 years). Students aged 17 years are usually enrolled at the freshmen level of study (the preparation year preceding the first year of bachelor studies) and, less commonly, at their first year of their bachelor studies. Therefore, students aged between 18 and 26 years would mostly be in their first year of their bachelor or diploma studies, and the older students would be enrolled in their full-time or part-time postgraduate studies (usually Masters studies).

- Experience and exposure: Attending university usually contributes to shaping and refining young people’s personalities, identities and values for their adulthood years (Harb, 2010), but it also provides them, to a certain extent, with a safe environment, and a space to interact and mingle with the opposite sex (Khalaf, 2006). During their university years, young people witness the most important years of their life, enabling them to go through a unique journey of self-discovery which includes finding their personal interests, as well as their sexuality. In Lebanon, it is only during their university years that young people are allowed to leave their parents’ homes, and go to live on their own, either in an apartment with friends or relatives, or in dormitories. This separation from parents provides young people with a wider space of freedom, away from parental control, to explore their sexuality if they should so desire. Accordingly, I aimed to include students who had been enrolled at the university for at least one academic year, so they would have had a minimal exposure to new experiences as part of their overall university years’ experience. I was aware that excluding students who had not completed their first year might well result in excluding those aged 18 years. However, the only reason behind initially
keeping or including those aged 18 years was to ensure the inclusion of students, who happened to be registered at an earlier age at the university. In other words, if a student was enrolled at the age of 17, in their first year, and was 18 years, in their second year, they would have still been included in my research sample. Choosing an age range of between 18 and 26 was to ensure the inclusion of students with various experiences and exposures at different stages of their study. Whereas 26 years of age is roughly the estimated age whereby young people would be finishing their masters’ studies.

- **Accessibility and practicality:** Given my existing social connections to both colleagues and professionals from the American University of Beirut (where I have studied and worked for at least 10 years), as well as being connected to activists from non-governmental organisations, who work with university students, I found that accessing and recruiting university students was more practical and easier than recruiting random young people on the streets. On the other hand, the gross enrolment ratio for higher education in Lebanon went up from 38.41% in the year 2000 to approximately 46% in 2013, as per the UNESCO Institute for Statistics. The female enrolment rate was 54.34% and male enrolment 45.66%, as per the Centre for Educational Research and Development (CERD) for the academic year 2012-2013. This suggests that almost half of the young Lebanese are enrolled at university, making it easier to find them and access them, as opposed to those who are not enrolled at any university.

- **The choice of universities:** In Lebanon, there are forty higher-education institutions, only one of which is a public university – “The Lebanese University”- while the rest are private. Most of the higher education institutions are located in Greater Beirut, which constitutes 70 percent of the overall students’ enrolment (Nauffal, 2004). In my sample, I tried to include students from the main universities in Beirut to ensure that my sample included as many diverse characteristics as possible. My sample included students from the Lebanese public university and from another seven officially registered private universities (as shown in Table 1). Most of the private
universities have a foreign origin (American, French and Egyptian). Whilst the Francophone universities seem to have a higher enrolment of Christian students, the Anglophone universities attract higher numbers of Muslim students (Nauffal, 2004). There are historical reasons behind this, which I will not discuss here.

**TABLE 1- List of Universities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of the University</th>
<th>Type of University (public/private)</th>
<th>Enrolment rate</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1- The Lebanese Public University (LU)</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>37.24%</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mixture of French, English and Arabic</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2- Lebanese International University (LIU)</td>
<td>Private-Anglophone</td>
<td>9.28%</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3- Beirut Arab University (BAU)</td>
<td>Private-English is the main teaching language</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4- Saint Joseph University</td>
<td>Private-Francophone</td>
<td>5.03%</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5- American University of Beirut (AUB)</td>
<td>Private-Anglophone</td>
<td>4.19%</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6- Lebanese American University (LAU)</td>
<td>Private-Anglophone</td>
<td>3.34%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7- Université La Sagesse</td>
<td>Private French (main teaching language) and English</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8- American University of Science and Technology (AUST)</td>
<td>Private- mostly English (main teaching language)</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Enrolment rate is based on statistics from the Centre for Educational Research and Development (CERD) for academic year 2012-2013.*
5.4 Developing my interview questions

Considering the sensitivity of my research topic, when I was developing my interview questions, I did not aim to ask my participants directly about their personal sexual experiences. Instead, I aimed to ask them about their views and perceptions of premarital sex, and its associated risks, to avoid any embarrassment or discomfort for them. Accordingly, I developed six main open-ended questions for the semi-structured interview in English, and translated them into Arabic. The first question was a general, icebreaking question, where I asked participants to describe the way they perceived Lebanese young people, in general, in terms of their life styles, interests, mentality (conservativeness vs. openness). The purpose of this introductory question was mainly to warm up and talk about general youth related issues from a young person’s perspective, instead of directly asking sensitive questions about their views and attitudes towards premarital sex, a topic which informed my second question. The third question was on the risks or fears participants associated with premarital sex, which was then followed by the fourth question on how would young people, in general, deal with these risks. Sometimes if this question was not clear to some, I used to ask what would they [or young people in general] did to protect themselves from the consequences of engaging in premarital sex, or what alternatives they would seek. The fifth question addressed the dynamics between a man and a woman in an unmarried relationship. I finished my interviews by asking participants whether they would like to add anything or talk about issues, which had not been addressed during our interview, but which the students felt were important. All the main questions were followed by probing questions, depending on the dynamic and flow of each interview [A copy of the semi-structured interview questions is attached in appendix A].

5.5 The questionnaire

Besides the interviews, I also developed a short self-administered questionnaire, which constituted of 16 close-ended questions, where the participants selected their response from a list of options. Twelve questions were mostly related to demographic characteristics; in
addition, four questions were about attitudes and behaviours towards premarital sex. The demographic characteristics included questions on age, sex, relationship status, religion, religiosity, university enrolled at, year of study/class, area of original residence, current residential autonomy, employment, source of pocket money, and weekly pocket money allowance. The other four questions were on, the student’s current sexual activity, attitudes towards premarital sex, previous involvement in premarital sex, and age of first sexual intercourse [A copy of the questionnaire is attached in appendix B].

The data from this questionnaire was useful in several respects. First, it helped me better understand my sample, and ensure diversity through the inclusion of students from different backgrounds, gender, age, universities and religions. By looking at filled questionnaires, as I went, I was able to identify gaps in the participants’ backgrounds, and adapt my recruitment strategy accordingly to ensure diversity in the sample. For example, checking whether the number of Muslims outweighs the number of Christians, or whether I had reached enough sexually active women, per se. Whenever there were significant imbalances, which was rare, I used to address them whenever possible. It is important to mention, though, that this was a qualitative sample, so I focused more on ensuring a roughly diverse sample, as opposed to ensuring accurate and balanced numbers, based on calculable formulas. Second, I used the questionnaire data to double check whether my participants fulfilled the already set inclusion criteria. Third, data from the questionnaire was used to complement the qualitative data, providing short answers to some sensitive questions, which were not convenient to ask in the interview. This data was triangulated against the participants’ interviews, as I was initially interested in exploring the links or associations (if any) between participants’ views on social risk and premarital sex and their age, religiosity, autonomy, social class, and area of origin. Although, the findings and conclusions derived from such associations were not meant to be generalised – due to the small sample size– these links supported the establishment of a better understanding of my data, and a robust analysis of it. For example, I checked whether there were any links between religiosity and sexual activity. I also checked whether the claimed attitudes towards premarital sex, in the interviews, synchronised with claimed attitudes and behaviours in the questionnaire and vice versa. In the findings of this thesis, I only present
the interesting and most relevant links. Overall, gathering data from both the interviews and the questionnaire boosted my reflexive analysis, and served the purpose of checking my research validity through triangulation. According to Creswell and Miller (2000), triangulation is “a validity procedure where researchers search for convergence among multiple and different sources of information to form themes or categories in a study” (p. 126).

The questionnaire was developed and presented in both English and Arabic, and each of the students chose their preferred language. However, all interviews were carried out in Arabic, as there was no need to carry out interviews in English. Sometimes, students would mix their answers in both languages, Arabic and English, but mixing languages while speaking is not unusual in Lebanese culture, especially among educated people, and those who live in big urban cities, like Beirut.

5.6 Recruitment strategy and data collection process

Due to work commitments in London, I collected my data during four field trips to Beirut between 2012 and 2014. A total number of 35 in-depth interviews were conducted with 18 females and 17 males from 8 different universities, one public and seven private. Only one interview was then excluded from the analysis after finding out, through looking at the questionnaire after the interview, that the student was a divorcée (something which he did not mention during the interview). This reduced the total number of in-depth interviews to 34 (18 females and 16 males). A brief summary of the participants’ gender, religion and sexual activity status is shown in Table 2 below.
TABLE 2: Participants’ characteristics by gender, religion and their sexual experience. SE= sexually experienced (ever had premarital sex)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Christians Total (N) = 9</th>
<th>Muslim Sunnis Total (N) = 9</th>
<th>Muslim Shiites Total (N) = 10</th>
<th>Druze Total (N) = 6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SE</td>
<td>Not SE</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>Not SE</td>
<td>SE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not SE</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>Not SE</td>
<td>SE</td>
<td>Not SE</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Students were initially recruited through personal social connections followed by a snowballing technique. I asked a number of social and professional contacts, who were in direct contact with university students, either through their work at civic non-governmental organisations (NGOs) or through their work at one of the biggest and highly ranked universities, to put me in contact with a number of university students. These were to be students who might be potentially interested in taking part in the study, and were eligible to participate based on the selection criteria. I was careful in the way I introduced my research to recruiters, as I did not want it to seem as if it merely focused on sexually active students. I explained to my contacts, who were helping me in the recruitment process, that I was interested in recruiting never-married Lebanese university students from different universities in Beirut, of any religious sect, regardless of their sexual experiences. I explained that I was interested in both undergraduates and graduates, as long as the graduates were not above 26 years old, and the undergraduates had completed their first year at the university. I also explained that my current research study only focused on heterosexual relationships; therefore, on students who identified themselves as “straight” or as “heterosexuals”.

The recruitment strategy was also limited by ethical considerations. For example, I could not determine the sexual activity or religion of the participants beforehand. First, I wanted to avoid exposing recruited students to detailed interrogation by the recruiters. Sensitive
and personal questions such enquiring about students’ religious affiliation or sexual activity might have made students feel that their privacy had been jeopardised before even taking part in the interview.

Second, I was particularly careful to protect female participants from any unnecessary backlash. Recruiting young women to discuss or talk about sexual issues, in general, and their sexual experiences, in particular, is very difficult in a society where the majority of never-married sexually active women keep their sexual activity under cover. Despite being very keen on including both sexually active and non-sexually active young women, it was almost impossible to ensure this mix of participants before the interview. I could not, by any means, ask any of the recruiters to put me in contact with unmarried sexually active women. I was aware that, by doing so, I might be unintentionally exposing some young women to social judgement and embarrassment. On the other hand, this would have created bias in my sample, as it would have resulted in the recruitment of women who were ‘known’ to be sexually active, or are ‘ok’ with revealing their sexual activity status. I did not want to restrict my recruitment merely to sexually active women, who are ‘ok’ and ‘open’ to talking about their sexual activity and sexual experiences with others. This would have somehow excluded women, who are sexually active, yet are keeping it secret, and do not want to disclose their sexual activity. This was in particular, the group of women I was interested in not missing out on, without forgetting that those who are not sexually active were just as important and relevant for my research study. Instead, I set out to recruit never-married young women, regardless of their sexual activity.

Therefore, not focusing on sexually active students as recruitment criteria meant that female participants, who agreed to be interviewed, would not be judged as being “sexually active”, neither by recruiters nor by any other person, who knew about my research and saw them with me. Using social contacts to recruit students meant that I had to be very careful about who was being exposed and how.

Through my social connections, I was put in contact with students from different universities, classes, ages, and sexes. When I initiated contact with my participants over the
phone, I was very careful in my approach, especially with potential female participants. First, I explained the purpose of my research study. Second, I ensured that I informed them that I was interested in their views and attitudes towards premarital sex, regardless of their sexual activity, and without necessarily addressing and discussing their personal sexual experiences. Indeed, the response rate was higher than I expected. Young women deliberately expressed their willingness to take part in my research study. Most probably, I would have had a high refusal rate if I had told young women that my research study aimed to explore their sexual experiences and personal relationships. Taking all this into consideration, the short questionnaire was important in gathering this sensitive information in a private and confidential setting. Accordingly, I continued to recruit women until I had a sufficient sample of sexually active women.

After students voluntarily agreed to take part in the research, I arranged interview times with them, and asked them whether they had a specific place or preferred venue, which they considered as ‘safe’ and ‘private’ in order to carry out the interview. Some of the participants chose to be interviewed in their own houses. Others did not mind being interviewed at some available private offices, which I arranged. These offices were either located at the Faculty of Health Sciences at the American University of Beirut, or at an office in Beirut’s city centre. Sometimes, I also conducted interviews at two of my friends’ houses, which were made privately available for our use. I took all these measurements to ensure privacy, confidentiality and as comfortable a setting as possible. However, only four students (three males and one female) chose to be interviewed in a public coffee shop, which had its own disadvantages, in terms of privacy and comfort, as I explain below.

Overall, I found that the general setting (public versus private spaces), as well as the different personalities of the students, influenced the dynamic and flow of the conversation. For instance, students whom I interviewed in their homes, or in private closed offices, demonstrated more relaxed body language, and a willingness to open up, compared to those I interviewed in public spaces, such as coffee shops. Even students who were shy and, somehow, quiet or reticent, had longer interviewing times in closed private spaces. Public spaces, in general, inhibited interviewees from expressing themselves, to a certain extent.
This was evident when few participants were being concise, despite me asking my questions in different ways and using lots of probing questions. Scholars who have conducted sensitive research had similar issues in relation to what was spoken out by the participants: where (in which setting), how (much they reveal) and to whom (researcher). All of these factors depended on the level of trust, and the extent to which participants felt safe (Dickson-Swift et al, 2007). Many of these accounts had already been highlighted in feminist research, which is known for breaking silences and trying to make women’s voices heard (see Ryan-Flood and Gill, 2010).

Gender also played a role in determining the dynamic of the conversation. In general, young women were very cautious and reluctant about what they were saying at the beginning of the interviews on premarital sex. However, as the conversation progressed, a lot of interesting perspectives and stories emerged from them. Young men, on the other hand, seemed concerned to use polite language because I was a ‘woman’. They avoided mentioning vulgar terms and sexualised language, which carried sexual connotations in spoken Arabic (their colloquial language) at the beginning of the interview. Some male interviewees also conveyed mixed messages about their views and attitudes towards premarital sex because, as we talked, I tried my best to present an open-minded, non-judgemental and understanding approach, to make them feel comfortable in opening up and being more transparent about their true feelings, attitudes and perceptions, instead of hiding them in front of a female researcher. Berger (2015) argues that a researcher’s personal characteristics, such as gender, age, race, language, origin, beliefs, biases, and preferences influence participants’ responses. This was evident when female participants were comfortable sharing and discussing their views and even their intimate sexual experiences with me, being a female researcher, during and after the interview, as I explain below.

All interviews were carried out individually and face to face, except for two interviews, which were conducted via a skype call, when notes were concurrently taken. Almost all interviewees approved of having their interviews digitally recorded, with the exception of two young women, who strongly preferred to keep their interviews informal and unrecorded. Instead, notes were taken throughout the interview. Taking notes during an
interview instead of recording has its own disadvantages, such as carrying the potential of losing some of the data and being unable to maintain a high level of accuracy. In total, I had 30 recorded and 4 unrecorded interviews. The average timing of each interview was around one hour. Some interviews lasted between 90 to 120 minutes, while others were shorter, around 30 to 45 minutes. The digital recording of each interview was transferred to my laptop, and was labelled with the real name of the participant I interviewed. I deemed this to be acceptable, as my personal laptop is only accessed by myself, and it has a very secure password. Besides, the location of the stored data on the laptop is difficult to find.

5.7 Pilot testing

Before I started the actual data collection, I carried out four pilot interviews. The interviews went really well. I did not have to make any major amendments. The first few interviews helped me to better phrase my questions, and focus more on the risk component during the interview. Only minor amendments were made to the interview questions and questionnaire, such as changing some of the wording of the questions. This had not really affected the quality of the interviews, so I included these interviews in my overall sample, as there was not any significant difference in the approach or the amendments made.

5.8 On the day of the interview

Before starting each of the interviews, I introduced myself and thanked students for their participation and for finding the time to meet. I always tried to break the ice with the participants by opening a short side conversation about simple things like the weather or the traffic, for example. This approach helped to start off the conversation and helped to prepare a comfortable setting, and establish some sort of trust.
5.8.1 Obtaining consent

When introducing myself, I usually explained a little bit about my work in the field of sexual and reproductive health and rights, which I was engaged in, besides working on my doctoral studies. I would then briefly explain to my participants the research objective, and about all the ethical issues in relation to my research study. That is, assuring them of confidentiality, anonymity, privacy and data protection, as well as obtaining their consent to voluntary participation in their interview. I also answered any questions or concerns they raised. This was especially important in this research study, as the data was especially sensitive, and might have carried undesirable consequences if released, disclosed or lost.

All my participants received two documents, one page each. The first document was introductory or informative. It included information about the research study and its objectives, as well as my contact information for the participants to retain for their future reference. The second document aimed at obtaining students’ informed consent to voluntarily participate in the research study. The consent form was signed and kept with me [A copy of the information and consent forms are attached in appendix C].

5.8.2 Completing the self-administered questionnaire

After I had obtained their consent, I would give them the short self-administered questionnaire to complete. The questionnaire had a total of 16 questions, as mentioned earlier in this chapter. The first section was constituted of 12 demographic questions, and the second section included 4 questions on attitudes and behaviours towards premarital sex. On paper, these two sections were separated from each other. The students would only fill out the 12 demographic questions prior to the interview; then I would ask them to fill out the second section, (4 questions), after the interview had finished. I separated these two-section questions from each other to avoid any sensitivity, embarrassment, feelings of intimidation, or discomfort the four questions might generate. I did not want questions like “are you currently sexually active” or “what was the age at which you first had sexual intercourse” to be interpreted as ‘judgemental' or ‘stigmatising’, and therefore affect the way participants interacted with me during the interview. Although they knew I was not
looking at their answers, it was a way to assure them that the interview would not be guided or informed by a judgemental attitude towards their sexual activity or by any of their answers. It was important for me to have them open up first through the interview, before answering these questions. I think that this strategy led to the avoidance of fake or inaccurate reporting. Once the participants had filled out the questionnaire, they would put it aside or give it to me if they wanted, and I would ask them if they were ready and happy to start the interview.

5.8.3 Building rapport and trust

During the interview, I would try my best to establish trust and rapport with my interviewees to help them feel comfortable and able to disclose their thoughts and experiences. After the interview, I would hand the participants the second section of the questionnaire (4 questions) and thank them for their time and valuable participation. Sometimes, participants (males and females) would stay longer to talk or ask more questions. Interestingly, almost half of the young women I interviewed stayed after the interview. Some told me more about their personal stories and experiences, and even asked for my advice and personal contact details. Eight of the participants (males and females) stayed in touch with me, as friends, through social media, such as Facebook or twitter. Consequently, I continued to hear from some about their love stories and the dilemmas they were facing. For instance, one of the participants contacted me a year after interviewing her, telling me that she changed her mind about “hymen reconstruction”, since the interview. This shows that research can be an ongoing relationship that becomes social.

Therefore, ethical questions have to be constantly negotiated. For example, for a couple of participants, I eventually learned more about their private and intimate lives beyond what was present in the interview itself. This knowledge, for sure, helped me get a better understanding of the meaning embedded in my data, but I have not used this information. To me, it is a matter of trust, privacy and transparency. Young women, who perceived me as a trustworthy person, to share and discuss some of their private matters with, surely expected me to keep their information confidential.
Besides, almost all young women expressed their delight that they had found someone to speak to about sex-related issues. They expressed their cautiousness and reluctance to talk about sex openly with anyone, including their close friends. They expressed their anger towards the judgemental aspect of society, and were keen to know more about sex-related issues. This reflects the importance of listening to these young women with no prejudice or judgement whatsoever. It reflects how much sex counselling is needed, and how important trust is.

5.8.4 Observations

Right after the interview, I would write down some notes and observations about some of my impressions or reflections or about the participant’s non-verbal expressions or body language. These notes helped me later in the analysis stage to better reflect on each of the interviews. For example, in one of my interviews with a young man in a coffee shop (public space), I noted that the participant was frequently avoiding eye contact, and looking at people around him instead, as if he was watching out for someone who might be listening to our conversation. Although he expressed very liberal views towards premarital sex, his body language demonstrated some level of anxiety. His answers were short and concise, despite encouraging him to elaborate. I sensed the discomfort in his body language. This made me avoid interviewing people in public places, unless they specifically requested it. On the whole, at least 3 out of the 4 students, who were interviewed in coffee shops, demonstrated lower levels of comfort in their body language compared to those interviewed in private venues.

5.9 Data Analysis

One of the key research lessons I had acquired previously, when I was doing my Master degree in Public Health at the American University of Beirut, is that ‘data analysis’ in qualitative research actually begins the moment the researcher starts data collection. In my case, this began with interviewing. I understand the interview based research process as a
continuous, reflective process, which starts with my first interactions with the participants, as well as when engaging with my field notes, observations, and reflections. It then continues to build up in the process of closer interaction with my data through the development of transcriptions, coding and analysis.

I completed a verbatim transcription for all of the 30 recorded interviews. The other four interviews were not recorded, as mentioned earlier (two were skype call interviews and two participants refused to record an interview). In the process of transcription, I was also generating summaries, writing down notes, and assigning codes to my data. I then started categorising the codes, and pulling out the main themes generated, which were, to a large extent, guided by the research questions and the interview questions. At that point, I developed a table, which had the main themes (horizontally) and the 34 names of participants (vertically), and I started assigning the coded categories from the participants’ quotations to the relevant themes. This exercise was a major challenge in analysing the data, as a lot of the categorised codes were often overlapping and fitted under more than one theme. Moreover, the analysis process was time consuming, as it was done manually. The existing qualitative data analysis software is also not designed to analyse Arabic data; therefore, it was more convenient to do the analysis manually. Only the main themes and relevant data in the form of quotations were translated into English. The main themes presented in the next three chapters on findings revolved around “attitudes towards premarital sex”, “recognising diversity and heterogeneity”, “confusion about one’s values and principles”, “awareness of double standards”, “emphasis on looks and physical appearance”, “moral risk: reputation and respect, “shared risk: importance of the family”, “future risk: marriageability”, “positive aspects of risk-taking”, “managing risks: strategies and negotiations”, “trust”, “performance” and “compliance”. Nevertheless, I entered the quantitative data from the questionnaire into an excel sheet to gather data on participants’ backgrounds, as I mentioned earlier. I did this also to quantify my data, when necessary, and to enrich my data analysis through triangulation, and to look for associations between some of the demographic variables and attitudes towards premarital sex.
5.10 Ethical considerations

Considering the sensitivity of the research topic, I was continuously reflecting on ethical issues, which shaped the research process before, during and after conducting the interviews. Most of these issues have been highlighted above. These are, a) protecting my participants, especially females, from exposure to any social judgement or embarrassment in relation to their sexual activity, especially during the recruitment process, as I explained earlier; b) taking measurements to ensure privacy, confidentiality and safety through the choice of venue and through anonymity and data protection, which were ensured throughout the research study. The interviews, which were digitally recorded, were stored on my personal laptop, in folders, which are difficult to access. The laptop itself has a strong password protecting its information. All other hard copy documents, such as consent forms, filled out questionnaires, and transcribed data were stored in a safe storage box in my flat in the UK, which no one has access to. When presenting the data, anonymity was ensured through changing all the real names of my participants and replacing them with pseudonyms. c) Framing and articulating my questions appropriately, given the sensitivity of my research topic. For example, I asked my participants about their opinions without directly asking about their personal sexual experiences to maintain their privacy. Only those who wished to disclose their personal experiences did so. There was no pressure from my side at all to get answers relating to personal sexual experiences. Many participants started talking about their opinions and attitudes, in general, but then, as we went on with the interview, more personal experiences were shared. I reminded them that they could say things off the record if they wanted to, and some of them indeed asked for it. At times, I had to stop recording, listen to some of the stories, and then turn on the recorder again. Being a good listener and interacting with the participants in a positive manner, and sometimes with sense of humour helped create a certain level of trust and comfort among the participants.
5.11 Reflexivity

Reflexivity is commonly viewed as “the process of a continual internal dialogue and critical self-evaluation of a researcher’s positionality, as well as active acknowledgement and explicit recognition that this position may affect the research process and outcome (Berger, 2015: 220). As such, reflexivity is a crucial component of any qualitative research, which allows the researcher to be aware of any potential biases or the potential for the researcher to be reading into the data analysis.

As mentioned earlier, in the introduction, my position as a Lebanese woman, strongly supportive of sexual health and rights, has led to the construction of my own personal perspective or convictions in relation to the world. I was fully aware of some of the issues I was discussing, which I felt strongly about, such as the right to sexual freedom away from social pressures and control, as well as the gender bias and discrimination in Lebanese society. Being a female, and coming from the same cultural background as my participants, had its own advantages, such as easy access to participants through my existing social connections and being able to understand implied content. I was also able to understand the participants’ language and the meanings behind it. I was able to understand the social and cultural sensitivities, which surround this topic, and demonstrate a good understanding of the political, social, cultural and economic context. On the other hand, one of the challenges of being an insider was maintaining neutrality, objectivity and the right balance between my personal convictions, and the data I was collecting and analysing. For example, during the interviews, I was always cautious of keeping my personal convictions hidden, even in my body language. I employed a body language, which encouraged my participants to speak out. I was conscious about using my non-verbal expressions (smiling, nodding, or showing impressive expressions) as well as my verbal expressions, to assure my participants a comfortable and trustworthy setting, where they would not feel they were being judged or stigmatised. I used expressions like “it is really interesting what you are saying” or “I am really enjoying this conversation” to express my interest in what they were saying.
Sometimes, though, some female participants, who stayed after the interview had finished, were themselves curious to know about my personal opinion on premarital sex. One even asked me personal questions. Despite being honest and open about my personal convictions, and in my answer, I admit that I myself suddenly felt exposed and somehow threatened. I felt exposed because I was aware of the common social contacts and acquaintances between us. I was also aware that she might tell mutual friends about our conversation – people with whom I did not necessarily want to share my personal views. I took note of this instance, and the way I felt about it. I could have avoided answering her, but she surprised me with her question, and I did not think much of how I would answer her. I then reflected on that experience afterwards, and I learned from it. I even prepared my answer for the next time someone might ask me personal questions. But no one did. Yet it was really interesting how I suddenly became the one under investigation.

Another instance was related to establishing trust. I believe that I succeeded in ensuring a safe and trustworthy environment for the majority of my participants. This was evident when they expressed their delight in having spoken with me. Women were more interested in after-interview conversations, as I explained earlier. Considering the sensitivity of the topic, I thought that indicated their level of comfort and trust, on the one hand, and, on the other hand their need to speak to someone about a topic such as this. Some might have found it empowering. Some stated that they rarely spoke to someone about these issues, and they thought it was very important. Despite the sensitivity of my research topic, it remained the job of a skilful researcher to ensure a ‘trusted’ and ‘confidential’ environment, which enabled the participants to feel safe and comfortable to open up and speak up their minds. I used many strategies and approaches to ensure the participants this safe, confidential, and, most importantly, non-judgemental and non-stigmatising environment.

I also reflected on my interview skills. Despite my well-established interview skills in qualitative research, sometimes, when I used to listen to some of the interviews, I used to take notes on what did not flow so well in the interview, and how I could improve on it. For example, I took notes of instances when I interrupted my interviewee, or instances where I had to improve the way I asked my probing questions, or even when I said something,
which might have influenced the student’s response. Such reflective notes helped me improve other interviews.

Overall, being aware of my potential bias, as well as, my personal knowledge encouraged me to treat my data more rigorously. Throughout the different stages of my research, I was in a continuous process of reflection, which did not just occur the moment I sat and started writing my analysis. It started the moment I was developing my questions, and continued to the very end stage of writing up the analysis. Whenever I was thinking of, or working with my data, reflective notes were being taken, which fed into the analysis and interpretation process. Reflexivity was also established and maintained throughout my prolonged interactions with my data and in ensuring that the diverse views of my participants were accurately represented. This meant that sometimes I had to go over the transcripts many times, re-listen to the recorded interviews, go over my notes, and match the data of the interviews with the data from the questionnaire through triangulation. Moreover, analysing my data from a newly learned theoretical conception also helped minimise the bias, as the data was interpreted with an innovative approach. Thus it was a creative learning process for me as well which brought up new insight and reflections.

5.12 Research Rigour

Researchers and academics, who had written books and articles on qualitative research methods, agree that, despite the importance of ensuring that the qualitative methods used to collect and analyse the data are valid and reliable, there is no one consistent method to measure the reliability and validity of qualitative research. The qualitative research process is also not as easy and straight forward, as is the case in quantitative research (Silverman, 2004; Pole and Lampard, 2002). Anssi Peräkylä (2004) argues that qualitative research is still weak in assuring reliability therefore qualitative research necessitates the production of high quality recordings, transcripts and field notes. However, validity is more concerned with the quality of the interpretations and the analysis. Other scholars referred to reliability and validity in qualitative research as ensuring that the research has rigour (Seibold et al,
1994; Golafshani, 2003), is trustworthy, has minimal bias and demonstrates quality findings (Golafshani, 2003). Reflexivity and triangulation are two ways of ensuring research rigour, and improving validity and reliability in qualitative research (Mays and Pope, 2000; Long and Johnson, 2000).

In this chapter, I have shown that my research study was rigorous, because I used the appropriate methodology for my research question. I used in-depth, semi-structured interviews and triangulated my data against data from my questionnaire. I ensured I did my best to eliminate bias throughout the research process. This was specifically done through a continuously reflexive process. I stopped collecting data when I reached data saturation point, and the majority of my data was accurate, as it was recorded and transcribed. In brief, the methodology used was successful in answering my research questions in the findings and analysis, as I show in the next three chapters.
CHAPTER 6
Young Lebanese in context: attitudes towards premarital sex

This chapter presents some of the core themes, which emerged from my interviews in relation to my participants’ general views and perceptions of themselves, their peers, and people of their age and their attitudes towards premarital sex. I also touch on their expressed fears and the dilemmas they face. This section is particularly important because my research question mainly addresses the ‘social risks’ of engaging in premarital sex, as opposed to the implied ‘health risks’. Therefore, providing a good explanation of the social context, such as the way young people identify themselves, their lifestyle and interests, sets the ground for a better understanding of other sections of the thesis, and the themes identified within. For instance, with the social context in mind, the reader will be able to better link my participants’ perceptions and views towards premarital sex, and the ways the participants negotiate and respond to the ‘social risks’ they face when engaging in premarital sex, which I explain in more detail in the following chapters.

The findings revealed that female interviewees reported a much higher exposure to social risks (if they engaged in premarital sex), as well as highlighting more personal sexual experiences than did the males. Both males and females believed that women were more prone to these social risks than men. Therefore, the data reflects a substantial focus on young women’s experiences in the following chapters of the thesis. Sometimes I use many quotes to support and highlight points of discussion for the purpose of presenting the views of my diverse participants both in terms of their gender and religious background.

I started my interviews by asking my participants about their perceptions of young Lebanese people’s lifestyles, their interests and position within the modern world (modernisation). This question was followed by another one, on what they thought of premarital sex (attitudes). Three main themes emerged, 1) Recognising diversity and heterogeneity, 2) Confusion about one’s values and convictions, and 3) Attitudes towards premarital sex: awareness of double standards.
6.1 Recognising diversity and heterogeneity

As explained earlier, the Lebanese social and political fabric is characterised distinctively by its own complexity. Almost all my participants showed that they recognised the diversity and heterogeneity among young Lebanese people in terms of their lifestyle, background, open-mindedness or conservativeness and, consequently, this perspective fed into their attitudes towards premarital sex. The majority of my interviewees stated that Lebanese youth, in general, do not share a homogenous set of social values and views in relation to controversial issues such as premarital sex and gender roles. Therefore, it is not possible to group youth into one category, or give them one character, as their views and lifestyle differ based on their social and religious background. My participants viewed this heterogeneity as largely related to variation in the social, cultural and sectarian composition of each of the geographical areas within Lebanon, from which young people descend or originate. For instance, one of my male participants described Lebanon as a group of continents living with each other as a result of civil war, which reflects a very complex and deeper problem than mere differences in lifestyle. His quote did not only reflect the sectarian diversity, but it also reflected discrimination and fear of the “other”, which enforces social exclusion.

“I consider that Lebanon cannot be given one character because it is not a country! 'Liberalism’ is not a general character, ‘conservatism’ is not a general character either. Ignorance or traditional customs or norms do not exist in all areas. Ok, if you want to go to Akkar, or to the South, or to Bqaa [these are examples of remote or rural areas], you will find shocking things if you [normally] live in Beirut. If you go to Batroun [coastal area in the North - mostly Christians], you will find shocking things if you [normally] live in Dahiyeh [One of Beirut’s southern suburbs- mostly Muslim Shiites]! It is different... We are countries, just like continents living with each other. That’s why people do not accept those who come from a different area.... because this is the sectarianism and the fears that we have, of everyone. Every group of people resembles each other in certain ways, and has fears of the ‘others’. [They think] like ‘these people might kill us’; ‘these people might eradicate us’; ‘these people want to govern us in any possible way’, so these ideas that they have towards the ‘others’ are linked to the way they deal with them socially....” (Majd, M, 22, Agnostic [Muslim-Shiites]).
In chapter 2, on the thesis’ contextual background, I mentioned that most of the geographical areas in Lebanon often determine the religious sect of the people living in or descending from that area. Frequently, the individual’s religious sect is further identified by their family name (surname), specifically when the geographical area has a mixture of families from different religions. Some social and cultural norms, among certain groups of people, are much more conservative than others. Religious ideologies and beliefs can play a fundamental role in forming social values and cultural norms and, therefore, the attitudes towards sex and sexuality and the lifestyles of young people reflect this. Here, I present another two examples from participants, who also linked this heterogeneity or diversity to geographical area, and eventually to the religion of the people living in each area.

“Here in Lebanon, the answer differs very much by the area, if you like, because there are societies of everything... ... ... I’ll give you an example, we, in Dahiyeh [one of Beirut’s southern suburbs- mostly Muslim Shiites] for example, if a girl [sic] is a bit late, like if she has not arrived home by sunset or so, immediately her parents start ringing her and asking where are you, or they ring the house she’s visiting [saying] time to come back and so on... whereas if you were [a girl] from Ashrafieh [an area in East Beirut- mostly Christians] her night-out or party probably starts at 9:00 or 10:00 at night... of course there’s this gap between them...” (Raneem, F, 21, Muslim-Shiites).

“It varies a lot from one place to another. There are some places where you find lots of liberation/open-mindedness, or at least this is what you see... in other places, you find that no, they are not open-minded/liberal, but sometimes you may notice that certain things happen but not publicly, you know! So publicly, it appears to be conservative, but practically it may not be. It differs a lot! You cannot generalise across Lebanon, though Lebanon is very small, you cannot generalise, it is different in each place/area.” (Nay, F, 19, Christian-Maronite).

My findings also indicated that my interviewees recognise not only the overall diversity, which exists in Lebanon, but also the diversity of views within specific religious groups (for example, amongst Christians themselves or Muslims themselves), whether these views are political, religious or social. For instance, one of my interviewees stated:

“I always thought that religion is a major factor in this [meaning: in creating differences in lifestyle, attitudes and behaviours], but then I discovered that it’s not!....... I found that within every religious sect there are people like this and that
[meaning conservative vs. liberal]. I even find for instance Christians who are very conservative. Before I came to Beirut, I always thought that Christians were much more open-minded than all other religious groups; but it turned out that they are not!..... I think that peers have an influence, the place you work at has an influence, and whether you stay in the same area or go out to experience other things. These things, in my opinion, make a difference – plus the area itself.” (Nay, F, 19, Christian-Maronite).

Recognising heterogeneity, the majority of my participants divided the Lebanese youth into at least two or three categories as such: First, there are those who are totally liberal, and are always trying to be like Westerners. Some of my participants referred to them as “over” - in the sense of being excessively liberal, or over doing it and as ‘indifferent’, as expressed by some of my participants:

“I see it [the life style of young Lebanese] so similarly to that lived in the West, because they are taking lots of things from there [the West], and they are living so much like that [like Westerners], and I also see that because we have lots of outings, clubbing, partying and so on, they became so open... too much! Like to me they become too open-minded - more than they should be! Also, they are not aware of what they are doing. Here, we do not have [sexual]awareness because they [meaning the society] are so closed on all issues related to sex and sexual relations before marriage ... we reached a stage like ‘it’s too much!’ Like now they [young Lebanese] hear that, in Europe, the mother tells her daughter to go do whatever she wants and to explore at the age of 16 yet to be aware, so here it’s like they have adopted it!!!! No, here like we have to calm down a bit...” (Noor, F, 25, Christian-Maronite).

“I think that they assimilate themselves with the West, like [they think] we are a liberal country and a country that is not just like any other Arab country, here we have lots of permissible things [compared to Arab countries], but they take things from the West in a way that is over [sic], like they think that we became like Europe or like America so we have to behave like them. They take it in a way that is over [sic]. Like for example, if they want to go for a night out, like ok there’s no problem with going out and drinking alcohol and wearing short clothes, but not to the extent that university girls [sic] would dance on the bar wearing very short and revealing clothes! Like you are a university girl, you shouldn’t behave like this or, for example, sitting in an unacceptable position in a public place...” (Katie, F, 25, Christian-Maronite).

Secondly, there are those who were referred to, by my participants, as “half- half” indicating that they are quite liberal and open-minded, yet still conform to some of the
social and cultural norms and values of their society, as expressed by Marwan (M), Lobna (F), Yamen (M) and Jamal (M):

“In general, we can say that young people in Lebanon are neither too liberal nor too conservative. Like they do have their norms and traditions yet at the same time they are accepting of every new thing and they work on it and they are always looking for the best. They like to have fun; they like to do anything they want. Some of them have restrictions, others do not, it differs from one to another” (Marwan, M, 22, Muslim-Suni).

“Young Lebanese are liberal from one side and very conservative from another side… like sometimes I sit and talk with someone who sounds very open-minded and accepts others and so on, but when [the person is] put in a certain situation or instance, he [the person] becomes narrow-minded and he goes back to his religion, his political party and so on” (Lobna, F, 23, Muslim-Suni).

“you can say that young Lebanese are half-half. They are open-minded in relation to young men but they are conservative/narrow-minded in relation to girls [sic]... ... they try to imitate the west in the wrong way. They take the wrong things from outside [from the west] for example and they think that it is trendy. For instance, if you go outside [to Western countries], you find that young men work really hard and that’s why they hang out towards the end of the week, drink, and do whatever they want. But here, they [young people] are all living with their parents, and they want to live on their own but at the expense of their parents.” (Yamen, M, 21, Christian-Orthodox).

“In general, the Lebanese youth nowadays are considered average. Average in the sense that they are living their normal life in line with the way the world is advancing. So they are living the trend that they are expected to be living or they are expecting you to see them living. All that is happening is that they are living in the same way like in Europe or the States somehow. Like they are trying their best to live a decent life while keeping the Lebanese trend which is this mixture of: ‘I love and respect my family and it has a big influence on me BUT I’m independent’. There’s a bit of this mixture, some of which is nonsense/illogical, like sometimes they seem to adopt totally different concepts.” (Jamal, M, 24, Druze).

The latter quote by Jamal indicates that young Lebanese tended to follow a western and liberal mode of life, which goes with the western trends. Yet at the same time they maintained traditional values and norms. The coexistence of these two concepts with each other, as is the case among some Lebanese, was perceived as “illogical” or “nonsense”, and
might explain some of the confusion and contradictions, which young people have about their own values and convictions, which I will highlight in the next section of this chapter.

Finally, there are those who are considerably religious or conservative and have not necessarily had the opportunity to engage in or experience the same experiences of people their age due to social and religious restrictions imposed on them, either by their families or by their own religious and moral values. Examples of these restrictions could be specifying a time to come home, not being allowed to go to parties where alcohol is served for example.

“I see that there are two types of people nowadays: some are living their lives abundantly specifically the young ones 17-18 years, and some others not at all, you feel that they have never seen/experienced anything, yet are too conservative, and I think that their parents enforce this on them, and once they go out, they try to do things and it becomes obvious the extent to which they have been suppressed.” (Katie, F, 25, Christian-Maronite).

“... and there’s a portion [of young people] whom you feel that they are isolated. Like they go to the university, attend their classes and that’s it.” (Ghassan, M, 23, Agnostic [Druze]).

On the other hand, the majority of my participants perceived Lebanon, on the whole, as a considerably liberal and progressive country, especially when they compared Lebanese culture and lifestyle to that of other Arab and Middle Eastern countries. Yet some insisted that Lebanese culture is outwardly liberal, but it remains conservative underneath, especially in the way women are treated.

“you have to see the society. At the end, we are not living on our own [in separation from the society]. We are an eastern society, no matter how progressive we are, till now we have not advanced. We are only developing ‘Al Jahiliyya’ [the pre-Islamic era usually referred to as the ‘days of ignorance’]! Before they used to bury the girl [alive] into the soil, and nowadays the society buries her when she commits any mistake” (Ghina, F, 21, Muslim- Shiites).

Ghina was arguing that no matter how advanced the Lebanese society looked from the outside, deep inside it, it remained traditional and unprogressive. She expressed that by
stating that the terms have shifted—girls [sic] are not literally buried—but socially buried. To her, both concepts are still “backwards”. More or less, they mean the same thing. One, is slightly more advanced than the other. For her, being socially dead meant being socially excluded and marginalised. I will discuss these social risks further in the next chapter.

It was interesting to see my interviewees fully aware of this diversity and heterogeneity within Lebanese society, as my findings later revealed that this heterogeneity was strongly reflected in my participants’ attitudes towards premarital sex, their perceptions and interpretations of social risk, as well as in the diverse ways they responded to, and negotiated such risk. My participants’ attitudes and views towards the social risks associated with premarital sex did not only vary by gender but also by the individual’s social background and, to a certain extent, by their religiosity rather than their religious sect. For example, in the questionnaire, there was a question on the individual’s religion, and another one on religiosity. Some participants chose the religion they were born with, but reported being “atheist” or “agnostic” under the question of religiosity.

6.2 Confusion about one’s values and convictions

When my participants were talking about their perceptions of young Lebanese people, one of the commonly repeated terms used to describe ‘youth’ was the word “lost” [in Arabic ‘Dayein’]. When I asked them to explain to me what they meant, my participants explicated it in different ways, but almost all of them indicated that young people are lost in the sense of being confused. They are disoriented about their own values and principles, regardless of whether these values were social, cultural, religious or even political. For instance, some of the participants indicated that, nowadays, young Lebanese straddle two cultures: traditional and modern. The tensions implied in socially keeping this balance are difficult to manage. Lebanese young people always try to assimilate themselves with what they perceive as ‘Western culture’, to seem progressive and modern and make them distinctive from the bulk of Arab states. At the same time, they are still trapped in their own conservative social
norms, values, and religious beliefs creating a dilemma or what they called ‘contradiction’ in their attitudes and behaviours.

“.... There’s contradiction because of the social environment, which he [the person] is in. He [the person] likes to be liberal but there’s the social milieu and there are the entrenched ideologies and stereotyped ideas which control him [the person] ....... they [Lebanese youth] are lost...... because I’m telling you, on one hand, the milieu, family, and the society they’re living in are pulling them to one side, and on the other hand, there’s what they are watching through the social media, on the television, as well as their ideas which are developing, are pulling them to the other side.” (Lobna, F, 23, Muslim-Sunni).

Moreover, most of my participants stated that Lebanon, in general, is a jingoistic (or “show off”) society where the Lebanese like to always brag about how exceptional they are in everything and in comparison to other people - for example, ‘better than Arabs’ and ‘as progressive as Europeans’. Part of this ‘showing-off’, for instance, is proving they are progressive, modern, up-to-date, liberal and open-minded, and so on. Accordingly, they ‘pretend’ to have liberal attitudes and assimilate themselves with Western culture, which, from their perspective, represents ‘liberalism’. However, this performance is limited to certain aspects of their lives such as their dress, forms of socialising in public, drinking and partying. It does not necessarily address core structural frameworks about gender, patriarchy or religion. When it comes to taking a stand on serious issues, such as marriage or a religious-political stand, they go back to their traditional and religious beliefs. Below, I provide a good example where one of my participants summarises why she thinks that some young Lebanese are lost and confused.

“First of all, we are a society which likes outwardly showing off. Always in all spheres, we have an aspect, which we pretend, and we have an aspect which we hide. Other than that, Lebanese society is somehow a progressive society. Like we have a certain milieu/ambience, we are not like Sudan, for example! We have a night-life, we have entertainment life, we have some kind of liberalism, which is allowable in the society. There are some people who are trying to strike a balance between this liberalism and the traditions and norms and are not succeeding in this, because the norms and traditions are always stronger/more resilient. It also depends on how much the individual is attached to their [social] environment. Also there’s religion, which plays the biggest role of course. And it has something to do with “pretending”, like he [an individual] would be able to give up on some of the religious practices at a certain
point, but there are other spiritual things, which he cannot give up on. So this also results in contradiction……. You find for example, a young man who doesn’t have a problem going out/partying, having relationships with women, drinking alcohol for example - ok here I’m talking about Muslims for example and other conservative environments- but at the same time, when someone talks about Al Aseer for example [ A fanatic Sunni cleric], he [the young man] starts talking about the rights of Muslim Sunnis. He goes back to the very traditional mentality/mindset. You feel that there’s a contradiction between what they pretend to be and what they have in their social, religious and cultural background.” (Hoda, F, 19, Muslim-Sunni).

Others phrased it in different ways stating that the Lebanese, in general, are lost because they are unable to establish an identity for themselves. Majd, for instance, summarised it quite well while providing some examples as follows:

“Lebanese youth in general are lost, because I think that they are unable to establish their identity politically, socially, intellectually…etc. like some of them prefer to stay the way we are, each confined within their religious sect and within their society, so they commit to such ideologies……. Another part [of Lebanese youth] is very revolutionary, very rebellious, and go to the extreme. These are also unable to find themselves. They start doing everything which shows they are different; they are sensible; they hangout and party; they get drunk; they don’t have a problem with anything… they do everything that is alien to the society….. Then there are those who are ‘in between’, like they want to take into account their society yet at the same time they love to do things which are prohibited for them……they are unable to make their own decisions………… In brief, I’m telling you, the concise word is ‘lost’. We are a lost/disoriented society, closer to conservatism than liberalism, and this is not only applicable to the youth but to the whole society. And this keeps us in a whirlpool, in a vicious circle, we are living in the same situation and it’s getting worse at all levels without us doing anything to change it because we cannot make one step forward if we are not convinced that we are going backwards” (Majd, M, 22, Agnostic [Muslim-Shiites]).

When elaborating more on this issue of ‘being lost or confused”, some of my interviewees, who originally descended from different geographical areas and neighbourhoods outside Beirut, discussed in detail the dilemmas and the struggles they faced in terms of identifying their identity and ascertaining their values, principles and beliefs after moving to Beirut and joining the University.
Beirut’s universities, bring together students from all over Lebanon with various cultural, religious, political and social backgrounds. Universities provide a vital, dynamic, and interactive milieu for students to share, discuss and exchange their various views, thoughts, ideas and beliefs. Some of my participants claimed that their exposure to this diversity opened their eyes and expanded their horizons into newly learnt concepts, knowledge and interpretations of life. At many times, being involved in such discussions triggered them to re-think and re-shape their own values and beliefs, or at least made them question some of their convictions. One of my participants shared with me how the university experience was a turning point in her life. Moving to live and study in one of Beirut’s universities changed some aspects of her personal identity and influenced her self-development, as she describes it:

“... it [the turning point] is definitely when I came to the university. You know why? Because as long as you live in a society/community which resembles you and you resemble it, and it imposes things on you whilst you do not know about the other things existing in another society/community. When you go to another society/community, you start comparing; you start weighing things in your head. When I moved to another community, I saw lots of things which I've never seen before, or, I was not allowed to see in the South [the region she descends from] so that I don’t get influenced [by it]”. From what she had seen, heard, and experienced she added: “I didn’t take for granted that all the liberal society/community is wrong, nor that all the religious society/community is wrong. I thought there are certain right things here and certain right things there, and on this basis I developed my identity. Like since three years ago till now, when I first came to the university, I changed a lot... before I used to be, or they accustomed me to be like ‘not accepting others’ [intolerant]...like ‘we are the right ones and full stop’! No, we are not the right ones and full stop!” (Ghina, F, 21, Muslim-Shiites).

It was interesting but not surprising to hear my interviewees declaring how they struggle to shape a clear identity for themselves in terms of defining and identifying their own values, principles and choices. Whilst this might be a feature of young people in general, a considerable number of my participants acutely expressed it throughout their interviews. Most of my participants had not lived in Beirut before. They were away from their parents’ supervision and from the ties and rules for the first time. Hence the diversity, rich in social, political, religious and economic terms, was a new experience for them.
This, on the one hand, is essentially due to the sectarian division of the geographical areas after the civil war, which has contributed to establishing sectarian ghettos. Being brought up in a uniform social and religious community shapes one’s values and beliefs in one direction, as expressed by my participants. For instance, some of my participants gave examples of how they struggled and, or were still struggling, to ‘find themselves’ as they articulated it, and to connect to where they belong. Below is a good example, where one of my female participants explained her struggle in her own words. She referred to her experience between two opposing cultures, namely her religiously conservative background in south Lebanon and the liberal cultural setting in Beirut.

“……if I want to talk about myself, I have not found myself yet between these two cultures. I can’t find myself in a strictly religious society, which adheres to a book solely or a “hadeeth” [prophet sayings] which has been stated a long long time ago; and I can’t find myself in a society which doesn’t give a shit about anything- not even God’s existence- and are living their life as if it is the one and only one life! Seriously, I didn’t find myself yet……. when I decided to develop my personality, I didn’t try to take anything from anyone………. I like to experience things first then decide whether they are good or bad for me. I don’t get influenced easily by others. For example, here at the university, every single day I hear ‘come on, take off your ‘hijab’ [head scarf] and shake hands with men, but I don’t listen to them. OK, I’m veiled… I grew up to find myself wearing Hijab [headscarf] due to a certain environment. But for now it doesn’t bother me maybe because I got used to it, not because I’m convinced about it! … … … At the end I think that a sensible human being who has her own principles, should not be judged based on her outer look or behaviours. For instance, my principles are something but I find myself in my outer look/appearance [ as a woman wearing headscarf] something else which I don’t deny that it reflects some sort of contradiction….” (Ghina 21, Female, Muslim- Shiites).

Ghina argues that her outer appearance and performance does not necessarily reflect her principles or lifestyle and she has a narrative of finding herself - trying to decide what of her upbringing she will choose for herself, and which parts she might discard.

This struggle and negotiation of identity and independence, which is shaped by certain values and beliefs, was not only experienced by female participants, but also by males. Tamer for instance stated that he started to establish an interest in ‘readings’ when he was in his final year of high school. In his first year of university, his readings started to open
his eyes to new concepts in life, some of which, as he declared, frightened him - in the sense that they were challenging some of his existing beliefs and ideologies at that time. Then he started hanging out with a group of ‘leftist’ students, which had the biggest impact on him and his way of thinking. Here, I note that in Lebanon the terms ‘leftist’ and ‘communist’ indicate a non-religious, non-sectarian, and a liberal/open-minded identity. Tamer stated that the environment at the university was completely different from the one he came from, and that it took him some time to change. When I asked him whether he thought that his new convictions and beliefs were solid and well established he replied:

“The beautiful thing about my beliefs is that they are never unshakable! You know. Maybe I will change later on, but the nice thing is that now I have reached a stage where I know that no conviction will last forever. But, at the moment, yes, I am very much comfortable with myself and my convictions” (Tamer, M, 21, Atheist [Muslim-Shiites]).

I found this discussion on identity struggle and confusion about identifying ones’ values and convictions particularly important for my research study. It helped me understand much of the convolutions around the relationship dynamics between men and women, which influence the ways young people negotiated the social risks of engaging in premarital sex. Finding one’s self means realising that the world is socially constructed through different narratives. Although my research did not initially aim at exploring the identities and struggles of Lebanese youth, my findings revealed that my participants’ attitudes and behaviours towards premarital sex, as well as their decisions on risk taking were largely influenced by their religious beliefs, social values, morals and convictions, as I will discuss later. This coincides with the standpoint evident in the literature, which assures us that, in Lebanon, like many other parts of the world, engaging in or refraining from premarital sex is strongly associated with morality (Pew research center, 2014). Yet, some scholars argue that morality is basically influenced or dictated by religious beliefs and ideas (Cochran and Beeghley, 1991; Scheepers, Te Grotenhuis, and Van Der Slik, 2002). However, as per my findings, this is not to say that an individual’s religion is what determines their sex-related attitudes and behaviours. It is rather, but not restricted to, their level of religiosity, as well as their attachment to particular social norms and values, and
their concerns about what they identify as moral principles. Therefore, the dilemma for some of my participants remained centred around establishing a clear identification of their own values, convictions, and principles, based on how they socially construct their moral world view. This in turn helped them to make decisions, adopt or change attitudes and behaviours towards a number of controversial issues in their lives, one of which is premarital sex.

In the next chapter, I argue how social risks are intertwined with morality. Engaging in premarital sex is perceived to be morally wrong or sinful, therefore, risky. It is risky because it may bring about to a number of social risks, such as social exclusion, among others, especially for young women. I also show how the level of perceived risk or danger varies from one woman to another mainly due to variations in their social, moral, and religious values and convictions.

6.3 Attitudes towards premarital sex: awareness of double standards

In Lebanese society, like any other traditional patriarchal society, men in general perceive themselves as much more privileged and more powerful than women. My data clearly revealed that patriarchy was a central narrative shaping sexual behaviour for both men and women. It was exhibited in men’s attitudes and behaviours at various levels; however, it was more specifically addressed by my participants at the level of personal and intimate relationships. Patriarchy and gender inequality were also manifested in what my participants called ‘duality’ or ‘double standards’, in the sense of accepting certain rules and behaviours for men but not for women or approving the same behaviour in certain circumstances only but not in others. During interviews, both female and male participants provided numerous examples of how gender discrimination was practiced and demonstrated in Lebanese society. Nevertheless, almost all my female participants, in particular, expressed their extreme frustration and anger at social bias and gender inequality, demonstrated in every single aspect of their lives, in their homes, at their schools and universities, at work and in society in general.
In the subsections below, I provide examples of my findings which illustrate how gender inequality is embedded in all aspects of my participants’ everyday lives, yet is more significant and evident when it comes to aspects of sexuality, intimacy and sexual behaviour. This does not only influence the dynamics of the emotional, intimate and personal relationships between young men and women, it also dictates their responses and interpretations of the social risks, as I explain in the following two chapters.

6.3.1 Sexism and moral boundaries

Some of the most common, yet not surprising, examples provided by my participants were related to the ways society agrees to, and even encourages men to, engage in premarital sex, yet concurrently denies women this right. Women, who engage in premarital sex, are often referred to as the ‘wrongdoers’ or ‘immoral’, and are exposed to social risks. These social risks are potentially harmful enough to destroy their social image and reputation, and change their lives - if not even threaten their lives, in extreme cases.

“the man here [in Lebanon] has the right to be sexually active for sure, and to have sexual experience before marriage, and have committed the seven sins [in Arabic: A’amel al sab’a wa themat’ha], but the moment he comes to choose bent el halal [meaning good reputable girl] who will be his future wife, she must be – as they say-mesh beyes temma ella emma [meaning that she has never been kissed on her mouth by anyone except her mother]” (Raneem, F, 21, Muslim-Shiites).

Other examples which indicated that women are shamed and judged for being immoral more often than men were: excessive alcohol drinking, sleeping outside home or returning home at dawn or sunrise, dating a number of partners, having numerous relationships, and using drugs.

“...the culture in which we were brought up in is fundamental [in shaping the way we think] Like the girl [sic] should stay like this [meaning preserving chasteness and decency] and the guy could do everything... it applies to everything... like even if we go back in time, the guy used to inherit while the girl did not; the guy drinks, the girl does not; the guy hangs out, the girl does not... these are the same, they are still
trapped in this mentality... now if you see a girl drinking too much, they criticise her, but if a guy drinks too much he’s strong/tough, he’s a big thing... even if a girl uses drugs, the girl becomes dirty, whereas for the guy it’s ok, he’s been passing through a difficult stage... they still have this mentality that men have the right to do whatever and women don’t” (Noor, F, 25, Christian-Maronite).

“There is no equality... like the girls, from the time when they were at their parents’ [meaning in their parents’ custody] they go like: ‘you should come back home at this hour’; if she was a bit late ‘where are you?’; you know... whereas for the guy it’s normal... he can be late, he hangs out and does lots of things... we have an ugly thing in society that if a girl went out with someone and did nothing, they say ‘wow she did so and so and blablabla’; whereas if a man did the seven sins they feel happy about it, you know.. like they say ‘leave him he’s being so and so’ [ in the sense of gaining experience]” (Moneer, M, 25, Muslim-Shiites).

Interestingly, these examples revealing society’s biased or discriminatory treatment of females were strongly associated with expressions like “society with double standards”, “duplicity or ambivalence”, “schizophrenic society”, “contradictory”, “hypocrisy or hypocrite society”, “we are wearing masks”, and so on. Such descriptions show that the majority of the participants, both male and female, were fully aware of the social and gendered performances, as well as the existence of gender inequality. They perceived it as a social dichotomy that is inherent within, and therefore inseparable from, the patriarchal structure of Lebanese society.

“They [Lebanese] are schizophrenic... double personality... because there’s discrimination between a male and a female, and they are not the same inside their homes and outside their homes. They have dual personality. A personality for home and family, and a personality for outside [home]. They [the two personalities] are not in harmony with each other.” (Zaher, M, 22, Muslim- Sunni).

“We are hypocrites in a lot of things. We, as Lebanese have a hypocritical nature... I don’t know why. like in everything... for example, the one of us would want to buy the newest phone although they can’t afford it. This transcends into other things, one of which is having sex...” (Tamer, M, 21, Atheist [Muslim-Shiites]).

Despite my participants’ consensus that the Lebanese society, in general, turns a blind eye to men having sex before marriage, and even encourages it, boasting about one’s sexual
potency and activity is not always fortified among certain groups or communities. Some of my participants argued that amongst some religious groups or communities, it is very desirable to keep men’s premarital sexual activity within a very low profile, as opposed to bragging about it. Whilst this is essential to discourage religiously sinful behaviour (sex outside marriage), some male participants declared that, even amongst these religiously conservative communities, premarital sex is perceived at its worst as a “mistake” for men as opposed to an “unforgiveable sin” for women. One of my participants provided a good example of the way gender inequality is emphasised and replicated in their society and practiced in public and private spheres. He told me about an incident, which happened when he was attending a religious lecture on pre-marriage awareness:

“A... he [the religious lecturer] was talking about tests that both [a man and a woman] should do before getting married.... so, one of the things was that there’s an injection which a girl [sic] should take if she had sex before or if he [the man] did. So here, he [the religious scholar] tells you: ‘if the girl [sic] had never had sex in her life and the same applies for the man, then there’s no need to take this injection. If not, and he [the man/future husband] knows that he is ‘mkhabbas’ [meaning had done lots of promiscuous sexual activities such as multiple partners], then she should take the injection.’ Rarely they mention ‘whether she [the future wife] is ‘mkhabssa’ [meaning has done lots of promiscuous sexual activities]’.... They consider that he [the man] does have this margin to have sex then repents... like if he has done promiscuous sexual activities before his religious commitment and before coming back on the right track [religiously] and so on, we prefer to do this injection in case he was a carrier [of a certain virus or STI]. Whereas ‘she’, she is not expected to [have sex before marriage]. Like even, he [religious lecturer] said: ‘if ‘she’ was a ‘sinner’.... Hang on a second! So for him [a man], ‘if he was ‘mkhabbas’, and for her [a woman], if she was a ‘sinner’?!! ... Like religiously speaking, it is supposed to be a sin for both [men and women], but it is more acceptable for a man to be doing such as sin, yes!” (Jamal, M, 24, Druze)

Jamal indicates that in the Lebanese society, patriarchy and religion come together to control the sexual behaviour of young women. Though my participants confirmed that, in Islam (including Druze), as well as in Christianity, neither men nor women are allowed to have sex outside the legitimate framework of marriage, such observed gender biased attitudes confirm that gender inequality and social risks affect women more extensively than men, regardless of any religious persuasion or affiliation.
Below, I provide some examples for participants from both sexes and from various religious backgrounds, which reflected their conservative attitudes towards premarital sex, each from their own particular religious perspective.

“I’m personally against. If it comes to me I won’t do premarital sex before marriage. First because my religion necessitates that I should not do it and this is the first principle, secondly, because I believe that not every relationship you’ll be in, will lead to marriage……. the religion forbids it for both men and women...” (Lobna, F, 23, Muslim-Sunni).

“I personally prefer to try as much as possible not to have sex before marriage... I prefer the sexual relation to be something serious not for fun... like I don’t prefer the relation to be only physical, but to be more like love and respect... there are religious reasons for this, as well as “me” [personal]... like I find it special as a human being differentiated from the animal by his ability to control his instinct and desires” (Yamen, M, 21, Christian-Orthodox).

“I’m personally against premarital sex because marriage is about lots of things, one of them is having sex...... and secondly from a religious point of view. Like I don’t consider myself too religious but if anything that religion says ‘NO’ to it, I would want to know why first, and I would be convinced about it” (Marwan, M, 22, Muslim-Sunni).

“for me, I won’t do it [premarital sex] ...... like I take it from restrictions of the social environment/milieu. However, these restrictions in my social environment didn’t come out just because the mayor or the neighbour decided so! It all goes back to religious roots.... So it’s not only that I fear people’s gossip. If it was merely the case, I would not necessarily care. It is both. People’s gossip is based on something religious. So it’s mainly religious... I mean this society has certain rules and red lines and so on... From where did they get them? From religion. They didn’t get them from a philosopher who one day decided to theorise and preach to people! So religiously it’s wrong, then why should I go there? Like we [Druze] have 3 or 4 things, which are considered top wrong or big sin. Like, for example, drinking is not a big sin, but killing, adultery, stealing, and marrying someone outside our religion are [big sins] (Lina, F, 21, Druze).

“of course I’m against it [premarital sex]. It is totally against my convictions, and not only for religious reasons but it is also about me. I prefer to keep it until marriage. I do not want to do it before marriage” (Aya, F, 24, Muslim-Shiites).
Findings from the questionnaire demonstrated that out of eighteen young women, eleven were not sexually active, and had never been involved in premarital sexual activity. Though, some of the sexually inactive women demonstrated liberal attitudes towards premarital sex as follows: One of them stated that she was “totally with premarital sex”; six reported that “it depends on the situation”; and only four were “totally against premarital sex”. On the other hand, seven women reported being sexually active, four of whom were “totally with premarital sex” and three stated that “it depends on the situation”. When matching the answers of women, who were “not sexually active” but reflected flexible attitudes towards premarital sex, that is, “depends on the situation”, I found that the majority thought that premarital sex was acceptable if conditioned with love, trust, and a long term relationship which eventually led to marriage. These young women did not differ from their counterparts who were “sexually active”, yet demonstrated moderate or careful attitudes towards premarital sex instead of liberal attitudes (that is, totally with premarital sex).

Among males, twelve young men reported “had engaged in premarital sex” compared to four who never did. Two out of the four sexually inexperienced were “totally against premarital sex”, mainly for religious reasons, which was as well reflected in their interviews as shown in the quotes above. Another participant reported that “it depends on the situation” and one declared being “totally with premarital sex”. Out of the twelve sexually experienced seven were “totally with premarital sex”, whereas the other four stated that “it depends on the situation”, and one participant did not answer this question.

In his interview, Moneer (M, 25, Muslim-Shiites) who skipped the attitude question, demonstrated slightly confusing attitudes towards premarital sex. At the beginning of the interview, he claimed that he did not have a problem with premarital sex. He perceived it as important for the couple to explore their sexual compatibility before marriage. From a previous experience he said, having sex with a woman he loved did not change his perception of her, he continued to love her and wanted to marry her, though later their relationship did not work out for other reasons. Yet at the same time, as the interview progressed, Moneer admitted that he had chosen a future wife, whom he could not have,
any physical relationship with before marriage. But, he found her suitable for him because she would bring him “peace of mind” which means that she would not cause him headache or worries [In his Arabic words: betrayethli rassi]. He also confessed that he himself was facing an “inner conflict” with this issue. On one hand, he perceived premarital sex as important, yet when he decided to get married, he prioritised other characteristics (being educated, humble, sexually inexperienced - which he rationally thought are suitable) over strong feelings of love and exploring sexual harmony before marriage.

Moneer’s “inner conflict” or confusion was not only evident in this instance. It was patent at different positions during the interview, and it seemed to me an essential part of negotiating his socially constructed masculinity. For instance, besides informing me that he had plenty of sexual relationships with women, at some point he narrated how he once was in a “fun relationship” with a young “non-virgin” woman, whom he never thought he would fall in love with or get serious about. Before he met her, he used to think that he must be the “first man in the life of the woman he wanted to marry or be with”. But, that changed afterwards, he claimed, though his choice of a future wife did not necessarily reflect this change.

Other instances were obvious through his contradictory approaches to gender roles and gender equality. On one hand, he criticised the society’s oppression and inequity towards women, yet on the other hand, he permitted himself to have sex with other women if he and his future wife were sexually incompatible. However, when I asked him what his reaction would be if she did the same, he was confused:

“I do not think that she would do something like this…. I do not know... logically, if you think about it, yeah you would ask why men are not the same as women, but one cannot accept it! I do not know. I’m incapable of answering you... but if I told you ‘it would be ok’, I would be lying” (Moneer M, 25, Muslim-Shiites)

This may explain why some men demonstrated conflicting attitudes towards premarital sex. It may not merely be out of ill intentions or deception. Young men, like Moneer, who portrayed themselves as “open-minded”, and tried to feign liberal attitudes towards
sexuality, were still struggling themselves to establish a clear picture of their own values, priorities and convictions separate from those of society. They were in the process of negotiating their constructed masculine roles in a patriarchal context, which defines the boundaries of the social order, dictating what is acceptable, and what is not, and for whom, what is moral and what is immoral. Moneer claimed a stand with women’s right to equality, yet continued to perceive himself privileged as a man and unintentionally ignored the sexual needs of his female partner, probably preserving a “pure” image of a future wife who will become the mother of his children.

6.3.2. **Girlfriend vs. sister, wife and daughter**

Moneer was not the only young man who demonstrated confusing or contradictory views towards premarital sex. **Makram (M, 22, Muslim-Sunni)** did not display a clear and consistent view towards premarital sex, either. Makram started his interview by stating he loves sex, and he does not have any problem with premarital sex, but as the interview progressed he started talking about guilt feelings when having sex, and later was reluctant to confidently answer my question of whether he would marry a non-virgin. He assured me that his current future partner is a “virgin”. This brings me to address other instances, which were referred to as “double standards” by my participants and which were almost always associated with gender discrimination or bias and inequality. Almost all my interviewees, both males and females, talked about the ‘double standard’ [sic] illustrated in the attitudes, behaviours and perceptions of Lebanese men towards women. The data indicated that Lebanese men do differentiate between women as their ‘girlfriends’, as opposed to women as their ‘sisters’, ‘their wives or future wives’, and their ‘daughters’. Men allowed themselves to be in an intimate and sexual relationship with their ‘girlfriends’ yet at the same time denied, prohibited and condemned their sister(s) or future daughter(s) for being in a sexual relationship with any man - even as a ‘boyfriend’ or ‘potential future husband’.

“I know that there is a lot of duplicity/duality [in Arabic: Ezdiwajiyah] ... I know that what he accepts for his girlfriend, he will not accept for his sister for example. This is double standards by itself.” (Nay, F, 19, Christian-Maronite).
“the man does whatever he wants. Like he’s cool and he doesn’t care and so on... but if he knows that his sister did anything! At that moment, just watch his reaction! Once you see his reaction, you’ll understand how ‘cool’ he is [he said sarcastically—meaning that the man will not be cool at all] (Nadeem, M, 25, Christian-Maronite).

The same applies to men’s attitudes towards their ‘future wives’, as we have seen in the case of Moneer. The findings demonstrated that if and when men were in a serious relationship and had chosen the woman they wanted to marry, they would refrain from having penetrative sex with their ‘future wife’ before marriage. Some participants stated that this was understood as an essential attitude of ‘love and respect’ towards her as a woman. Concurrently, the ‘future wife’ should also refuse any kind of sexual, specifically vaginal, penetration before marriage in order to keep her image of ‘purity’ unshakable in her man’s head, hence preserving his love and respect. Some participants indicated that women have to be cautious with sexual penetration, especially if they were planning to marry the man they were in a relationship with, because some men tend to often test the woman to ensure that she is not sexually experienced, nor easily seduced. Some men will try to have sex with the woman they plan to marry to see her reaction. If she accepts, then she is perceived as easy and, therefore, not a good catch. If she refuses, then she is probably a pure and respectable woman with moral values, hence, a good wife suitable to raise their children.

Stories from my participants revealed that some men would assume that “being a sexually inexperienced woman” is not necessarily sufficient proof of her pure and respectable qualities. They would argue that she may not yet have had the chance to be in an intimate relationship. To these men, the resistance of a woman to any sexual intercourse is equally as important as her sexual purity. A woman’s resistance and firm refusal assures the man of the woman’s respectable and conservative characteristics, and that she is a woman who will never allow a stranger to approach her sexually, thereby preserving her chastity, purity and virginity until marriage.
This has to do with ‘trust’ on one hand, which I will elaborate on more in Chapter 8, and ‘playing hard to get’, on the other hand.

“Women draw the boundaries in a relationship because otherwise women would be giving men what they want and they [men] would be more than happy.... One [a woman] has to reject any [sexual] approach by her boyfriend, like a kiss is ok, a hug... but not sex. He would disgrace her for this later” (Sireen, F, 20, Christian-Orthodox).

“Women are the ones who would stop men from crossing their boundaries because men - they do not care. So she has to say no” (Faten, F, 22, Muslim-Sunni).

In brief, men perceived themselves as more privileged than women in having sex; therefore, men were eligible to have sexual intercourse with their girlfriends, for example. However, this attitude is not pertinent to men’s female family members. Men’s sister(s) for instance are not allowed to have any kind of sexual intercourse with their boyfriends- if, that is, they were allowed to have a boyfriend in the first place. From the men’s perception or point of view, their sister(s), wife and daughter(s) are to be taken under their wing and protected. They perceived their role as protecting the females in the family from other male aggressors (a playful boyfriend for instance), in the case of my research study. Yet at the same time, they themselves are perceived in the eyes of some other men as an assailant for being in a sexual relationship with someone else’s sister or daughter. This is because women are at the core of the family’s honour, as I explain in the next chapter.

This explains why women’s resistance and refusal to engage in sexual intercourse remain vital in the eyes of traditional Lebanese men. Without this resistance, sexual intercourse becomes the fault of the woman, as the only one to be blamed for transgressing social boundaries, as Lina stated:

“no matter what happens, I blame the woman. Because, depending on how much she gives him, he [the man] will use. For example, no matter how conservative the guy was, if the girl gives him this thing [sex], he will not refuse it. If she is giving to him emotionally and sexually and makes him feel that this is ok and that is ok and this is alright, he will not be disappointed! On the contrary he will ask for more... but it also depends how smart or stupid she [the woman] is. She can have fun and
feel the pleasure sexually but up to a certain point. Like there’s a difference between the girl who accepts a kiss plus another thing, and between a girl who accepts sex plus I don’t know what! …… so she draws the limits, she decides. Unless she doesn’t care about herself [meaning her image and reputation]” (Lina, F, 21, Druze).

When I asked my male participants, who claimed to be totally in favour of premarital sex for both males and females, about their position regarding their sister’s engagement in sex before marriage, some seemed reluctant in accepting the idea. Only a few confidently claimed that they were totally accepting of it. Those who demonstrated reluctance justified their disagreement mainly due to their protective feelings for their sister(s). Some of the reasons, which came out were either because they did not trust other men, as they were confident that the majority of Lebanese men are playful, and they lie to women to get what they want (meaning having sex); or they feared that their sister(s) would be harmed and abandoned by other men.

“... this took a lot of time... you know I started having all these thoughts of honour and integrity and so on, but then after a while- it took me time- I started thinking that whatever I accept for myself I should accept for my sister. So if my sister is sexually active, as long as she is safe and as long as I trust her ability to assess the situation, it is not my business. ‘Safe’ as in safe sex and ‘safe’ as in she’s with good people” (Tamer, M, 21, Atheist [Muslim-Shiites]).

Some male participants also assured me that they were usually honest with the women they date about their intentions and expectations of the relationship. Therefore, a woman who agrees to an uncommitted relationship should not blame the man for their relationship’s consequences, as long as their relationship is consensual. Some women, on the other hand, do get emotionally attached and would hope to sustain the relationship. The conflict between the sexes occurs when one of the partners (mostly females) asks for commitment and the other (mostly males) avoids it. The findings suggested that, for some men, being honest about one’s intentions reflected the way they justified their sexual behaviour in order to escape feelings of guilt and blame. It was like an ethical cover for them, as they would have obtained woman’s consent for engaging in a sexual relationship without deception. Such an example explains the social significance of women’s firm refusal of
sexual contact outside marriage, and confirms the notion that women carry the largest burden of responsibility and blame when engaging in premarital sex.

6.3.3 Justified vs. unjustified premarital sex

The research findings suggested that most of the socially-expected gender roles and behaviours were constructed on the basis of gender discrimination and inequality, which are based, essentially, on the patriarchal structure of society. Yet, these social expectations of both males and females became the ‘norm’. My findings revealed that most participants, in spite of being conscious of the discrimination against women, and disapproving of it, tended to adapt, or go in line with, these socially constructed roles and expectations, and, in some cases, even adopted them. For instance, female participants expressed more defiant views than those of males, yet less rebellious actions, due to the risk of negative social consequences it exposed them to. Only one of my female participants expressed strong feminist and total non-compliant views and behaviours, both publicly and privately. Therefore, I argue that, in order to avoid being exposed to social risks, the majority of women continued to conform to social expectations about sex and morality in different ways. That is, some either performed compliance, or partially conformed or completely conformed to social norms and values. In chapter 8, I elaborate more on four different types of social and moral compliance as follows: a) performed compliance, b) partial compliance, c) absolute compliance, and d) non-compliance.

The discrepancy or lack of harmony between ‘rebellious’ attitudes and ‘conforming’ behaviours might be one of the explanations for what my participants referred to as “duplicity”, “ambivalence”, “double standards’ or a “schizophrenic society”. This was specifically relevant to women, as my analysis also suggested that ‘ambivalent’ attitudes and behaviours or ‘double standards’ [sic] are not merely demonstrated by men. For instance, when asked about their attitudes and views towards premarital sex, half of the female participants, regardless of their sexual activity, either supported or justified premarital sex only under certain conditions or circumstances but not in others. They linked premarital sex to love, commitment and genuine intentions of getting married. Some tried
to justify their engagement in a premarital sexual relationship by associating it with love, passion and fidelity towards one male partner, and a willingness to maintain a long term and “serious” relationship.

The vast majority of female participants, particularly those sexually active (7), as well as those who demonstrated liberal or less conservative attitudes towards premarital sex, considered premarital sex a crucial component of the relationship. They associated premarital sex with positive aspects, despite the fears and the social risks associated with their sexual behaviour. Most of these positive aspects revolved around exploring each other’s bodies, getting to know each other better, strengthening emotional bonds, exploring physical compatibility, enjoying sexual pleasure, intimacy and gaining sexual experience. It also served the purpose of avoiding sexual disappointment and sometimes divorce later when it comes to marriage, and knowing one’s own self – what they love or enjoy and what they don’t. However, some were against premarital sex when it was only used for fun and pleasure, and didn’t comply with the conditions of love and long-term commitment. In other words, most of these young women (except three) did not seem to justify or encourage premarital sex if the couple’s intentions were merely to have a temporary or provisional relationship for sexual pleasure or for a one-night stand. Some even considered it “promiscuous” and “unacceptable”, and were invested in keeping the distinctions between women based on their sexual behaviour. Besides, sexually active women were fully aware of the risks they themselves were taking in case their supposedly committed, long term relationship, failed (due to the fact that they had already had sex with a male partner who did not become their future husband). To them, premarital sex, which results in a prolonged, love based, and trustworthy relationship is valid, despite the final outcome.

“I think it is very important that one knows the partner that he wants to be with, and here I’m talking about the case where you’re thinking of getting married to that partner... it is important to know if you are sexually satisfied with him because once you got married, maybe everything will be perfect except this side of the relationship, then the relationship will no way work out...... and I’m against one-night stand and short term relationships.” (Dalia, F, 23, Muslim-Shiites)
This finding coincides with what Ozyegin (2009) refers to as the “new premarital sex culture”, which only moralises the loss of virginity in the context of “love and emotional investment”. Therefore, it shifts the morality and notion of purity associated with the “physical virginity” to the “morality of virginity”.

It was evident that never-married sexually active women, who were raised to practice their dominant feminine virtues of decency and purity, and to protect their bodies and vaginas from being penetrated by those who are not legally their husbands, try to come up with good reasons to vindicate their sexual behaviour, and to alienate any aspect of “promiscuity” and “deviancy” from the “self”. I interpret this behaviour as an escape route from feelings of guilt, shame and fear. It is their way of defining the new boundaries of what is “moral” and what is “immoral”.

On the other hand, a couple of young women, who demonstrated relatively conservative views, for religious reasons, or due to absorbing traditionally submissive values into their character, expressed feelings of disgust towards premarital sex, and considered it absolutely inadmissible. Miller (1997) argues that this feeling of “disgust” occurs when we feel that our bodily boundaries have been broken or transgressed. Feelings of disgust towards sex were also evident in Yasmine et al (2015) study, where it was reported that female students were five times more likely than males to think that sex is disgusting.

“… to me sex is a sacred relation... you cannot share your body with just anyone! I like to keep my virginity to one man only, the one I will marry, because this reflects how special he is to me... I feel it is disgusting to sleep with more than one man and have various relationships. I’m totally against premarital sex…” (Aya, F, 24, Muslim-Shiites).

“I told you I’m so anti-sexual, even the kiss I hate it” (Lina, F, 21, Druze).

Although Lina was engaged in an intimate relationship herself, her insistence on telling me that she was not interested in physical intimacy was a way of assuring me that her opposition to premarital sex was well grounded within her moral values. It was as if she was telling me that, if an intimate kiss is that difficult for her to accept (because she
perceives it immoral and tries to resist it by convincing herself that she hates it) then what would the case be when it comes to premarital sex?

6.4 Summary and conclusive remarks

In this chapter, I highlighted some of the core emerging themes, which underpin the social interactions of university students in Beirut. It was very interesting to see that my opening or ice breaker question brought up controversial issues by my participants that I was not expecting. Although I asked participants of their views towards young Lebanese, in general, many of them also reflected on their own personal experiences and their own struggles in regard to their values and convictions. Similarly, some mentioned how Lebanese youth, on the whole, deal with premarital sex (as part of the more general question), but then, when I directly asked them what they thought about premarital sex, young people reflected upon their own attitudes and views. Therefore, in this chapter, my participants’ views go back and forth between describing young Lebanese on the whole and their own perceptions. I thought it was vital to shed the light on some of these emerging themes, which reflected my participants’ daily frustrations and struggles and helped me to better apprehend the intricacy of their choices, the ways they take risks, and respond to the social risks of premarital sex. Below I sum up some of the main points in this chapter.

- My participants were able to acknowledge that Lebanese youth is diverse and heterogeneous and that their views of sex, morality and values cannot be neatly categorised under one category. They highlighted that Lebanese youth ranged from being socially conservative to socially liberal. They were also able to relate these cultural and social attitudes to differences based on religion, sect and locality (living in a liberal area as opposed to a conservative area). As explained earlier, religious and sectarian divisions in Lebanon are also entrenched via geographical segregation. At the same time, this segregation does not exist in complete isolation. Some areas are mixed, others are not. But in general, people from different backgrounds do meet, interact, work and collaborate together at various platforms.
such as at universities, at work and through business, as well as at national, social and political platforms. Accordingly, they learn about each other’s norms and traditions.

- The majority of my participants considered Lebanon as a considerably liberal country, on the whole, especially when they compared Lebanese culture and lifestyle to that of other Arab countries. Some considered Lebanon liberal outwardly, but as remaining conservative underneath, especially in the way women are treated.

- University students perceived the Lebanese youth, on the whole, as lost and confused about their own values and convictions. However, some students admitted that they themselves among those who are confused. They mostly related this to their new exposure to and interaction with people from diverse social, political, and religious backgrounds. This contributed to shaking some of their beliefs and values and prompted them to think out of their homogenous sectarian group or geographical area.

- My participants were straddling two cultures, modern and traditional. Keeping the balance between the two was not always easy. It resulted in what my participants referred to as “double standards” and “contradictions”. This was evident in the different social performances they had to enact in different situations and in front of different audiences, which synchronises with Goffman’s (1990) work on social performances. I will elaborate more on this in the discussion.

- “Double standards” were evident throughout all the accounts, and not only in relation to premarital sex, but also within other permissive social behaviours such as alcohol drinking, late outings, partying, and so on. Whilst “double standards”, in relation to premarital sex, is highlighted in the literature as a form of gender discrimination based on sexual behaviour (Eşsizoğlu et al, 2011; Bordini and Sperb 2013; Greene and Faulkner, 2005), where premarital sex is deemed wrong for
women but allowed (or right) for men (Reiss, 1956), my study further revealed that “double standards” were also associated with the type of sexual relationship. As per my findings, the new moral boundaries suggested that premarital sex was deemed as “moral” or “acceptable” among some participants, as long as it happened within a framework of love and commitment. On the other hand, it was deemed as “immoral” and “unacceptable” when it occurred within a casual framework—just for fun and pleasure. This was consistent with Ozyegin’s (2009) study among Turkish university students, as I pointed out above.

• Overall, the three main findings presented in this chapter around recognising diversity and heterogeneity, confusion about one’s values and convictions, and awareness of double standards, go together and reinforce one other. They are interrelated, and they influenced my participants’ views towards premarital sex, its associated social risks and the ways they responded to these risks, as I will explain in the next two chapters.
CHAPTER 7
The social risks of engaging in premarital sex

In the previous chapter, I highlighted some of the contextual themes in relation to my participants’ perceptions of themselves and their peers, the dilemmas they face, as well as addressing their attitudes towards premarital sex. In this chapter, I focus on the ‘social risks’ my participants associated with engaging in premarital sex, as well as drawing on some of the positive aspects, which they linked to their risk-taking behaviour.

To acquire a better understanding of my participants’ perceptions of premarital sex and its associated risks, I asked them what issues they thought about when deciding to engage in or refrain from a premarital sexual relationship and what their ‘fears’ were or what ‘risks’ they envisaged. Here, it is important to point out that these questions were asked in Arabic language- more specifically, in colloquial Lebanese. Therefore, the precise meaning of ‘risk’ and the students’ interpretation of this term was based on how the word ‘risk’ was translated. The Arabic translation of the term ‘risk’ into spoken Lebanese is ‘moukhatara’- which, when translated back to English, would literary mean ‘endanger’. The term ‘moukhatara’ (endanger) stems from the term ‘khatar’ (danger). In spoken Arabic, ‘moukhatara’ is commonly associated with negative attributes such as ‘fears’, ‘worries’, and ‘threats’. However, the formal Arabic translation of the term ‘risk’ may be rendered as ‘mojazafa’ (risk) besides ‘moukhatara’. The term ‘mojazafa’ (risk) itself either means ‘moukhatara’ (endanger) or ‘moghamara’ (adventure). In my interviews, I used the terms ‘risks’ as ‘makhater’ (plural of moukhatara) and ‘fears’ (makhawef). Therefore, the term ‘risk’ in my research study indicated ‘danger’ and a fear of potential negative outcome(s) as a result of engaging in premarital sex. Nevertheless, as I explained earlier in chapter 3, the act of ‘risk-taking’ itself could be positive in its associations (for example, feelings of pleasure, and joy) as well as having negative associations (for example, social exclusion, if exposed) and most often with both, specifically among young women, as will be shown in this chapter.
Responses to the above questions differed between young men and women. Interestingly, whilst young women’s responses significantly pointed out fears and risks from a social perspective, young men’s responses were mostly related to their fears and worries from a health perspective (such as fears of contracting STIs, including HIV, as well as getting the woman pregnant). Unlike young men in the sample, the social risks among female participants outweighed the health risks. Both male and female participants pointed out that the social burden of engaging in premarital sex placed on women was greater and much more serious than that placed on men. Although a couple of young men touched on some of the social risks of engaging in premarital sex, in my research study sexual activity appeared to be more threatening to women, proving the subject of social risk to be highly gendered.

I divided narratives linked to social risks into three main categories: a) Moral risks: reputation and respect; b) Shared risk: importance of the family; and c) Future risk: becoming unmarriageable. When discussing these, I presented women’s and men’s responses separately unless there were no significant differences between their accounts.

7.1 Moral risk: reputation and respect

Data analysis revealed that one of the central social risks of engaging in premarital sex was protecting ‘one’s reputation’, which seemed to be highly valuable to both young men and women. Maintaining a good reputation was associated with adhering to societal expectations of morality assigned to each gender, which consequently constructed some of the masculine and feminine traits. Whilst men’s good reputation was mostly concerned with bravery, chivalry, protectiveness, generosity and the ability to financially support the family, women’s respectable reputation was essentially associated with demonstrating sexual virtue and chastity. This mainly adheres to the perceived conventional masculine and feminine roles which are dominant among the majority of my participants. Only a few participants demonstrated fluid and flexible notions of femininity and masculinity.
As per the findings, the emphasis on women’s reputation appeared to be crucial and much more cherished by society than that of men’s. Hence, women’s reputation was adjudged to be much more fragile and difficult to restore if lost. Some female participants expressed it in local proverbs or sayings such as: “A girl’s [sic] reputation is like a glass, once broken it cannot be repaired” [in Arabic: Som’at el-bent mitil el-ezaz, eza enkasaret ma btetsallah] and “girl’s [sic] honour is a flammable match stick” [Sharaf el-bent oud kabreet]. For these young women, preserving their reputation meant maintaining a respectable social image of themselves in the eyes of others in their society. A fundamental aspect of a respectable social image for women dwelled in protecting their honour—consequently their family’s honour, as I further elaborate under the ‘shared risks’ section.

“… I fear losing my reputation for sure because people are not merciful! They will not say that this woman did this [had sex] because she loved that man and this is an indication of love not an indication of ... but they don’t see it... they will only see her as a ‘bad girl’, ‘easy catch’ and so on... no matter how cool I look, but I’ll always have a psychological issue with my virginity and my intact hymen... my problem will always be ‘if he’s [her unmarried partner] gone, my whole life is gone’ and woman’s honour is a flammable match stick…” (Faten, F, 22, Muslim-Sunni).

All female participants interviewed, regardless of their sexual activity and experiences, expressed high concerns and fears of losing their ‘good’ and ‘respectable’ reputation and considered it a key valuable asset, which they must protect and never lose. To them, their reputation was all that they are judged by in their society. Being a respected woman in society was perceived as vital to having a decent, valuable and respectable life. Without it, young women would be socially excluded, and would lose almost all the privileges they had been given as a result of being ‘respectable’. Examples of such privileges were their freedom of mobility, that is, going to university, attending events with friends and partying, as well as being loved, praised and welcomed by people in the neighbourhood and local community. Whenever there were rumours, or when parents doubted their daughter’s behaviour, mobility becomes under close scrutiny and investigation. For this reason, young women considered losing their good reputation as one of their greatest fears. Even if a ‘girl’ [sic] had done nothing “wrong”, she still had to be very careful in terms of how she expressed herself, interacted with men, and carried her body in public, because if there
were any doubts or suspicions about her, people would talk and a rumour, it was argued, could ruin her life.

“... In the community that I live in, she [a woman who has sex before marriage] will be ostracised- literally in a state of ‘rejection’- I think no one will talk to her anymore; she will no longer have people’s respect; and she will become- let’s say if she did this thing [premarital sex]-then that’s it, she is ‘not good’, she’ll be disgraced... and any man will treat her on that basis and will take it for granted that she is so-and-so...” (Ghina, F, 21, Muslim-Shiites).

“If a man did whatever, it’s ‘normal! But if a girl did something, this is considered [by the society] extremely wrong, and it’s so easy to spread the rumours because Lebanon is too small and the Lebanese like to gossip... she’ll be famous for her bad reputation, she’ll become ‘dirty’. They will filth/ruin her reputation and it is really dreadful.... Like even if one [a woman] is sitting in her home and someone wants to hurt her, they can gossip about her. This is really aggravating here in Lebanon. People like to gossip, they like to cause harm, and it is very easy to harm a girl in this way [by talking about her]. The girl might have done nothing but people might make up rumours that she’s horrible only because they like to gossip and this can ruin her life [in Arabic: yekhreblha bayt’ha]” (Noor, F, 25, Christian-Maronite).

“I so much care about my reputation... I’m telling you we are not a ‘cool’ society, be sure of this... I care about what people say and I’m not ready to keep on defending my convictions whenever I sit with someone... I prefer to be like ok this society suits you! and I’m in-line with it. That’s it! I don’t want to go through this struggle” (Dalia, F, 23, Muslim-Shiites).

Some young women found it important to conform to the moral expectations of society in order to maintain a respectable social image and avoid the risk of being socially excluded, disgraced, rejected and ostracised. Lina, for instance, expressed her utmost fear of losing her good reputation and social image in society. She told me how terrified she was after she broke up with her boyfriend – her only relationship, which involved making out - as she feared he might tell someone about their intimate relationship. Lina was perceived as a young model for younger girls and a reflection of politeness, good manners, chastity and purity, as well as being educated, financially independent, responsible and politically active. Her mother’s friends and relatives wished their daughters would be like Lina when they grew up.
“...I personally fear it [losing reputation] because people perceive me like - you know how they say ‘the mistake of a smart person is equivalent to a thousand mistakes’- yeah, so I do not want to make this mistake, you know! Like for example, I hear a lot of people- like yesterday the sister of my friend’s mom, she has a girl- she told me ‘I hope my daughters will be like you when they grow up’... So, it is not good! I don’t want to go through this, where people view me and my reputation as something [respectable and polite] and then it turns into something else [disrespectable]... At that time [when they broke up], I was not scared, I was terrified that he might let it out of the bag [about what happened between them].” (Lina, F, 21, Druze).

To Lina, sex and pleasure were not worth the sacrifice. By sacrifice she meant ‘losing virginity’, as she explained. When I asked her why she considered that losing virginity was a sacrifice, she answered because a woman would be “sacrificing her life”, before she added: “well, not that her life will be totally destroyed but up to a certain point... maybe ‘sacrifice’ is a bit of a big word”. In fact, Lina was essentially stressing the importance of protecting a woman’s reputation by exaggerating the perceived negative outcomes of being perceived as sexually active. Despite stating that a woman would be sacrificing her life, she did not necessarily mean that she would be subjected to honour killing, for example. To her, losing the respect of others in society was equivalent to losing a decent and meaningful life along with plenty of privileges.

Young men had also assured me that, in Lebanese society, women’s reputation is at stake more than men’s reputation. Almost all the men I interviewed asserted that women’s main concerns were protecting their reputation and their fears revolved around being socially exposed and disgraced.

“The one thing they [women] care a lot about is- in between brackets- ‘reputation’; and what if people talked; what if someone knew; what if someone said bad things about her because she had sex; and of course their parents’ opinion....” (Tamer, M, 21, Atheist [Muslim-Shiites]).

“...for a girl, first of all her reputation will be wasted... [people will] talk talk talk: look how she turned out to be ‘falteneh’ [spoiled or wasted] ... They go after her to the end” (Ghassan, M, 23, Agnostic [Druze]).
“Girls are not privileged to make mistakes like men... we are brought up in a society which gives the green light to the man and commends the girl to walk along the wall and live in good repute [in Arabic: Emshi janb el hayt w ouli ya rab el-sutra] ...This society aggravates me because they consider me less intellectual and less capable as a human being” (Ghina, F, 21, Muslim-Shiites).

Young men, on the other hand, seemed to also care about maintaining a good reputation in general. As stated earlier, men’s good reputation was perceived to be more linked to their magnanimity, good manners, and their ability to demonstrate their manhood in being protective, helpful, providing financial security for their families, and in some cases abiding by their religious morals and values. The majority of the male participants, with the exception of four, did not think that men’s reputation would be very much affected by premarital sexual engagement. However, seeking paid sex with sex workers was perceived by my male participants to be “cheap”, “disrespectful”, and not a good trait. It seemed to negatively impact on young men’s reputation, this consequently was kept secret. Only one male participant declared that he sometimes had sex with sex workers.

“....some young men care about their reputation like if they were socially exposed, especially those who are religious, or if it was known that they had sex... especially when they go to illegal places and pay for it” (Ghassan, M, 23, Agnostic[Druze]).

“sex is not a big deal... well unless one goes to stripping night clubs to satisfy his needs through prostitution, this is not very much accepted... It’s like cheap [way to have sex] ... ... but for example, the society will look at you [as a man] in a bad way if you are lazy [khamoul] and you do not work or if you are a drug user... these are things that may spoil a man’s reputation. But sex! I do not think it is important... People don’t stop at this issue” (Nadeem, M, 25, Christian-Maronite).

“I don’t see that sex is related to morals. When I think of morals, I say that someone who is good with others, someone who doesn’t steal, doesn’t lie, these are morals not sex.” (Tamer, M, 21, Atheist [Muslim-Shiites]).

“There is a very famous quote that says it all... ‘I am a man, nothing can be held shameful against me’ [in Arabic: Ana rejjal, ma bi’aiebni] … this expresses the extent to which men do not have anything to feel ashamed of in terms of sex. Premarital sex for men is even encouraged though not always boldly, but the
“moment you turn a blind eye to all his sexual behaviours is enough to say ok do whatever you want” (Rida, M, 20, Muslim-Sunni).

Unlike the findings from Bakass, Ferrand and Depledge (2013) and Massad et al (2014) studies, which demonstrated that young Moroccan and Palestinian men usually have sexual intercourse with sex workers to gain sexual experience, this sexual behaviour was perceived as shameful and discouraged by my male participants. There might be different reasons for that. First, it might be because my participants were university students, therefore, maintaining a good social image of themselves, as educated and respectable, seemed to be very important to them. Second, if it is happening, it has been kept secret as my participants indicated. Third, university students in Lebanon usually enjoy more freedoms and have more spaces to meet up away from parental scrutiny and control as indicated in earlier chapters. The latter suggests that Lebanese students find ways to engage in intimate relationships while managing social risks, as I explain in the next chapter.

The other four young men, who thought that premarital sex might affect a young man’s reputation, declared that this was likely to occur if the young man’s family and social milieu were religiously conservative, or if the young man himself was religious. Yet, despite this, they confirmed that a man’s reputation would not be affected in the same way that a woman’s reputation would. Therefore, the data showed that, among some religiously conservative groups, moral restrictions are imposed on sexuality and sexual behaviours equally amongst both men and women. In such cases, sex before and outside marriage is perceived as a threat to the moral order and integrity of both sexes, hence bodily control and discipline is required. Majd for example, is an atheist. However, his family and social environment are religiously conservative. He told me that his openly liberal behaviour (whether it was related to his religious beliefs, sexual behaviour, or alcohol drinking) had put him in troubles with his family and the people in his community. He explained how they first advised him before their advice turned into judgment and rejection.

“the problem is, with someone like me, and with people who do not have a problem to say that they drink alcohol and have sex with girls[sic], they are rejected. They reject you.” (Majd, M, 22, Agnostic [Muslim-Shiites]).
But on the whole, most of my interviewees, both males and females, agreed that male premarital sexual behaviour was even socially encouraged. Female participants, specifically, were aggravated by what they referred to as societal ‘double standards’, in terms of sexual permissiveness, as explained in chapter 6. Many young women ridiculed this ‘sexual potency and virility’ trait of socially constructed masculinity. Although young women were very critical of the “double standards”, most of them felt powerless when it came to facing the society, confronted with threat of social exclusion and gossip.

“the man believes that he is not talked about like ‘nothing can be held as shameful against me, I’m a man’ [in Arabic: Ma bi’aiebni shi, ana rejjel], like you are a man but sometimes the woman is being – like sorry, but masculinity is not by being a ‘male’- the word ‘man’ [Al rajol] is an Arabic term which means the person who can be relied on and trusted. Sometimes a woman would have more magnanimity and manliness than you [as a man] do. Like a widowed mother who is racing to bring up and caring for 4-5 children, is equivalent to a hundred men. And you [as a man] are like proud that nothing can be held as shameful against you in your harlotry/fornication and drunkenness!! You are worthless compared to her!...... Men in the end see their manhood/masculinity in their ability to have sex with any woman for example... their pride in their penis- sorry! But at the end I’m telling you, manliness is not found in this” (Faten, F, 22, Muslim Sunni).

“It annoys me that ‘you males, who gave you the legitimacy and who told you that you can do whatever you want, then you come to control such as decision [women’s sexual behaviour]. Who told you that the hymen is the secret of life?! Why do you want to stay in power and control when it comes to this issue?’ it annoys me that they want to be the first and only man in her life! Well, he might have no clue what she did and how much she is lying to him” (May, F, 22, Muslim- Shiites).

“I don’t understand how you [society] want virgin girls [sic], all of them, everybody wants a virgin girl [sic], and you want [sexually] experienced men, and you do not want homosexuality!! Like from where do men get the experience?!” (Nay, F, 19, Christian-Maronite).

Moneer provided a good example of how premarital sex was encouraged in men, surprisingly by his mother:

“by the way, when I tell my mother that I’m dating so and so, she tells me: ‘see if she [girl he is dating] satisfies your desires’ in all aspects you know [meaning also his sexual desires]” (Moneer, M, 25, Muslim-Shiites).
Nadeem on the other hand, stated that his parents were aware that he was sexually active. Whilst his mother does not like to talk about it or encourage it, his father deals positively with the fact that he is sexually active. He stated that he was encouraged by his father and uncles but discouraged by his mother:

“My father always asks me how are things going – like my sexual life- and he makes jokes and positive comments about it. He encourages me; like to him, I became a man. But when mom hears him, she goes mad. She tells him to stop encouraging me: ’this conversation is Ayb [that is, shameful]’. Mom is still conservative when it comes to these issues, she considers it [sex before marriage] immoral” (Nadeem, M, 25, Christian-Maronite).

Whilst the example provided by Nadeem reflected how his father and uncles promoted premarital sex for men through their positive comments, the example provided by Moneer reflected the ways heterosexual hegemonic masculinity was maintained in society not only by men but also by women (his mother), specifically older or senior women. Connell (1987) argues that hegemonic masculinity is constructed in relation to women and subordinated masculinities - such as homosexual men (1987: p. 186). Therefore, ‘hegemonic masculinity’ does not exist without the ‘emphasised femininity’ and other subordinated masculinities. It is women’s compliance with men’s power and control which sustains this asymmetry.

The findings also suggested that, although Lebanese society values, to a large extent, the social status of highly educated, intellectual, and successful women, these merits do not necessarily justify a behaviour, which fails to conform to the dominant social morals. On the whole, the social and moral expectation of a woman’s virtue is merely assessed by a woman’s success in reserving her chastity and virginity. Therefore, a woman is expected to physically reserve her intact hymen until marriage, and abstaining from excessively expressing sexual desires, connotations, attitudes and behaviours. Sexual desires and behaviours are confined to married life. Yet, at the same time, Lebanese society encourages women to be physical and sexually attractive, as I explicate in the next chapter - where I examine how, given different social expectations, women try to negotiate these dual roles.
(being sexy and physically attractive yet maintaining chastity and virginity until marriage) expected of them.

All my participants confirmed that women who lose their good and respectful reputation lose their dignity, decency and honourability in the eyes of their families and wider society. Single, sexually active women who engage in premarital sex are labelled and called bad names such as: “dirty”, “bitch”, “slut”, “whore”, “bad girl”, “not clean”, “not good”, “dishonourable”, “disrespectful”, “unethical”, “playful”, “opened”, “she eats it”, “street girl” and so on. When analysed using Douglas’ notions of purity and pollution (symbolising order and disorder), it emerges that the social perception of women as ‘dirty’ and ‘impure’, and therefore ‘disrespectful’, is associated with the socially constructed notions of purity and pollution (dirt) in relation to a woman’s body and its openings. According to Douglas (1966), ‘dirt’ disrupts ‘order’, yet at the same time ‘dirt’ is never fixed. Things become dirty when they are misplaced. For example, food is not dirty by itself. It becomes dirty when it is spread on the bed sheets or on clothing. In other words, the concept of ‘dirt’ depends on the perception of its beholders. To apply this to my findings, I suggest that women’s bodies are not perceived as ‘dirty’ in themselves, however, they become ‘dirty’ when their boundaries are transgressed. The openings of women’s bodies are dangerous and risky to the social and moral order when they are invaded or penetrated. Whilst disorder symbolises danger and power, social order is also symbolised by order in the sexual body (Douglas 1966) depending on what the body symbolises in each culture. Therefore, a woman is deemed pure and honourable as along as her sexual body is pure. That is, as long as her bodily orifices are not penetrated outside the legitimate framework of marriage. Once a woman violates the social morals and values, which relate to her sexual body, she offends and violates the social order. Hence, she is deemed as dirty, impure or bad, and deserves punishment as a transgressor. Moreover, social conceptions of dirt and purity cannot be separated from the societal hierarchy and gendered power relations as they are reflections of the cultural values and beliefs that exist on the basis of that specific social structure.
“they will not stop at any names... what do you want? you name it! They will call you the most terrible names you can ever hear of... and now they are even coming up with all these newly combined names, you know, so that if one word is not bad enough and is not humiliating enough maybe combined words will do. I feel disgusted even to spell them out, but for sure you heard them all from this wretched society” (Aya, F, 24, Muslim-Shiites).

“you’ll always be judged badly even if you did nothing... so imagine if they knew that you had sex... that would be a nightmare for the rest of your life...... you will be hated and disrespected... like you will lose the respect of everyone... you’ll always be referred to as ‘unclean’ or ‘not good’ or... or... or...” (Sireen, F, 20, Christian-Orthodox.)

Linking reputation and honour to women’s purity and sexual virtue, reflects a form of social control over women (and their bodies), who are responsible for upholding the moral order as an inseparable component of the social order. Douglas also suggests that social order entails restrictions at different levels and means to protect society from alien ideas, values and beliefs which endangers its order, stability and leads to its deviancy (Douglas, 1966; 1992). Women are often considered the gateways to communities and in this way Douglas argues that social control is often translated into control over the body. As such, the more the social boundaries are rigid and the more taboos are enforced in society, the greater the social control over specific bodies that become the focus of moral frameworks and community identities.

But here the question is who is controlling whose body? And, who defines these social boundaries? In the case of my study, this control is specifically imposed over women’s bodies (all femininities). In general, this control would also extend to include the bodies of other subordinated masculinities - those who do not fit or align with the most privileged type of masculinity: ‘the heterosexual hegemonic masculinity’ as per Connell’s (1987) definition. As argued by Weeks (2003) and Douglas (1966), social taboos and boundaries in relation to sex and sexuality are socially constructed. Each culture constructs its own boundaries and decides on what practices are perceived as moral or immoral, pure or dirty (polluted), good or bad, healthy or perverted. Yet, to shape and define these social boundaries and decide on what is ‘risky’ or ‘dangerous’ and what is ‘not risky’ is a place
and a matter of power. Those in power dictate ‘who should do what’ and ‘who should not do what’ through an entire social and institutional system designed to maintain this power and regenerate it.

I argue that the cultural taboos and boundaries, which are positioned to protect a certain society from perceived threats or dangers, that may disrupt its social order or cohesion and lead to its deviancy (Douglas, 1966 and 1992) are highly gendered. Women’s sexual permissiveness is seen as dangerous to men’s constructed masculinity and power. The control and power imposed by hegemonic masculinities would be at risk if women gained sexual freedom, increased power and eventually stopped conforming to the institutionalised hierarchy of masculine power. Therefore, social control over women’s bodies and their sexuality to keep men in power and to undermine women becomes essential. Under ‘shared risk’ I further explain how this control is socially sustained.

“Men for example they do the worst things in terms of their sexual relations yet at the end of the day they request a woman who was never kissed except by her mother! They want sexy beautiful attractive women yet virgins and when they marry them they impose on them all sort of restrictions. Men think themselves they own the woman. They own her body, her behaviour, her brain. They own her all” (Aya, F, 24, Muslim-Shiites).

“Risking reputation” appeared to exert a high pressure on young women in particular and controls, to a great extent, their risk-taking decisions in relation to their sexual behaviour. The findings clearly revealed that control over one’s body is not merely related to the individual him or herself, but is rather related to an extended societal control. Therefore, young people’s decisions regarding abstaining from or engaging in premarital sex are not necessarily individual, specifically among women. Even if a woman desired and wanted to get engaged in premarital sexual relations, her refraining decision would be based on weighing the consequences against the social and moral expectations and assessing the social risk. Below, I provide some quotations from my participants’ accounts reflecting some of their embedded fears, anxieties, and trust related issues, which I expand more about in the next chapter.
“... I’m convinced about the idea [of cohabitation and premarital sex], but for sure I won’t cohabit because society will not accept it, and I didn’t find a guy who is deserving of this. In Lebanon, we live in a state of anxiety and hysteria, which breaks this intimacy in a relationship and affects it negatively” (Raneem, F, 21, Muslim-Shiites).

“even if I wanted to, I don’t think I can... it’s difficult to take such a decision while knowing what might be waiting for you... even if I decided to challenge society, it is difficult to trust Lebanese men... once I was in love with someone and I was so tempted to be intimate with him.. but I did not do it.. the idea itself made me so anxious.. I don’t want to think what will happen next if anyone told my parents for example.. no way..” (Sireen, F, 20, Christian-Orthodox).

“I, as a Lebanese girl, the problem of [preserving] virginity is not for my own sake, it is for the sake of the society around me. Like, if I got married for example, and my husband told me at the wedding night that you’re not virgin!! He will then go tell my brother... see how I think about it? I’m in dispense of these troubles” (Faten, F, 22, Muslim-Sunni)

“First of all, the man’s mentality. The guy here [in Lebanon], no matter how open-minded he is, he will always think that ‘I will do whatever I want, but at the end I’ll take...’ any man, no matter how much he tells you that he is open-minded, however, when it gets serious and you ask him, he will say ‘for sure I will not take a girl who has done the seven sins [in Arabic: Al sabaa w dimmeha, meaning who has done lots of sins] ... this word ‘sabaa w dimmeha’ I don’t understand it. What does it mean ‘sabaa w dimmeha’? She might be with only one man! This is the first thing [man’s mentality]. The second thing is that the society here they will not accept it no matter what! And your parents, your parents will not accept it/absorb it and I think this has a great influence. Here there’s no man [who will accept it] unless you want to live abroad. If you live abroad no one asks you what have you done, no one interferes with your privacy. Here, it is not the case, here if you want to date someone, this and that want to give their opinion about it...” (Katie, F, 25, Christian- Maronite).

These quotes coincide with Douglas’s argument that an individual’s choices are context dependent. When individuals are faced with “estimating probability and credibility, they come already primed with culturally learned assumptions and weightings” (Douglas, 1992: 58). Throughout the interviews, young men and women discussed social institutions which influenced their decisions. They mainly referred to family, religion, social and cultural values and myths besides gender. They also stressed the way they were raised with culturally adopted notions or concepts of the “ayb”, which means “shameful and
disgraceful”, and “haram” which means “religiously forbidden and ill-gotten”. My participants as well expressed their frustration at forced social constraints:

“The moment we are born, we open our eyes on two words: “Ayb” and “Haram”. Everything is ayb and haram even your thoughts and ideas. You are not allowed to think freely as an individual. You have to always think as the others, mainly the way the people of your social and cultural network oblige you to think. Any thinking beyond these lines is either “ayb” or haram!” (Aya, F, 24, Muslim-Shiites).

“... we have a psychological issue with ‘no, ayb’; ‘no this is Aar [shame/dishonour]’; ‘no, this is haram’... they didn’t let us – since our childhood, whether a boy or a girl- one turns up to his society with no sense of ‘you notice’; ‘you compare’; ‘you analyse and see if you find this right or wrong’... NO! the parents raise up [their children] that ‘this is Ayb; this is haram; our religion didn’t tell us this’... and the individual is a passive receiver... parroting... repeats what he was told by the society.” (Nisreen, F, 26, Druze).

Overall, it was interesting to see the dissatisfaction, revolt and harsh criticism of the society, which almost all my interviewees expressed, but anger towards the society’s unfair judgements and inequity was more evident among young women regardless of their attitudes towards premarital sex, as I elaborated in the previous chapter on findings. Moreover, some young people refused to relate the notions of honour and morality to sexual relationships. They challenged the existing traditional definition of morality which links women’s honour to her virginity (intact hymen) and chastity. Some of my participants saw no connection between the two.

“you cannot assess my morals in relation to whether I have a hymen or not or whether I have sexual relationships or not! I know lots of people who never had sexual relationships but you cannot even talk to them because of their bad manners!” (Nay, F, 19, Christian-Maronite).

“They always consider that a girl’s honour is in between her legs [in Arabic: ‘Sharaf el bint bayn ejrayha’] and this is something of course very retarded and very backward because a girl’s honour is here [she points towards her head- meaning her intellect]” (Raneem, F, 21, Muslim-Shiites).
Raneem’s quote reflects the same meaning of another Turkish colloquial saying which was highlighted in Ozyegin (2009) work on “virginal facades”. Young men and women interviewed by Ozyegin stated that “virginity is not between the legs; it resides in the brain” (ibid.:109). This reflects how young people are continuously constructing new moral boundaries in relation to their sexuality. Nevertheless, they continue to experience tensions between the old and new boundaries of morality, which often lead to social risks. Accordingly, young people find ways to negotiate sexual boundaries and manage associated social risks, as I explain in the next chapter.

### 7.2 Shared risk: importance of the family

As mentioned earlier, Lebanese society, on the whole, is a relatively collective culture in certain aspects. Individual decisions in general, specifically big and or risky ones, which directly impact the family’s social reputation, image, its position in the society, as well as its safety are not taken without consulting family members. Examples of such decisions are marriage, opening a new business, travelling abroad for work or study, single women’s autonomy and so on. However, my findings showed that risky decisions, which disrupted the social order in the sense of disrespecting the power hierarchy and going against some religious rules and moral values, such as engaging in premarital sex, were absolutely not amongst those decisions discussed with the family members, despite the impact of these decisions on the family. Not only was this due to their private, individualistic and intimate character, but also because such decisions risk disrupting the existing social and moral order through the transgression of its boundaries.

As per my findings, the family appeared to be one of the most important social aspects which influenced young people’s decisions to engage in or refrain from premarital sexual relationships, especially among females. Family in Lebanon identifies one’s social background and class, religion and identity. Most of my participants perceived their nuclear family as an important source of social power, emotional and, often, of financial support and protection. The fear of disappointing the family and bringing them social shame and
blame exerted the utmost pressure on female participants’ decisions, and was counted as one of the eminent risks that young women accounted for when weighing the risks of engaging in premarital sex.

“I fear hurting my parents or making them feel, for instance, that all these years you’ve raised me up and made huge efforts for me [to reach where I am, and be proud of me]. yet at the end look how I ended up to be... like look what I have done to you...” (Raneem, F, 21, Muslim-Shiites).

“...Parents, I definitely take them into consideration because unfortunately parents say a statement like ‘you disappointed my hopes, you disappointed my expectations’... what is that hope though? That I did the thing that I’m convinced of!! [She questions] ... But you know, maybe here the emotions play a role...” (Nisreen, F, 26, Druze).

“you really cannot say that this [people’s talk or gossips] is the least you care about and so on, because the day the gossip reaches any of the family members, I don’t think anyone will accept it! (Noor, F, 25, Christian-Maronite).

In Lebanon, like in other Middle Eastern countries, there is an inseparable relationship between individual honour and family honour (Mosquera, Manstead and Fischer, 2002). Most of the time, the family’s honour is interlinked with women’s purity and chastity. When it comes to premarital sex, social and moral pressures are exerted more heavily on women than on men - though men are also expected to maintain discipline and not drag the family into shameful situations. However, because family honour is strongly perceived to be connected to women’s virtue and purity, women who do not conform to the set social and cultural values deserve to be punished as they threaten the family’s reputation and subsequently men’s power. Therefore, shared honour means shared reputation and shared risks. In other words, the risks my participants chose to take as individuals were not necessarily individual risks. They were also exposing their family’s reputation, social image and status to social shunning and shame. The concept of ‘shared risk’ highlighted here coincides with the findings from Lupton and Tulloch’s (2002) study where Australian participants showed a certain level of concern regarding joint risk or “risk as being shared, spread over more than one body/self” (2002: 323). That is, risks taken by an individual did
not merely affect the individual him/herself but also extended to others, such as the close social network around them like the partner, children, and sometime the whole family.

Some young women were well aware of the pressure this put on them. They themselves expressed their frustration and disapproval of the entire concept of shared honour, and consequently shared risk and considered it a ‘retarded’[sic] and ‘backward’[sic] mentality:

“...it annoys me how ‘honour’ is interlinked... like the honour of the father derives from the honour of the mother, from the honour of the daughter, from the honour of the brother! Enough! Like let each one has their own honour [laughing]” (Nay, F, 19, Christian-Maronite).

Yet, they felt ambivalent about them putting their families in situations where they would experience shame. For some other female participants, being perceived as disrespectful and immoral in the eyes of their family members (specifically the parents) is one of the toughest outcomes or consequences.

“I really do not care about what people think, but I do not want my parents to feel ashamed of me you know. I do not want them to be like ‘you put our head down’ [in Arabic: wattayti rasna]. They care about what people say. Like because they care, I have the responsibility not to make anyone gloat over them [in Arabic: yshamat feehom] or talk badly about my family, and make them feel ashamed of their daughter” (Sireen, F, 20, Christian-Orthodox).

“... I fear if my family knew.... Absolutely they will not be ‘understanding’... and for sure there will be plenty of big troubles, but it won’t reach the level of ‘killing’... but definitely ‘rejection’.. ‘ostracised’!!... ...But for me, everything has a reason in the end.. For instance, if my sister did it, I will contain her but my brothers will not! They will reject her: ‘you did this, so now you are in the category of a girl who committed adultery and adultery is a forbidden sin...” (Faten, F, 22, Muslim-Sunni).

“...the scary thing is always the ‘parents’, and more specifically the ‘father’... maybe my case is a bit specific as I was in a family of a violent father.... Like the whole family was living in a violent environment.... He’s patriarchal and he used to practice his masculinity through violence, so he’s someone who is so tied up by the shallow coatings of the society which say that a girl should remain virgin until she gets married” (Dareen, F, 22, Agnostic [Muslim-Shiites]).
7.2.1 Emotional ties

My findings suggested that this shared or interconnected risk between the individuals, specifically females in the case of my research study, was not merely related to the patriarchal hierarchy constitution of the family - which puts males (father, husband, brother- as custodians) in a more powerful and controlling position over females and, in some cases, may lead to violent or aggressive reactions towards the female transgressor. Despite the vital role of this *power relation* which usually exerts substantial pressures on women and urges them to be responsible and considerate towards their families when taking risks, the association between *shared risk* and *strong social cohesion* as well as the *emotional bond* between family members should not be underestimated.

When my female participants expressed fears of exposing their family’s reputation to social shame, these fears were not always associated with the *fear of punishment* (being punished by their family), but were also linked to *fears of causing harm* to their family and exposing them to harmful social judgments and disgrace. Most of my participants’ responses reflected a weighty level of responsibility towards protecting their families’ reputation from any harm. I argue that their protective manner is also a result of a strong social and emotional tie to family members expressed by love, care and being protective.

“I am struggling with my parents. But I’m aware that you, dad, the 64-year-old, I will not now come and try to change you and convince you! I have to understand you and protect you at a certain point from society” (Raneem, F, 21, Muslim-Shiites).

Women’s sense of responsibility to protect their families from social defame was also evident in Kevorkian (2008) study on the dilemmas which face rape victims in Palestinian society. The author addresses women’s silences about their rape crime because they want to protect their families from social shunning and defame.

It might be argued that this emotional attachment and feelings of guilt and responsibility towards family members, may, to a certain extent, portray women as emotional, obedient,
caring and lacking of self and sexual control (Nurmila, 2009). However, my findings clearly showed that *shared risk* is not merely blind obedience and a simple response to the power-relationship asymmetry. It further entails deep emotions, love and cohesion between family members. The majority of young women, regardless of their sexual behaviours, expressed deep emotions as well as mutual love and care towards their families. The fear of hurting and disappointing the people they loved and cared about the most (like the parents) and the fear of not being loved by them seemed to be extremely scary to almost all young women. Almost all my female participants stated that they would not have cared about people in society if their parents were supportive and approving of their sexual behaviour, or if their parents did not care about people’s judgements.

Even women who felt liberated and were not religious, were also concerned about protecting their family members from social dishonour and exclusion. For instance, Dareen, a liberal and sexually active female, was not necessarily concerned about her personal reputation as much as she was concerned about the reputation and safety of other female family members, specifically her mother and her sisters. Dareen had an unintended life threatening pregnancy outside the uterus, and had to undergo urgent abortion surgery. Her case provides a concrete example of how *shared risk* could be emotional, controlling, and could threaten not only a woman’s own life but also ruin a whole family- in case sexual activity status was disclosed. Dareen told me how she had to beg the nurses and the doctors to hide her abortion from her family; otherwise, this could have led to undesirable consequences which might have reached killing.

“I had to ask the doctors not to tell my mom that this is an abortion... we told her it's an ovarian cyst... my mom was convinced because she had spoken to the doctor himself, but my dad had doubts and he kept calling the doctor to ask if I have done anything [meaning had sex]... he maintained this pressure [on the doctor] all the time that it scared me a lot because my life is not only about my own self. It is linked to a family which consists of a mother and three sisters. That is if I do something that is really averse, it will be completely reflected on them and in a very dreadful way – like there were some problems which were reflected on them [on her mother and sisters] before, but it passed. But something like this [sex before marriage] – for him [her father]- it doesn’t pass at all! I do not know what might he have done to my sisters. He might have forced them into marriages against their will as a revenge or...
Dareen assured me that she did not fear the unintended pregnancy itself. If she knew she was pregnant, she could have undergone an abortion and that would have solved the problem. But in her case, the pregnancy was outside the uterus, and she had internal bleeding without her knowing about it, until she suddenly fainted and was taken to hospital. Her major concern was not the health problem itself; it was, rather, having a sexual health risk which might expose her sexual activity status and consequently expose herself and her family to social scandal and other social risks - such as brutal physical violence by her father. She explained that the real risk would have been if her father knew the truth. It would not have merely been her life at risk, but also her sisters and mother would have been abused as a result. She was worried most about them because her father would shame her mother for failing to bring up ‘her daughters’ as virtuous women, on one hand, and he would have imposed restrictions on them, on the other hand. Dareen, the eldest among her sisters, felt responsible for keeping her mother and sisters safe and protected. Her emotions of love and protection were strongly reflected throughout the interview.

Similarly, sexually active female participants stated that one of the problems which faces sexually active women is being hesitant to visit a gynaecologist when faced with any sexual problem. This was mainly due to their fears of being caught or seen, or because they would not know of a gynaecologist other than the one whom their mother visits. Participants related that to lack of knowledge and awareness. It is related to their misconceptions behind the reasons of visiting a gynaecologist. And, just like the fear of facing a health problem, which might visibly expose a woman’s sexual activity status, a couple of young women also expressed their fear of being caught by the police. This was also one of the social risks linked to social scandal. If caught by the police, the police might take legal actions against the woman, or, they might call the parents to come and take or release their daughter and consequently expose her sexual behaviour.
“Cohabitation in Lebanon is illegal. So if the police came in, and discovered that we are living together, they might accuse us that this is ‘beit da’ara’ [meaning a brothel]” (May, F, 22, Muslim-Shiites).

“A friend of mine was making out with her boyfriend in the car, when the police came and took them to the police station... and they called her dad, or she had to call her dad to get her out, something like this. Like, it is so embarrassing. I mean just being in such a situation you know. She told me she felt humiliated. Luckily, her father is open-minded and they were not having sex, just kissing, but even so! Oh my god! Just being in that situation is awful!” (Sireen, F, 20, Christian-Orthodox).

7.2.2 Liminal spaces, performance, and collective power

Some female participants noted a level of tolerance and leniency in their parents’ attitudes towards premarital sex – and sometimes this consisted of denial. However, knowing that the society will potentially shame the family, was an issue of concern to my participants.

“my parents are not narrow-minded, but they are like: ‘ok even if you are having sex, we do not want to know’. I’ll give you another example of how we behave in Lebanese society: My friend wanted to travel for one month to be with her boyfriend ... she suddenly told her parents that she wanted to travel to that country – which they already know her boyfriend is in! like her father did not ask her “where are you going to stay?” though he knew that she is going to see her boyfriend, and for sure she will not stay in a hotel!... but he didn’t ask her because he knows he might hear an answer: “I’m going to stay with him” ... he does not want to hear it...” (Dalia, F, 23, Muslim-Shiites).

“I prefer that they [her family] don’t know. Although sometimes I think that she [her mom] must have thought about it [that her daughter had sex] because I speak out my opinions very bluntly, so if this topic came up for instance, I say: ‘yeah so what, let her [a woman] do whatever she wants... cohabitation is very nice.’ So, if she [her mother] thinks about my opinions, logically, if her daughter thinks like this, then she [the daughter] must be at least applying it. But I feel that she doesn’t dare to think like this... but in general, I don’t like them to know for sure, I haven’t even told my sister. So, I make sure they don’t know...” (Nay, F, 19, Christian-Maronite).

The above quotations indicated that, when parents do not actually know or have a concrete evidence of their daughter’s sexual encounters, they can turn a blind eye to their daughter(s) sexual behaviour. For example, in the case of Nay, the mother pretended that
she had accepted her daughter’s progressive views and principals, without questioning the link between her daughter’s views and actual behaviour. Here, uncertainty seemed to provide a liminal space where family reputation can be maintained. This however, involved a social performance by both the parents (by pretending that they do not know) and the children, so that everyone become complicit with the narrative that is being developed to minimise social risk.

Similarly, other accounts showed that some parents, including the father, colluded with their daughter(s) and tried to protect them from the wrath of society. Some female participants insisted that their parents themselves did not have a problem with premarital sex as well as being open minded in terms of other controversial issues. Yet, the social pressures which threatened the family’s reputation and interests (social, political and economic) obliged them to keep their convictions low profile. These parents did not punish their daughters for having premarital sex, but urged them to keep it secret so as not provoke the wrath of society. If the daughters’ socially perceived transgression (sexual behaviour), which is supported by the parents (moral guardians), was exposed, society would punish the family by demolishing their social image and reputation.

“my parents fear people. Mom fears the way society looks at us. There is always a “NO” because we are girls and because there is this ‘your image must be always good because when you are about to get married they will ask about you’. But dad in general wants us to do what we are convinced of...but he’s always like one step forward and one step backward [reluctant], as if he wants us to stay on the safe side. He’s like ‘I want you to be yourselves and revolutionary, like go live your life and don’t abide by people, BUT, don’t do things that irritate society’. That is like do what you are convinced of, that’s fine, but do not be provocative with society” (May, F, 22, Muslim-Shiites).

“...like the mother of one of my friends knows that she [my friend] lives with her boyfriend in Beirut, but she [mother] told her [my friend] not to let anyone know about it, and not to let anyone know that she [the mother] knows” (Sireen, F, 20, Christian-Orthodox)

Such accounts, suggested that the society as a whole - namely neighbours, friends, people at work, one’s social connections and networks- holds, which I call, ‘collective power’, to
enforce social order. That is, the community in which people live and interact, collectively exert social pressures on families (mainly on parents/guardians and males in the family) to teach and transfer the constructed social morals and values of that specific community to their children, and to ensure they maintain social order through scrutiny and a system of blame and punishment. This includes maintaining social norms, moral values, constructed gender roles and power relationships. In some cases, though, society’s norms, traditions and moral values may contradict the convictions of those whom the society held responsible and accountable for maintaining social order, as shown in the accounts above. This could result in the social isolation of the family and loss of respect in the society, negatively affecting the family’s economic and sometimes political interests; and consequently influence the future of their children (for example, rendering them unmarriageable).

Also it is important to note that some accounts revealed that power relationships were much more complex than they seemed. Whilst most literature on patriarchy (Mosquera, Manstead and Fischer, 2002; Abu Odeh, 2010; Mernissi, 1982; Moghadam, 2003) suggest that fathers or males in the family have the authority over other members in the family, and are responsible for the misbehaviour of female members, my findings suggested that this is not always restricted to the males in the family. Females in the family, like mother and sisters (usually the older but not always), also hold a vital part of this power, which they use to threaten and pressure other members in the family to keep them in order. Raneem (F, 21, Muslim Shiites), for example, told me how once she went shopping and bought new clothes. When her sister, who is religious, saw Raneem’s clothes, she was upset with her and accused her of being dragged into new values alien to their own. She obliged her to return the clothes she bought, though Raneem (veiled) insisted that the clothes were not even tight. They only did not conform to the Islamic custom her family and related social milieu were used to. As such, it is not only the males in the family who ensure social order, but it is also the females in the family that play a role in keeping other family members tamed as well as conforming to social, religious and moral values.
Shared risk was also evident among young men. Some of my interviewees, including young men themselves, stated that some men might pull out from marrying a non-virgin partner if their decision was opposed or rejected by their family. Instead, they would go in line with, or as some young men put it, “respect” their family’s decision. I argue that consulting the family and accounting for their opinion in matters which are considerably “personal” and “individualistic”, such as marriage, reflects three things: First, it reflects the hierarchical power residing in a patriarchal family structure where the seniors’ opinion in the family - particularly males (yet influenced by senior females, namely wives and mothers) - is taken into account and “respected”. Second, it indicates that big risky decisions, which might reflect on the family’s reputation, for example, are not necessarily always taken individually. Douglas argues that “no one takes a decision that involves costs without consulting neighbours, family, work friends. These are the support group that will help if things go wrong… Placing all the focus on individual cognition excludes the problem” (Douglas, 1992: 12). She states that intersubjectivity, consensus making, and social influences affect the way risky decision are taken. Third, this reflects the importance placed on the family’s cohesion and emotional connectedness which deem some of the individual risks as shared risks. To some young men, this reflects on being a ‘good man’ – a masculine trait demonstrated both in respecting seniors and protecting a family’s interests and reputation. Overall, most participants seemed to prioritise their family’s interests over their own individual interests.

“Well, for sure I care for my parents’ opinions, like my relationship with my family is more like a friendship and they do not usually interfere in my life or decisions, but if they do, then it must be a really big issue, so I do care and I do it out of love and respect you know… it’s not like I’m a ‘foufou’ [weak/not a man – usually used for homosexual men to undermine them as subordinate masculinities] if I listen to my family and took what they say into consideration” (Nadeem, M, 25, Christian Maronite).

“I’m like this I have this mentality... also it’s from the way may parents raised me... these things specifically [being against premarital sex] I acquired it from them... also the other thing that makes me against it [premarital sex] is that I’m the youngest at
home... and I learned a lot a lot a lot from their mistakes... so I’m seeing what my eldest brother does... and I’m seeing how it is bad for him, so why should I put myself in such a situation?! Why should I date for instance one who is not my type or is not the type which my family prefers?!! This will cause me headache later... in general I tell mom about all my relations. I introduce them to mom” (Marwan, M, 22, Muslim-Sunni).

“some men care about keeping things hidden from their families... it depends on the family whether it accepts it or not... in general most men do not care much... but there are some who care depending on the way one was brought up, one’s parents, one’s social environment” (Lina, F, 21, Druze).

Besides family pressures, participants stated that some of the reasons behind a man leaving his “girlfriend” or the “woman he loved and had a sexual relationship with”, for another virgin woman were mainly related to: men’s fears of bad reputation – as no one wants to get married to a woman where others point their finger at her; and men’s fears that a sexually experienced woman would be too challenging and perhaps would cheat on them later.

“Listen, I feel that there are lots of reasons which make them [men] leave her [girlfriend] and search for someone else. One of them is pressure from the parents- if they know who this girl is, her mentality, and whether she had a sexual relation with their son or not! This is one thing. The other thing for example, I feel that they [men] have a problem if he is walking with his wife into a restaurant for instance [meeting someone] oh he used to sleep with my wife! I don’t feel they like the idea, it doesn’t sink in. I also feel that there are fears... that one day she will cheat on him or she will have a higher tendency/ potential [to cheat] compared to a virgin. [To men, they think] as long as she is so open-minded to the idea of sex before marriage, then she’d probably also be open-minded to the idea of cheating and open-minded to going out with other men... I do not see them linked to each other at all!” (Nay, F, 19, Christian- Maronite).

In his interview, Zaher (M, 22, Muslim-Sunni) stated that men were scared of sexually experienced women because they challenge their sexual ability and potency. That was reflected in men’s fears and insecurities about their masculinities:

“The problem with women’s sexual experience, that he [the man] will think that if she has the experience, he will always have doubts- maybe somebody else will satisfy her
more than he does. He [the man] loses confidence in his manhood (manliness). We are a society which is based on masculinity” (Zaher, M, 22, Muslim-Sunni).

These masculine fears and insecurities were expressed differently in various interviews, but they were specifically evident when my participants talked about virginity and marriageability in terms of future risk.

7.2.4 Collective identity is more important than the individual

Some participants expressed their frustration of the way society associates them, as individuals, to their families. Among the majority of participants, they stated that the individual’s behaviours would always be associated with their family’s reputation, be it good or bad. There is no place for the liberated individual self. They perceived this profound association as controlling and restraining.

“You know like since I was a teenager I always wanted to do things I love, but I always felt restrained. Whatever I will do, they [society] will not say Sami did so and so... it will always be, the son of X [his father’s name] did so and so. And my father, and also our family in general, but especially my father, he is very well known for his good and respectable reputation and good morals and so on. Like this by itself restrains you.. like that’s it! As if you are tied. Like imagine you are no longer seen as X or folan or folan [as individuals]. You become the son or daughter of so and so [eben or benet folan] especially if your family is a good and respectable family. You, your whole being, become a reflection of their image in the society. If you don’t behave like them, it’s a problem” (Sami, M, 24, Muslim-Shiites).

“Even in your normal everyday life, they never call you by your name, they always refer to you as the daughter of so and so; the sister of so and so; the wife of so and so [in Arabic: bent folan or ekhet folan, or mart folan] you always have dependence or subordination to a man in your life. And this for sure annoys me” (Ghina, F, 21, Muslim-Shiites).

“.... Because I am the daughter of Sheikh X [Muslim cleric] and the daughter of Hajja Y... they make you feel it is a burden” (Raneem, F, 21, Muslim Shiites).
These quotes illustrated the difficulty of maintaining an individual and separate identity from the family, the immediate community and religious groups that one belongs to. Sami for example illustrated the difficulty of being disconnected from the community and the religious group his family belonged to. He addressed the influence of the social pressure on his father and consequently on his family:

“I will talk about my family... my father for example... you feel like it is an emotional and psychological, and religious pressure [from the society]. Or how would I say it! Like because my dad interacts with religiously conservative people on a daily basis, so he becomes influenced by them and by what they tell him. Some of them, this is what they do in life- preaching [he said sarcastically]- If they tell him your daughter should wear headscarf or your son did so and so, or like we saw your daughter or your son I don’t know what, you know... like they load him with bullshit, and they influence him, and he starts wanting to hold us accountable [in Arabic: yohasebna] and to apply what they tell him on us. When we travel all of us as a family, like when he is away from that society he becomes cool and more comfortable and happier!... Like our interaction with him [as a family] changes..... In brief, he is scared from people. Simply!” (Sami, M, 24, Muslim Shiites)

Sami also explained how social pressures might risk the stability of his family’s business and might lead to their social exclusion if they did not conform to social and religious values, especially as his family had a very good reputation and was very well respected in their social milieu. He also told me that such social pressures were not merely found in the case of his family. He knew a number of friends who complained of the same problem, and this phenomenon had been drastically increasing in the past few years. This was essentially due to an increased religious and sectarian fanaticism leading to an intensified sectarian rift between the Muslims Sunnis and Shiites, as a result of regional conflicts (i.e. Iran and Saudi Arabia’s proxy wars in Syria, Iraq and Yemen). Concerns to demarcate group allegiances have put greater pressure on maintaining a good reputation and good relations with everyone, especially those from the same religious groups.
7.3 Future Risks: being unmarriageable and forced marriages

As I explained in chapter 2, Lebanese society place high emphasis on marriage and establishing a family. Marriage is perceived as the only legitimate and socially acceptable frame for having sex specifically among the conservative, more traditional and religious families. In the findings, the notion of “marriage” came out strongly and appeared to be absolutely important to the majority of young men and women even among those with liberal views. Some female participants even expressed their preference for getting married before or by the age of thirty at the latest.

My findings also suggested an inseparable relation between marriage and premarital sex. Women were certain that losing their virginity, in the form of the intact hymen, would put them at a very high risk of being ‘unmarriageable’ or at least would decrease their chances of getting married. Indeed, although the majority of male participants (10 out of 16) reported being “totally with premarital sex” themselves, they, along with their counterparts, felt assured that the majority of Lebanese men would not marry a non-virgin. Women, therefore, had to carefully negotiate their future through the decisions they make about managing their sexual relationships, as I explain in the next chapter (8). Findings revealed that women are not passive. They actually weigh up the risks and can feel empowered by not having sex or by well performing the role of a virgin.

Awwad et al (2013) found that 57% of Lebanese male university students would agree to marry a non-virgin woman. Whereas my participants, in their interviews, estimated what they thought was the percentage of men who genuinely do not have a problem of marrying a non-virgin, to range between 10 to 25%. However, my participants’ assumptions were not limited to ‘university students’. It was merely an estimate based on their everyday experiences and interactions with people in their communities and within their social networks.

“it is very rare to find men who don’t have a problem with this issue……even if they were so cool or actually they pretend to be so cool, but I don’t know why, they remain old-fashioned/backwards [in Arabic: motahajjer] in their heads and they would still want a virgin and so on…” (Noor, F, 25 Christian- Maronite).
“In the case of premarital sex, the girl would say ‘no one will ever marry me’... young men they say they do not have any problem and so on, but when it comes to them personally, no they do have a problem. Nowadays, those who tell you that they do not have a problem are very very few, unless they are brought up outside Lebanon or are very secular... ... if I had a sexual experience, be assured that most men won’t take me [as a bride]” (Faten, F, 22, Muslim- Sunni).

One of the most dominant narratives that emerged from the research was the belief that a sexually experienced woman would not be able to marry because of men’s desire for virgin brides. Even if a woman had sex with only one man, a man whom she loved, trusted and intended to marry, she would still be perceived as deviant and not trustworthy in the eyes of society and most likely also in the eyes of the man she had sex with (as explained in chapter 6). It was perceived as a serious risk of exclusion. This takes us back to Douglas’ concept of pollution and purity. A never-married woman who had premarital sex, even once or with one male partner, would be perceived as ‘impure’ and ‘promiscuous’ by society in general because she had allowed her body boundaries to be invaded and contaminated. “Contaminated”, because her sexual behaviour would be inevitably linked to the assumption of being loose and easy allowing her body boundaries to be penetrated by multiple male partners. She would be suspected for having sex before and outside marriage – being unable to commit to one man. Female wrongdoers would be blamed, condemned and punished for disrespecting the social and moral order.

“... When it comes to ‘I want to get married’ he goes like a good guy with his parents to check out a beautiful girl, he checks her waist, her education, her age, her face, her hair, her parents, and ok ‘mesh bayes temma ella emma’ [meaning ‘a girl who has never been kissed on her mouth by anyone except her mother. This expression is very much used to indicate a girl’s chastity, decency and virginity.]. At a certain moment they [men] go back to their reality, to their culture, to their origins...This shows that he [the man] is unable to be liberated. He is just being ‘sexually’ a man. That is [he’s being] a typical sex machine [sic] if you want!” (Nisreen, F, 26, Druze).

“girls [sic] care so much about the way men perceive them... because when it comes to marriage – I [the man] live my life and so on- but when I [the man] want to get married I want to find the girl ‘mesh bayes temma ella emma’ [meaning ‘a girl who has never been kissed on her mouth by anyone except her mother]’” (May, F, 22, Muslim-Shiites).
“She’d fear her future, her destiny... you know that there are a lot of people who care about her being virgin and never been in a sexual relation with anyone else before. So she starts thinking ‘if I did this, it will affect me negatively’, like maybe the person who I love or I want to get married to will no longer agree [to marry me]. So, maybe one day she will find a man who is appropriate and compatible in every way but this issue [being not virgin] might be the main cause for them not to be together. This is the problem... like men’s mentality is what scares them [women]” (Moneer, M, 25, Muslim-Shiites).

Moreover, when asked about the reasons behind men’s preference of marrying a virgin, my participants claimed that it is all about proving they are ‘real men’. ‘Real men’ was further explained as men proving their manhood and demonstrating their masculinities as being strong and potent. This is on the one hand. On the other hand, it was also perceived as a form of ‘selfishness’, ‘possessiveness’ and wanting to own or have control over women. This not only reflects the power of men over women but also reflects how women are ‘objectified’, reduced to the state of their hymen and treated and perceived as a man’s property. As one of my interviewees laughed and stated sarcastically:

“Most men won’t accept it! Why? Because in their heads they think that ‘someone else, some other man- other than me- had opened [sic] her! [i.e. had the first vaginal penetration with her]. No man will accept it for himself. Like I’m talking about the majority of Lebanese men, no matter how cool and open-minded they pretend to be, and I’m not saying that there is no exception. No there are exceptions but they are minority. Once you go deep down inside them, you’ll be shocked! Their ego and manhood does not allow them to take it! This is like messing with their manhood and dignity [she laughs sarcastically]” (Malak, F, 23, Muslim-Sunni).

“Most men will not accept it because they feel that this is their right! That is: ‘it is my right that I take this responsibility [first penetration] with my beloved one [habeebti] who will be my wife, not someone else’... here, I [as a man] will feel my strength/potency...” (Dalia, F, 23, Muslim-Shiites)

“They [his friends] have this expression which they use a lot: ‘yiiii maftouha’ [i.e. Ohhh! She’s opened] – I’m sorry to use this expression- but there are a lot of men who do not accept a woman who have previous relationships [sexual]. This mentality is partially derived from religious beliefs and partially because we are ‘eastern’ patriarchal men. (Tamer, M, 21, Agnostic[Muslim-Shiites]).
Moreover, the risk of being unmarriageable had also driven some young women to accept a relationship that might no longer be suitable for them, specifically if they had sexual intercourse with their partner. In other words, premarital sex restricted women’s freedom to break out of the relationship.

“A friend of mine and I, got engaged almost within the same period of time. She had a sexual relationship with her fiancée and I did not. After a while - I was still a teenager- after I entered university, I realised that this is not the one, so we broke up. When we broke up, my friend cried! I was not crying; I was happy I took this decision. I sensed that she was crying for herself, not for me. I felt that she wanted to be in my place- ‘I want to break up as you did’ she said. But now she’s married and had a baby, but you can see that she is unhappy. She was not able to break out of the relationship because she had had sex … it ties you because we are in a society which does not accept it.” (Lobna, F, 23, Muslim-Sunni).

These findings suggest that women who remain virgins are actually taking active control over some aspects of their lives and in a better situation to make informed decisions about who they will eventually marry.

In addition to losing their virginity and then running the risk of becoming unmarriageable, some female participants talked about their fear of getting emotionally and physically attached to the man whom they had had sex with. In that case, they would stand firm to their partner even if he was not the right spouse for them, and subsequently they might be subjected to his terms and conditions and sometimes to his bad treatment and disrespect.

“The idea that they are having sexual relationship will make her [the woman] attached to him [the man] in a way that, in her unconscious, she will not be able to be away from him. She cannot leave him even if he has demerits… like she would abdicate few issues… like ok he’s stingy- fine, whatever… but there will be plenty of ‘whatever’…. And because of the issues the girl[sic] knows she will face before marriage [virginity issue, reputation, hymenoplasty] if the person [groom] was not the person whom she had sexual relationship with, that’s why she will hold on to the person she has sexual relationship with even if she doesn’t want him as her spouse… but she will prefer marrying him rather than going through all the fray if she wanted to marry someone else” (Dalia, F, 23, Muslim-Shiites).
Young men also discussed the social risk of being pushed into a forced marriage, if they had had sex with young women, especially if she got pregnant. If found out, the parents would want to cover up their children’s “sin” or “transgression” by forcing the young man to marry the young woman. Male interviewees gave examples about friends or people they knew who were forced into marriages they never wanted and had a miserable life or got divorced later.

The above sections demonstrated three main social risks, which were negatively attributed to engaging in premarital sex. Nevertheless, both young men and women also addressed positive aspects for engaging in premarital sex despite the fears and the social risks which were specifically significant among females. Most of the positive aspects revolved around exploring each other’s bodies, getting to know each other better, strengthening emotional bonds, exploring physical compatibility, enjoying sexual pleasure and gaining sexual experience, avoiding sexual disappointment and sometimes divorce later when it comes to marriage, knowing one’s own self – what they love or enjoy and what they don’t.

7.4 Summary and conclusive remarks

In this chapter I have shown, as per my findings, that there are three main social risks which my participants associated with engaging in premarital sex as such: moral risk, shared risk, and future risk. Interviewees were not passive in how they negotiated these risk and engaged with the narratives about risk. Although most participants articulated dominant discourses, such as this quote:

“some [women] care because she [a woman] will think that her reputation will not be good; her parents/family will no longer love her; no groom will propose to her because she is not –between brackets- ‘decent/honourable/clean’ or dunno what you want to name it” (Tamer, M, 21, Atheist [Muslim-Shiites]).

I found that social risks sometimes outweighed health risks, specifically among young women. This was concurrent with Mahdavi’s (2009) study where Iranian women were
mostly concerned with the *social risks* associated with their, socially perceived, unacceptable and punishable behaviour, as explained in Chapter 3. This could be either related to lack of knowledge about the health risks in the absence of sex education programs in the vast majority of Lebanese schools on one hand; and, on the other hand, it could be linked to the high social pressures and risks women encounter where they feel that they are constantly under inspection.

Protecting the individual’s and family’s respectable reputation and social image came out as the major social risks among my participants. There was an inseparable relation between women’s purity, morality and a good social image with that of her family. A woman’s moral reputation and consequently her value as a human being was sometimes narrowed down to her virginity regardless of her personal and intellectual achievements. Yet, those who demonstrated more liberal views were more likely to value a woman’s achievements and stand by her side. Whereas those who demonstrated traditional views always accused the woman of transgressing moral boundaries and questioned her reputation.

Strong social cohesion and emotional bond between the majority of the participants and their family members reinforced the normative behaviours. Yet, the data showed that some parents also engaged in creating unspoken silences about sexual experiences of their children to allow for some to explore their sexuality as long as they were not found out by the community. This was specifically evident when some female participants talked about their parents’ worries about people’s gossip rather than their worries about whether their daughter(s) were sexually active or not.

Being unmarriageable, on the other hand, was also one of the social risks taken seriously by young women considering the importance of marriage and establishing a family in Lebanese society. Spinsterhood in general is not only discouraged and disfavoured by Lebanese society, but it often also raises questions and assumptions about the reasons behind its occurrence. In some cases, these assumptions may include harmful reputation-related rumours, specifically for women, which may lead to even more complex situations.
To conclude, engaging in premarital sex is perceived to be morally wrong or ‘sinful’ in Lebanese society in general; therefore, it is risky. It is risky because it may bring about to a number of social risks, specifically for young women. This chapter revealed that social risks are socially constructed, highly gendered, and greatly influenced by the socio-cultural context. On the contrary, sexual health risks are universal - in the sense that they can affect anyone, anywhere in the world if the person in question were not taking the appropriate precautions to have safe sex. Therefore, sexual health risks are ‘real’ risks. Whereas the social risks of engaging in premarital sex in the Lebanese context are socially defined and constructed. They are unpredictable and changeable. The constructed social risks were closely associated with social and moral boundaries. The degree to which these social risks are serious or dangerous depends on the rigidity and fluidity of the associated social and moral boundaries that the individual is embedded in. That is, they only exist in the eye of the beholder. What is perceived as socially risky by some might not be perceived as so by others. Moreover, the degree of threat and danger these social risks pose to the individual varies by gender, religiosity and most importantly by the social background and family. If the individual is surrounded by a family and community who exhibit relaxed social and moral control, then the severity of the social risks becomes less significant.
CHAPTER 8
Managing social risks: strategies and negotiations

Chapters 6 and 7 revealed that almost all interviewees, regardless of their sex, religion, and sexual activity, were fully aware of the nature of Lebanese social diversity, societal ‘double standards’, gender bias and inequality, as well as the social risks they might encounter for transgressing the social and moral boundaries. Having looked at the social risks my participants associated with engaging in premarital sex in the previous chapter, the findings confirmed that these risks can sometimes be harmful and detrimental, especially for young women. Nonetheless, my interviewees also showed a high level of agency in managing their sexuality. They shared with me some of the strategies they employed to enjoy sexual intimacy while avoiding or minimising the social risks associated with it.

In this chapter I start by explaining what was counted as sex by my participants, before highlighting how women performed seduction and purity to attract men. Then I focus on the sociologically interesting strategies my participants utilised to manage and reduce these social risks in the following order: 1) Negotiating non-vaginal-penetrative sex and intimacy; 2) Hymen reconstruction; 3) Performing purity and chastity; 4) Negotiating temporary religious marriages. I also highlight four different types of social and moral compliance as follows: Performed compliance; partial compliance; absolute compliance; and non-compliance. Finally, I talk about trust as a vital component in the relationship between the sex before moving on to the summary and conclusion section.

8.1 What counted as sex?

As mentioned throughout this thesis, evidence of a woman’s virginity is assured through the preservation of the intact hymen, even though not all virgins bleed upon first penetration. What counted as ‘sex’, was often constructed in relation to vaginal penetration. Only a couple of participants counted other forms of non-vaginal-penetrative sexual
encounters as ‘sex’. This was evident when these two participants stated that premarital sex does not have to be a “complete relation” [meaning full intercourse or vaginal-penetrative sex]. To them, premarital sex could also be outer-course without vaginal penetration, and it still carried a moral risk [losing reputation] for women in more conservative contexts. Participants engaged with a contested grey area around what counted as sex and real or performed virginities.

8.2 Dating: performing seduction and purity vs. manliness and potency

Both young men and women declared that young Lebanese in general place high emphasis on their looks, physical appearance, and manifestations. Although women seemed to pay much more attention to their looks, an increased attention to men’s physical appearance was also evident throughout the interviews.

“Some guys shock me! Whenever we want to go out, they spend 2-3 hours in front of the mirror tiding themselves, styling their hair, trying on different pants... it takes them ages to get ready and I look at my friend in a shock! I mean what difference does it make if you were wearing any of these trousers!” (Ghassan, M, 23, Agnostic [Druze]).

“Nowadays, young Lebanese care so much about their physical appearance and looks... they look at themselves in the mirror for a long time before they go outside the house, because as they are stepping out, they are thinking of how other people would perceive them or how they would like to be perceived by others” (Ghina, F, 21, Muslim-Shiites).

“We only care of how to impress others regardless whether we are reflecting our inner-selves and real personalities. In that aspect we are so shallow” (Malak, F, 23, Muslim-Sunni).

Findings from the above accounts suggest that young Lebanese are continuously choosing how they want to “display” themselves, in Goffman’s (1990) terms, in front of different audiences (people in the society). Ghina illustrated it perfectly by indicating that young people are consciously aware and deciding on how they want to portray themselves to others and how they want to be perceived by others.
My findings revealed that this high emphasis on physical appearance, and the way young people portrayed themselves in public (that is, their fashion style, the way they dress and move, their haircuts, and the shapes and forms of their bodies), aimed mainly to attract the other sex, or a desired partner. The majority of my participants stated that, a desired partner for young women often meant attracting a potential spouse. This is not surprising considering the importance of marriage in the Lebanese society (Dierkson, 2008), as well as young women’s desire to be in long-term committed relationship as opposed to casual one. Therefore, being beautiful – mostly, as per the new standards of beauty, promoted in the media (skinny, straightened hair, makeup, large breasts, big lips and so on)- and caring about the physical appearance does not necessarily indicate that women want to have sex. Young women differentiated between attracting or seducing men into a serious relationship, which would eventually lead to marriage and commitment, and seducing men merely for sex. The latter, was perceived by the majority of my female participants as “unacceptable”. This goes in line with the newly constructed moral values and boundaries which I highlighted in the previous chapter.

For young women, attracting a Lebanese future husband necessitated that they take care of their physical appearance and beauty, considering that Lebanese men desire beautiful and attractive women. At the same time, young women were fully aware that men desire a “virgin” woman. Therefore, along with performing seduction, young women also maintain or perform virginity and sexual purity. Most of my participants believed that Lebanese women in general either comply or perform compliance to these dual societal scripts: being sexy but not having sex. Ghassan provided a good example on how the society expects women to use their physical beauty to attract a “future husband”:

“The society is very judgemental about so many issues that has no meaning [no value], and they [the society] care a lot about appearances... I do not want to stereotype but you feel that their view to life merely revolves around the physical appearance... I know from my grandma. For example, when a girl in her 20’s or 30’s comes for a visit, my grandma tells me ‘Isn’t she going to get thinner [lose weight] to get herself a groom [husband]?’ or something like ‘the girl is beautiful [holwa], but she needs to look after herself’ [meaning that she needs to take care of her physical appearance]” (Ghassan, M, 23, Agnostic[Druze]).
Whilst scholars who addressed this dichotomy in societal expectations perceived it as contradictory (Khalaf, 2006; Seidman, 2012; Salamandra, 2006), my findings suggested that these dual societal expectations are not always paradoxical. These two roles of being “physically attractive” yet “virgin”, might actually complement and serve each other. Women care for their physical appearance to attract men and eventually get married to one. Yet, if a woman was not virgin she would risk becoming unmarriageable as I explained earlier.

The data suggested that, by performing sexiness and seduction along with the performance of virginity, young women become more desired by a large number of men, as indicated by Aya:

“Don’t you see them how they [women] paint themselves from top to toe! The way they dress! Like, for some of them, it’s better if they are undressed [meaning that their clothes are too revealing as if they are not wearing any].” When I asked her why? She said: “to attract men. To attract the richest man, the coolest in their views of course. Because I see them shallow and ridiculous. But some women all what they care for is marrying a rich, and this is the most important, and cool man who takes her out and secures her a wealthy life” (Aya, F, 24, Muslim-Shiites).

I argue that these performances place women in a powerful position and enable them to actively negotiate and take control over their intimate relationships. When being wanted and desired by more than one man, women gain the power of riddling and choosing the man they desire instead of being riddled and chosen by men. Thereafter, the way women manage their intimate relationships and sexual boundaries varies from one woman to another as I elaborate later in this chapter.

Nevertheless, women’s dual performances to attract men, indicated that women are sending clear signals to men that they are both ‘sexually desired’ and ‘chaste’- responding to what men are looking for, and triggering their masculinities. For instance, my participants declared that women tend to seduce men, but, at the same time, play very hard to reach. Lebanese women seemed to be aware that men do not like the easy catch woman.
“There are lots of women who habitually like to make it very difficult for men to get to them, you know.. like [they think] does he deserve to be with me? Or I want to make him suffer, I will do so and so.. This is their way of thinking” (Moneer, M, 25, Muslim-Shiites)

Other accounts revealed that young men also performed their constructed masculinities as being potent and able to seduce and reach the woman they desired. Going out publicly with an attractive woman, desired by men, was perceived as a masculine pride, as Nadeem, sarcastically phrased it:

“we men like to show others how good we are in attracting women. The more the woman is desired [by other men], by classmates let’s say, the more she becomes a source of pride to the man who dates her. We like to show off and brag about it... as if we are saying we are real men, we are potent enough.. look whom I’m going out with!! (Nadeem, M, 25, Christian-Maronite)

My findings indicated that Lebanese women acquired a very good understanding of what Lebanese society, and men, required from them. They learned to act and perform according to the set moral and social boundaries. These gendered performances seemed to be culturally structured and very well maintained.

Now, being in an intimate relationship meant that young people had to manage their sexual lives while protecting themselves and their families from various social risks. I now move to explain some of the strategies employed by young people, especially women, to manage social risks associated with their sexual behaviour.

8.3 Negotiating non-vaginal-penetrative sex and intimacy

One of the social myths around proving that a woman’s hymen is intact is “bleeding at the first intercourse”. Although, in modern Lebanon, traditions such as showing the family a “stained blood sheet” on the first day of marriage do not exist, my findings revealed that bleeding at the first sexual intercourse remains vital for the majority of Lebanese men as a proof of the bride’s virginity, purity and chastity. Both men and women in my sample
engaged with these ideas to construct their understandings of what kind of sexual activities counted as sex.

Some young women stated that women who do not bleed at the first sexual intercourse within marriage might be asked to undergo a virginity test by a gynaecologist to confirm their biological virginity (that is, presence of the intact hymen). If the woman was a virgin, yet did not bleed, it is the gynaecologist’s role to explain that to the couple, and specifically to convince the man of the reasons why the bleeding did not happen. Otherwise, the woman could well be in serious trouble. In cases where the woman was not a virgin, some gynaecologists would report false virginity to save her from the social risks, which sometimes might threaten her life.

“My cousin for example, she told me that she didn’t bleed when they [she and her husband] had sex. Her husband told her that he trusted her, but that he was worried - I’m telling you this, but my cousin was barely 17 years old at that time, she didn’t know anything- he told her it is better to see a doctor to ensure that there wasn’t any problem. Yeah and the doctor told them that she was virgin” (Aya, F, 24, Muslim-Shiites).

“I hear stories, I do not know anyone in person, but I hear stories from my friends at the university about how so and so [in Arabic: folana] escaped or was lucky [in Arabic: zamatet] because the doctor reported that she was a virgin but in reality she was not... I don’t know but I feel that most doctors are understanding, like especially if the girl explains the situation to them!” (Malak, F, 23, Muslim-Sunni).

Therefore, when it comes to engaging in sexual relationships before marriage, one of the very common approaches, which came out of many of the interviews, was negotiating having non-vaginal-penetrative sex with the sex partner to preserve virginity. Couples in a relationship, where either one or both did not wish to have vaginal-penetrative sex, negotiated having some sort of physical intimacy which did not result in ‘breaking’ [sic] the intact hymen of the woman. Consequently, different forms of non-vaginal-penetrative sex were considered ‘safe’ alternatives to vaginal intercourse allowing the couple to enjoy feelings of sexual pleasure and intimacy while preserving the hymen. Examples of these sexual practices, as revealed by my participants, included sexual outer-course (some called
‘brushing’), oral and/or anal sex, making out, soft touching and foreplay, as well as mutual masturbation.

“... but we did ‘min barra la barra’ [meaning ‘sexual outer-course’]. At the beginning she didn’t want to. She was scared. But after some time, you know, something must happen [he giggles] ... So, gradually [in Arabic: shwai shwai] I convinced her that nothing would happen against her will and I would not do anything to hurt her like I would not have a complete relationship [sic], penetration, with her... and I understood why she didn’t want that. But after we talked and so on, she opened up a bit and things started to improve...of course we never had full intercourse” (Rida, M, 20, Muslim Sunni).

“I have lots of friends who put themselves in this category of ‘not having a complete relationship’. So they do what is called ‘making out’ [sic], that is, they do everything but from the outside without intercourse... most of them are females, my friends, they have sex without intercourse, but in my view this is not sex!” (Dareen, F, 22, Muslim-Shiites).

“Most of the people I know - girls- they go from kissing and cuddling and making out etc... and oral sex etc. then they reach this point where they go like no no, this is ‘sharaf’ [meaning: ‘honour’- he said it sarcastically]” (Zaher, M, 22, Muslim-Sunni).

As such, men and women would enjoy different forms of sex and sexual pleasures while keeping women protected against any proof or evidence holding them guilty and subjecting them to social risks and dangers. For example, to protect herself from social risks, that is, protecting the reputation of herself and her family, as well as continuing to be marriageable, Katie admitted having a non-penetrative sexual relationship with her boyfriend.

“After a certain period of time, definitely there should be a sexual relationship before marriage, but I would say not completely... I mean not having complete penetration... it [sex] will sure happen because the man is in need and the woman in is need [sexual needs]... But because you have to always think that here in Lebanon, the guy [man] wants to do everything but at the end of the day he wants a girl who has not done anything in her life!... I mean you hear a lot about two who have been together for a long time, a [sexual] relation happened between them so he dumped her later. So now what does the girl have to do?!.. And here we still have this taboo that ‘Oh this girl had a [sexual] relationship; and Oh she will undergo a surgery [hymen reconstruction] ... but a [sexual] relationship should happen. I, for example, I’ve been with my boyfriend for a long time, so for sure we
have a [sexual] relationship, but it is incomplete, because you never know what might happen. I mean after seven years you are no longer only holding hands, of course not! but also not in public – like what happens here at the university. (Katie, F, 25, Christian-Maronite).

Besides, I was surprised to hear from some sexually active male participants that they themselves refrain from ‘penetrating a virgin’ relating that to their feelings of ‘guilt’, ‘responsibility’, and sometimes ‘reputation’. Instead they limited their sexual behaviour to non-penetrative sex when the female partner was a virgin. These young men demonstrated relatively less liberal or confusing attitudes towards premarital sex. Their fears of exposing the woman they loved or cared about to social risks and subsequently causing her social harm was one of their major concerns.

“I never did it [penetrated a virgin] and I will never do it. I cannot! Like, I do not want to be the one who has done this to her... Maybe this will ruin her future, and I will be behind it... or maybe she will get pregnant or someone might know. I do not want to be the one who caused her this harm” (Rida, M, 20, Muslim-Sunni).

“...sometimes I would be with someone, if she was a virgin, it is impossible for me to do this thing- to take away her virginity- like if I was not sure that she was definitely the one I want, and the one I want to marry, never! So that I don’t reach a stage where one day the girl would say bad things about me or something, like to say ‘this is the one who ruined my life, or ‘he messed up my life’ or something like that, you know” (Moneer, M, 25, Muslim Shiites).

This finding was also confirmed by other sexually active male participants, who demonstrated liberal attitudes towards premarital sex, yet also provided examples of their male friends. Zaher (M, 22, Muslim-Sunni), for example, claimed that “95%” of the male friends he knew do not have “full intercourse” - in the form of vaginal penetrative sex - with the woman they were with in a long term relationship. His friends declared having a “red line” within their sexual relationships, as stated by Zaher. They perceived the woman they loved as different to the woman they ‘slept with’; accordingly, they had to preserve and protect the one they loved. Zaher continued that even his male friends who were not in a long term relationship do not engage in vaginal penetrative sex if the girl [sic] was a “virgin”. He told me the story of how one of his friends met a woman in a pub and he went
afterwards with her to his place to spend the rest of the evening. When Zaher’s friend knew the girl was still a “virgin”, he refrained from having sexual intercourse with her. Therefore, my findings indicate that social risks were not only felt and negotiated by women, but also by men who sought to minimise social risk for their female partners.

“What I discovered is that the idea is not only about ‘I love her, I want to protect her’, it has to do with the responsibility around it. He [his friend] feels that he has the responsibility not to harm the girl [sic]” (Zaher, M, 22, Muslim-Sunni).

My female participants, on the other hand, presented different views on this issue. With the exception of a few, most female participants did not perceive men’s abstinence from having sex with a virgin as an act of ‘protection’, as men stated. On the contrary, young women linked it to ‘selfishness’, ‘control’, ‘desire of being the first man in the woman’s life’ and ‘possession’. All of which are traits of conventional and hegemonic masculinity and potency.

“From my previous experiences with men, most of them were like: ‘you’re a virgin?! Oh ok, if a virgin, we can continue in our relationship; if not a virgin- even if they fell in love with me and found me so cute and lovely and the perfect match- BUT! the idea of ‘being the first man in a woman’s life’ comforts them a lot! This makes me think what if I loved someone so much and he was so perfect and I wanted him badly, at a time where he ‘stops at this point’! [that is, at being non-virgin]” (May, F, 22, Muslim Shiites).

“... Other than the society and so on, I also see it as selfishness. Like the man wants her to be all his... his own...and no one should share him ‘his woman’ [sic]” (Sireen, F, 20, Christian-orthodox).

“This concept of being ‘virgin’ or ‘not virgin’ is a real issue for a lot of men even the educated and liberal ones... because they feel it is their right! [A man feels] it is my right - with my beloved one who will be my wife- to be ‘responsible’ about this issue [breaking up the intact hymen], not someone else!... A big part of it is that this is something that ‘I do’, it is not something that just comes to me! Here I as a man, I feel my potency, my power. Here it becomes narcissistic maybe.” (Dalia, F, 23, Muslim-Shiites).
Participants stated that men, who refrain from having penetrative intercourse with virgins, limit their sexual intimacies to non-virgins, namely, liberal, sexually active women, divorced women, and, in rare cases, sex workers. These were some of the mentioned alternatives among men.

The findings from the above section suggested that some young Lebanese assigned new bodily boundaries in response to social and moral boundaries as a way to manage social risks. In other words, the social and moral emphasis placed on female virginity in the form of preserving an intact hymen, was responded to by staying away from the “vaginal opening” of the female body, while allowing other forms of bodily contact – which sometimes included penetrating other orifices of the body. They allowed themselves to creep to the edge of certain bodily boundaries, but stopped at the riskiest and most dangerous one. This again coincides with Douglas’s interpretation of the interconnection between social boundaries and bodily boundaries. It also helps to validate the idea that masculinity is manifested in different forms. As much as conventional masculinity is associated with sexual potency and virility, it also has a strong association with the provision of protection and security of those perceived as ‘weaker’ and innocent. In the case of my research, those perceived as ‘weaker’ are girlfriends, female partners or fiancées. I argue that this reinforces the division between ‘good women’ who can become wives, and ‘bad women’ who are sexually active and do not need protection, yet serve as a lesson to those women who step outside of the norms.

Attitudes of young men and women towards non-vaginal-penetrative sex varied between those who supported or justified it, and those who criticised it. Participants who supported it believed that physical and sexual intimacy was necessary for any ‘serious’[sic] or long term relationship, as explained in the previous chapter. Besides, they perceived non-vaginal-penetrative sex as an acceptable strategy to minimise the social risks (besides some health risks such as unintended pregnancy) associated with premarital sex.

“I'm not against it because there are certain circumstances that justify it... maybe this young man accounts for the girl’s circumstances, like ‘I cannot do it [vaginal
penetration] due to religious circumstances or if you want due to circumstances that have to do with my family, my parents, my social milieu, my upbringing, and my future. The fear of tomorrow... like something might happen and our relationship might end tomorrow [in the future]. For all these circumstances... But there’s something in life, something very important, there’s pleasure and physical feeling... so I don’t stand against it” (Nisreen, F, 26, Druze).

“Personally, I find the whole virginity concept ridiculous and backward [in Arabic: Motakhallef] and it degrades the value of a woman. However, I understand why people here [in Lebanon] do it. To some this might be a way out, in the sense that they are having some physical intimacy yet the woman remains a virgin. When she wants to get married later, she will not face problems if the one she’s getting married to is eastern [meaning has an eastern/oriental patriarchal mentality]” (Nadeem, M, 25, Christian- Maronite).

Although non-vaginal-penetrative sex was not perceived to be completely risk-free by some women, they perceived it as a strategy to negotiate and manage risk. Female participants, who continued to be concerned with some of the social risks, despite engaging in non-vaginal-penetrative sex, were mainly worried about trust-related issues. For instance, some women talked about their fear of being exposed by their partners later if they broke up. They feared that the former partner would either tell his friends about their intimate relationship or threaten them by publishing nude and intimate photos or chats. Some also worried about being caught making out. Yet, to these young women, keeping their virginity was their greatest concern. Other issues could be handled by taking some precautions, like avoiding intimate or nude photos being taken. Another important precaution was keeping the relationship status low profile by avoiding making out publicly (for example, in a car, restaurant or university campus), and knowing the partner, in the sense of ensuring that he would be a trustworthy partner.

On the other hand, women who criticised non-vaginal-penetrative sex were either too conservative or too liberal in their views towards premarital sex. Both, liberal and conservative women perceived non-vaginal-penetrative sex as a form of deceiving one’s self before deceiving the partner. They did not see any difference between sexual intercourse, oral or anal sex and vaginal sex. They believed it was all the same. Some women
even considered it degrad ing for them to be obliged to preserve a tiny piece of flesh and blood (hymen), which they considered to have no value.

“I really do not understand how these women, who do everything except penetration, continue to consider themselves virgins. No you are not a virgin. Virginity goes beyond the hymen... But she convinces herself that she is [a virgin] and she gets married on this basis. It’s like someone who is lying to one’s own self” (Nay, F, 19, Christian Maronite).

“as if she [a woman engaged in non-vaginal-penetrative sex] is telling you ‘I got out of this relationship a virgin’... but it is either do a complete relationship or do not do it at all... In both cases [penetrative and non-penetrative] she is getting [sexual] pleasure out of it, the only difference is the consequences. She might say ‘no one will talk about me, and no one has anything to do with me because I’m still a virgin just like any other one who had never been kissed on her mouth/lips except by her mom’ [in Arabic: mesh beyes temma ella emma] ... I find it cheap” (Lina, F, 21, Druze).

Similarly, young men who opposed this sexual approach either disagreed with it as a concept or were more worried about issues of trust and deception.

“To me, she is not a virgin. Sex is not only about the vagina. The whole idea [of virginity] is not restricted to penetration [that is, vaginal penetration]. It is not only about whether she is ‘biologically virgin’[sic]. It is about the whole idea of physical intimacy” (Yamen, M, 21, Christian-Orthodox).

“... ... To me if a woman had all this [kissing, cuddling, making out, and oral sex] but she didn’t have intercourse, to me it’s the same. I don’t respect those who choose this grey area [meaning they do everything except vaginal penetration]. The dual personality is amazing! I know lots of women who pretend that they don’t even have a boyfriend in front of their parents/family. To me the girl who takes the last step [vaginal penetration] is more honest than the girl who doesn’t do it. Because the girl who doesn’t do penetration only to preserve ‘honour’ is a liar. She is trying to say that I didn’t do anything [any sexual / physical relationship] but this is a lie, because she did. What’s the difference? It’s crazy. Because it’s the same intimacy” (Zaher, M, 22, Muslim-Sunni).

In Zaher’s view, there is no difference between vaginal intercourse and other forms of non-vaginal penetrative sex. He prefers honesty over performance of chastity and/or virginity.
He did not seem to sympathise with the social pressures which might drive women to avoid sexual intercourse.

### 8.4 Hymen reconstruction

Not all young women conformed to the social rules and norms and preserved their virginity. Some women still engaged in premarital sexual intercourse despite the anticipated social risks, which they were fully aware of. Since women, more than men, carried the utmost burden of the social risks, they had to be armed with a shield or a plan protecting them against such risks. Young women, who disclosed having sexual intercourse, declared having already anticipated possible consequences if their sexual activity was revealed. Accordingly, they shared with me their fears and worries about the social risks (and sometimes health risks), which I presented in the previous chapter (7). But the majority of those sexually active did not surrender to these fears and had strategies in place to allow them to perform virginity, if the need arose. One of the key props in this performance and dealing with such risks was turning to medical help. *Hymen reconstruction*, which is also known as *hymen restoration* or *hymenoplasty*, was one of the strategies female participants suggested to avoid social risks and minimise any associated harm.

“At a certain point I thought about doing it [hymenoplasty], but I don’t think I can adapt to a life which does not involve sex. So, why would I do it?... I consider it [the hymen] very ridiculous, and as long as I voluntarily let it go, why would I want it back again now! It’s been a long time now, I got used to a life that involves sex and sexual happiness, so it is really wrong to do the surgery. The only reason which would make me reconsider doing it is a huge pressure from my parents, that’s it! Otherwise, at the moment I won’t do it.” (*Dareen F, 22, Atheist [Muslim, Shiites]*).

My participant’s views toward hymen reconstruction differed between support and opposition. Similar to vaginal-penetrative sex alternatives, female participants supporting
hymen reconstruction considered it a good solution for women to get married and sometimes lifesaving.

“You might be surprised, but I find it [hymen reconstruction] lifesaving for some girls[sic]... So yeah, why not... Like ok, it is not good in a way that she would be lying to the one who will be her husband, but this is what he asked for in a way [she laughs]. I mean think about it, if men accept women with sexual experiences the way they do, she wouldn’t have to lie about it and hide it. But they make a drama out of it” (Malak, F, 23, Muslim-Sunni).

“I would never do it. But certain communities are narrow to the extent that a woman might be forced to do anything just to save her life, really. So I do not judge the woman herself as much as I judge/accuse the values which forced her to do it... in principle I’m against it, but I wouldn’t say that she is a liar and malicious... no! I like to understand her circumstances” (Nay, F, 19, Christian-Maronite).

Women opposing hymen reconstruction surgery considered it deceptive and a fake performance which either downplayed women’s sexual choices and control over their bodies, or devalued the worth of real virgins. Some interviewees for example argued that they preferred to spend their life with a man who accepted them as they are, acknowledged women as equals and recognised their right to having premarital sexual relationships.

“It’s like a forgery... as if you went into an exam, you cheated, and you took 10/10 [full grade] ... But you know that you cheated! It’s the same, deceived the man by your virginity, but you are not virgin. I’m surely against it” (Lobna, F, 23, Muslim Sunni).

“To me it [hymen reconstruction] is social appeasing. Why have you made this step to engage in a physical relationship if you are not convinced about it?!... to me it is like someone who boldly wrote with ink, then started to search for an eraser to erase the ink and the ink is not being erased. And this will be discovered and divulged” (Nisreen, F, 26, Druze).

“...to me it’s ridiculous because you are lying to your life partner. If you are starting your life with a lie, then what have you left for the rest of it! (May, F, 22, Muslim Shiites).
The majority of men did not support hymen reconstruction either. They also considered it as a form of deception. Yet, some declared that they would understand the social pressures, which might force women to pursue hymen reconstruction surgery.

“I think it is very stupid, and it is not worth it. But I do understand that some girls [sic] feel obliged to do it due to social considerations... so sometimes one is forced to conform to the social regulations if they want... I mean if my sister asked me, I would advise her ‘No’. But in the end, I don’t know, sometimes there are certain circumstances obliging her to do it. But at the same time, I won’t dislike her for doing hymen reconstruction, I will understand” (Tamer, M, 21, Atheist [Muslim-Shiites]).

“Why would she do it? Like if she did something [premarital sex] she should not feel shameful about it. I’m against hymen reconstruction because she will be lying to the person she’s getting married to” (Yamen, M, 21, Christian - Orthodox).

“I disgrace the woman who does this surgery... if she is my wife I would divorce her immediately...like unless she had a very good reason like if someone raped her or something or if she had like an accident or something. But otherwise, I mean I would not be able to trust her anymore. How can you be with someone in the same house and supposedly the closest to you if you don’t trust her!” (Rida, M, 20, Muslim - Sunni).

“Sometimes the woman is obliged to, when the man with her doesn’t accept [her having previous relations] and if she loves him, she would have to do it... But for me, I prefer her to be honest with me in everything, because then I would be assured that this woman has good intentions and is honest and genuine even in her feelings which is the most important thing...if she was not honest from the beginning, then she would be hiding lots of other things you know! (Moneer, M, 25, Muslim-Shiites).

8.5 Performing purity and chastity

An inseparable aspect of the identified strategies of social risks management was the performance of purity and chastity as per my findings. Reconstructing the hymen in itself would retrieve a biologically fake virginity. However, the findings suggested that a woman’s sexual performance with her future husband might expose her sexual experience. The same applies to those who had experienced non-vaginal alternative sexual intimacies. Participants declared that, if an existing relationship did not end in marriage, women kept
wary and performed sexual purity, chastity and bashfulness in any new relationship and specifically with their potential or future husband. Women’s performance of chastity remained indispensable in hiding any previous sexual experience.

“Once the young woman reaches the age of marriage and faces the idea of marriage, she will go through all these issues of ‘being virgin or not virgin’, ‘what should I do now’, ‘should I tell my husband that I’m not a virgin’, ‘should I undergo the surgery? And if I did the surgery is there a way he would know?... so all these thoughts come to her mind, as well as the idea of ‘what if he discovered from my behaviour that I had a premarital sexual relationship?’- and I’m convinced that this exposes her unless she was a brilliant actor, then go for it” (Dalia, F, 23, Muslim-Shiites).

“... that’s why [due to fears] women take caution and act as angels with anyone who speaks to them about this issue regardless of whether they are sexually experienced or not. They know that this issue [women’s sexual permissiveness] won’t possibly be accepted. Like sometimes, there are girls whom I myself slept with, but to someone else they say that ‘this is the first time they kiss’, or ‘I never kissed anyone in my life’!!!” (Majd, M, 22, Agnostic [Muslim-Shiites]).

Moreover, a few participants also mentioned other ways women might use to justify being ‘not a virgin’ to get around the social risks of premarital sex. These included performing being a victim of rape or sexual assault or claiming to have lost their virginity in some sort of an accident. If the woman was convincing, the man would not only sympathise with and forgive her, but some men would also feel an additional responsibility to protect her. For a man to take on this ‘protective’ role with a ‘weak’ woman appeared to add value to his manhood. For example, Lobna (F, 23, Muslim-Sunni), who was working as a social worker besides conducting her studies, narrated how one of the women at the university convinced Lobna’s male partner that she had been raped. Being at the same university and knowing few things about that woman, Lobna was not convinced. She thought it was merely a tactic [sic] to get his attention, sympathy and protection.

“She was still his friend back then and was trying to get physically closer to X, my partner... she told him that she had been raped and so on... when he told me this, and it might be true that she was raped, I don’t know but I sensed that she had issues. I doubted her honesty... I know few things about her... To me, I understood this as a tactic hers to show him that ‘I’m the miserable woman... I was raped...
I’m the tortured woman...’ blablabla [sic]... I’m giving you a sample of woman who justifies for themselves their engagement in a sexual relationship... I won’t say more, because there might still be a probability that she was actually raped. But in my opinion, she was using it to vindicate herself and to fix her image in front of him” (Lobna F, 23, Muslim-Sunni).

This also has wider implications for real victims of rape if women are not first believed, when they claim they are sexually violated. Lobna stated that her job as a social worker taught her many things about women and exposed her to similar cases and much more. Accordingly, she was able to identify which of these claims were real or not. Lobna believed that performing ‘being a victim of rape’ would be influential, as this scenario places the man in a position of a “protector” or “saver”:

“... psychologically, the man likes to be the ‘protector’. He likes to feel that the woman is in between his ribs, you know... so the woman might take advantage of this, plays the role of a victim and asks for his protection... like ‘I’m seeking your protection... you are my protector and savour...’ and so on. The man in his turn feels this responsibility, and he likes this feeling of being the ‘protector’, so he protects her... And she would be deceiving him... this is one of the ways which I have seen [in the cases she worked with]” (Lobna, F, 23, Muslim-Sunni).

Lobna’s narratives did not necessarily indicate that men were passive or naïve, whereas women were deceptive. Whilst this might be true in a few cases, I argue that these narratives reflected how conventional conceptions of femininity and masculinity came into play and interacted with each other. It reflected a case where emphasised femininity played a role in complementing and assuring hegemonic masculinity. The performance of ‘weakness’ and ‘victimisation’ called for a perfect response of ‘protection’ and ‘magnanimity’. The two poles of conventionally performed femininity and masculinity needed each other. One could not exist without the other.

8.6 Temporary religious marriages (mutaa marriage)

In the previous chapter, I mentioned that sex outside marriage in general was considered a sin among all religious groups. However, some Muslims opted for what is known as
‘temporary marriages’. Temporary marriages are a religiously legitimate arrangement between ‘religious’ people where they could secretly engage in a sexual relationship outside of the traditional conception of open marriage and long-term commitment. There are different forms of temporary marriages practiced in some countries in the Middle East. These are *mutaa* marriage (pleasure marriage) – practiced only among Muslim Shiites in Lebanon, Iran, Iraq and Bahrain, ‘urfi’ marriage (customary union)\(^2\) in Egypt (İlkkaracan, 2008; El Feki, 2014; DeJong et al, 2005), and ‘misyar’ marriage (ambulant marriage)\(^3\) in Saudi Arabia (El Feki, 2014; Alessa 2010). The latter are practiced among Muslim-Sunnis. Since my study is concerned with the Lebanese context, and misyar marriage is not commonly practiced among Muslim-Sunnis in Lebanon, I only address *mutaa* marriages among Lebanese Shiites.

*Mutaa* marriage, as declared by Shiite participants is a temporary unregistered private arrangement between a man and a woman, with no witnesses. It is based on a verbal consensual agreement, where the woman articulates a statement and the man agrees. For accuracy purposes, I double checked this information and looked up the statement on the website of the religious authority Al-A’lamma Sayyed Muhammad Hussein Fadlullah, the only Lebanese Shiite marja’a [High authority religious reference]. As per the website, for a *mutaa* contract to be valid, a woman articulates the following statement: “I wedded myself to you with a dowry of (x) for duration of (x)” and the man replies: “I accepted”. This temporary marriage has a long list of terms and conditions some of which are different to the long term conventional marriage - for example, the validity of the *mutaa* contract ends by the end of pre-agreed duration of the marriage, not by divorce.

\(^2\) Urfi marriage is one of the temporary marriages which is practiced among Muslim-Sunnis. Unlike mutaa marriage, it requires two witnesses as well as making the ‘betrothal’ public knowledge in accordance to the Islamic requirement" (DeJong et al, 2005: 54).

\(^3\) Misyar marriage is “introduced about 10 years ago, although it existed in the Arabian Peninsula before Islam. This marriage is the same as a regular marriage with all of its conditions, except that the husband is not obliged to pay anything to spend the night or to offer any accommodation for the wife. One of its main conditions is that the marriage has to be announced but will only be known only among her immediate family” (Alessa, 2010: 143).
The findings suggested that, despite the religious legitimacy of mutaa, it is not widely socially accepted, even in Shiite communities themselves. This was specifically true if a young virgin woman had undertaken this type of marriage. However, it was more socially accepted if the woman was divorced, widowed (especially wives of martyrs), or a “spinster”. But then I raised a question regarding the age which would define a woman as a ‘spinster’. My participants did not have a clear answer to this question, but mostly stated it began after the age of forty.

Accordingly, mutaa was specifically a religiously permissible arrangement to engage in premarital sex without sin. My participants stated that mutaa was only practiced amongst religious Shiites in the Shiite communities in Lebanon. The majority of my participants declared they had either heard of, or knew of someone who had practiced mutaa – sometimes they had practiced it themselves. Only two of the participants I interviewed declared having a mutaa marriage at some point in their lives when they were younger. Both Majd (M) and Dareen (F) later became either atheist or agnostic. Others narrated stories and experiences of their friends and people they knew of their own age. They explained how men claim deep emotions and love to negotiate and convince specific women to have mutaa as a permissible way to engage in guilt-free and sin-free sex, viewed as ‘halal’.

“I did temporary marriage because I was still attached to the religious stuff. Though in my opinion, I did not really care much because before that, I did things without articulating these two words that you say ‘Zawajtoka nafsi’ [I wedded myself to you], but the person I was with felt comfortable doing it that way. So I used to do it for him to feel comfortable. For those who are religious, they feel that they are doing what they want but, at the same time, God is comfortable with them. So it’s like legal prostitution, but really it is not necessary. Like it is only two words, which you can articulate to any human being, they do not have to be written, you do not need witnesses, not even a signature, nor the presence of the parents/family, nothing” (Dareen, F, 22, Atheist [Muslim-Shiites]).

The majority of my participants, regardless of their religion, demonstrated opposing views towards temporary marriages and described it as a ‘halal or permissible prostitution’. Although temporary marriages are very different to prostitution, but the way my
participants described it was more of an ironical perception. Their sarcastic attitude towards *mutaa* seemed to be associated with their little understanding of *mutaa*’s terms and conditions which— to my surprise— were much more complex than I thought, and the way my participants described it to me. Only few participants seemed to be more understanding of the concept.

“I know about ‘mutaa’ [pleasure] marriage among Shiites and I find it to be something very progressive! Like, finally somebody admitted that the human being needs sex! I’m serious. Like is it acceptable for Christians to believe that they cannot have sex, except when they want to have children [for reproduction]!!! Like is it possible!!! However, at least amongst Shiites, they acknowledged that people have sexual needs even when they were not married! Yet what annoys me about it is that sex does not have to happen *bel halal* [that is, to be legitimate], but I can’t tell the Shiites this [she laughs]. Like I think if you want to sleep with someone you can do it without *mutaa*. But maybe they would be religiously in agreement with each other, I don’t know! But I do see it as something good. I don’t see it as a bad thing like often I hear people saying things like ‘they [Shiites] don’t care about anything but sex, and look at their *mutaa* marriage, they do it to have sex’... Yeah, but so what? What’s wrong with that. I find it to be something more progressive than the teachings of other religions which don’t adopt *mutaa* marriage and do not even recognise pleasure in the first place” (Nay, F, 19, Christian-Maronite).

**8.7 Social and moral compliance**

So far, this chapter suggested that participants differed in their ways of negotiating and managing the social risks associated with premarital sex. These differences seemed to be essentially related to each of the participant’s moral and religious convictions as well as their level of compliance with social and moral values and boundaries. My findings revealed that social and moral compliance came in different forms. I identified four types of compliance as follows: a) Performed compliance; b) Partial compliance; c) Absolute compliance; and d) Non-compliance.
8.7.1 *Performed compliance*

*Performed compliance* occurred when participants did not conform to society’s norms in general; however, they kept their attitudes and behaviours of non-compliance hidden and reserved. For instance, some female participants, who supported premarital sex regardless of gender, declared performing being submissive, *publicly*, and in line with social expectations. Participants declared acting out compliance in front of their family and friends as well, to protect themselves from any risky implications of non-compliance. They only declared their actual non-compliance *privately* to people they trusted in their close circles. Therefore, openly, they claimed to agree with society’s norms and moral values and subsequently performed their ‘compliance’.

However, their actions and views in private did not necessarily reflect their publicly claimed views and attitudes. From their perspective, it was not possible to change society as a whole. Therefore, to avoid social risks - which ranged from being judged and stigmatised for one’s opinion to being socially excluded and unmarriageable - some young women insisted that one either completely obeys the rules or be smart enough to get around them without making their disobedience apparent to society in general and getting themselves into ‘unnecessary’ troubles.

“*lots of things will change for sure* [in case her sexual activity status was exposed], *so you have to try as much as possible to keep it confined/limited to certain people who are distant* [i.e. strangers] *from family and parents. Here in Beirut, to be honest, I do not really care! But there* [in her village], *all the people know each other very well, and gossip spreads quickly, so I prefer them [her family] not to know anything. It is better for me and for them*” (*Nay, F, 19, Christian-Maronite*).

“... *a lot* [of women] *say that they are against this thing* [premarital sex] *but they would be doing it. So it is only to protect their image in the society or their image amongst their friends, you know, so they say we are against it and so on, but in reality they are [having sex]*” (*Lobna, F, 23, Muslim-Suni*).

However, I argue that *performed compliance*, can sometimes be critical and harmful to women. By performing compliance, young women might unintentionally collude, maintain
and reinforce the regeneration of an entire patriarchal social system which they themselves do not approve nor agree to. Examples of how they unconsciously supported that same social system, which they themselves criticised and refused to conform to, were evident in various interviewees’ accounts. One instance was when I asked young women in favour of premarital sex whether they would agree to marry a sexually experienced man desiring of a virgin. Some, but not all, declared that they would agree. Their response came as a surprise, considering the ways in which these young women passionately and intensely criticised and attacked the patriarchal nature of their society. They were replete in expressing their frustration and rage towards existing societal bias and discrimination against women. Yet, by accepting such a marriage, these young women had to also demonstrate their virginity and chastity using one of the strategies mentioned above, the most likely being hymen reconstruction. The below conversation with Raneem, (F, 21, Muslim-Shiites) illustrated performed compliance when it came to marriage.

**Interviewer:** “what would you do?”
Raneem: “Ummm, what would I do... Ummm.... We will find a solution for that, I don’t know [She laughs]”

**Interviewer:** “How? What would be the solution?”
Raneem: “like there are many surgeries and things like that...umm you can do anything”

**Interviewer:** “Ok, so you do not have a problem with that”
Raneem: “Exactly... [silence]... But I hate to do this! yet it is society which imposes on you this scrutiny which obliges you to behave like this, you know! Because you do not have a way out! I even tried to be evasive in my answer. See how hideous society is... Ouw! It is so hideous to an extent that I was not even able to talk about this issue!! Yes, I would have surgery, that’s it! simply as it is!” (Raneem, F, 21, Muslim- Shiites).

Several months after conducting this interview with Raneem, I received a text message from her telling me:

“Remember when you asked me about the hymen surgery in the interview? I changed my mind, I will not do it! If he does not accept me the way I am and accept that I had a previous relationship, I do not want him!” (Raneem, F, 21, Muslim-Shiites).
Although Raneem’s message was not necessarily part of her interview, the fact that she
texted me to tell me this, indicated that her answers to the questions I raised in the
interview did not stop at the point where the interview finished. Her post interview
response indicated that young people’s attitudes, behaviours and convictions in terms of
premarital sex are continuously changing. For some, engaging in premarital sex might only
be a matter of ‘time’ and/or a ‘change in circumstances’, which was evident in different
interviews. For example, the majority of non-sexually active women, including the ones
who demonstrated very conservative attitudes towards premarital sex, stated that their
views and behaviours towards premarital sex might change later with time. Others stated
that if they were living in Europe maybe, they would have probably had sex and did not
have to worry about the social risks and judgements.

Besides, as I mentioned above, not all female participants, who publicly performed
compliance, accepted the performance of virginity when it came to marriage. Some
confirmed their refusal to marry a man demanding a virgin bride. They considered it to be
against their actual values and convictions, despite trying to publicly hide the latter. At the
same time, they were fully aware that they were exposing themselves to future risk by
remaining unmarried.

“I think its future outcomes will be negative, but I would not regret it [that is,
premarital sex] … If I fell in love with someone else, and he just did not accept me,
it means that there is a part of him that did not convince me, and that I will not get
along with him later on. At a certain point, and at a certain stage in life, we will
break up because of this issue… the fact that you [as a man] didn’t accept me and
only reduced me to a ‘hymen’ means that something about you [as a man] is no
longer comfortable to me…. You no longer convince me” (Nisreen, F, 26, Druze).

“Every girl [sic] wants to protect her reputation and social image before
marriage... because in the end, the man will ask about the girl, like is this girl
good? What’s her repute? What’s her status? What does she do in life? everything
about her... But for me, the one [man] whom I want him to love me, and the one
who wants me to be with him, I do not want him to think in this way [meaning
desiring a virgin]. If he thinks in that way, au revoir, merci [sic], that is I do not
want to be with him” (May, F,22, Muslim-Shiites).
These findings suggested that, in the process of negotiating social risk, young women chose where, when, how and to whom they disclosed their ‘real’ views, moral convictions, and sexual activity status. In Goffman’s (1990) terms, the ‘setting’ and ‘audience’ determined young women’s ‘social scripts’ and ‘displays’. The findings confirmed that for many young women, social performances and negotiations were necessary due to living in a society with high social risks and fears. Social non-compliance and disobedience would expose them to numerous social risks, as mentioned in the previous chapter (7). Therefore, instead of standing up for their own beliefs and convictions, the majority of women preferred keeping their convictions hidden to avoid the undesirable. Some considered secrecy and disguise as a must that any smart woman should employ to protect herself and eventually her family.

“Nowadays there are numerous solutions. That is, if a woman is not a virgin, she can undergo surgery [hymen reconstruction]. You [as a woman] can either do it out of courtesy to society [In Arabic: Tosayer al mojtama’a] or you can rebel against society. But you girl [sic] must be, supposedly, aware that this [sexual behaviour] is socially unacceptable. So once you decide to engage in this, keep it secretive/private, so that when she wants to get married, this won’t stand in her way- because no one will know! Accordingly, once she wants to get married, this [her virginity and sexual behaviour] will not stand as a barrier in her way because no one will know! Well, unless of course he [her ex-boyfriend] talked about her and about their intimate relationship... but this takes us back to trusting the person you are with.... A woman has to be fully aware ... like she cannot be open about her relationship, otherwise her sexual relationship would be too obvious! If they break up, society will have a problem with this issue. So do whatever you want but without letting anyone know about it, and that’s it!” (Dalia, F, 23, Muslim-Shiites).

Although performed compliance was much more evident among female participants, some young men also said they were cautious in the way they expressed their views about sex and sexuality publicly. Many stated that they felt it was acceptable to discuss these issues and even boast about their sexual activity within closed circles and among friends, where they felt comfortable. Whereas, the majority explained that this was not something they would discuss or talk openly about with their families, parents, or relatives.
8.7.2 Partial compliance

Participants also claimed to oppose only certain social norms. That is, they accepted and conformed to others. I call this ‘partial compliance’. For instance, some female participants criticised gender discrimination in their everyday life and supported women’s rights. Yet, they themselves seemed to accept some of these discriminatory social norms and values as the “norm” and expected others to behave accordingly. Some even judged other women who did not conform to these social expectations and boundaries. Between rejecting some norms and accepting others, young women seemed to construct their own new boundaries without risking their own social acceptance in society.

For example, Faten (F, 22, Muslim-Sunni) criticised gender discrimination and inequalities in society. Also, she clearly stated that she was totally against premarital sex for both men and women and strongly disagreed with gender discrimination in relation to this issue. Yet, at the same time, when I asked her whether she would accept marriage to a man with sexual experience, she declared that she would agree. She believed that she did not have a ‘choice’ but to accept. Whilst she disapproved gender discrimination as a concept, in her real life, she accepted the double standard in sexual behaviours and the possibility of marrying a man with sexual experience, even though she herself had to conform to a social morality which demanded that women be virgins until marriage.

“My personal opinion is that I reject premarital sex for both men and women… I think there is a pleasure in reaching a stage where I can provide the person I want with everything. That is, my body, myself, my soul and everything. He must be for me only, not like to leave me and walk away one day. I feel that this [sexual relationship] is a sacred bond more than it is a religious bond…. [About marrying a man with sexual experience she answered]: Yes... what can I do? I have no choice... but rest assured that he will not accept me [marry me] if I had prior sexual experiences” (Faten, F, 22, Muslim-Sunni).

Other examples of partial compliance were demonstrated when some participants believed that the permissibility of premarital sex “depends on the situation”. That is, young women perceived premarital sex as acceptable only if the couple had genuine intentions of
commitment - eventually leading to marriage. Any temporary sexual relationship merely aiming for fun and pleasure was considered unacceptable and even condemned. I argue that identifying and colluding with the ‘double standards’ (see Chapter 6) is a form of partial compliance.

*Partial compliance* like *performed compliance* was not only restricted to female participants but also applicable to male participants. Like, when some men openly declared being with premarital sex for both sexes, but when they themselves engaged in a serious relationship with a virgin woman they refrained from sexual penetration. Understanding *performed* and *partial compliance* appeared to be vital to managing social risk and establishing *trust* between men and women in their intimate relationships. My findings showed that participants had to identify what their partners’ genuine views, attitudes and convictions were in order to know where they were standing and behave accordingly. ‘Trust’, as I explain later in this chapter, came out as a very sensitive and critical issue. It was related to fears and assumptions of what the other person’s genuine intentions and moral convictions truly were.

Overall *partial compliance* shows that members in the society become consciously aware of what is deemed acceptable more than others. In Douglas’s (1966) language, some social transgressions are less contaminating than others. Therefore, people learn about these transgressions and contaminations through their continuous social interactions, and can judge them accordingly.

### 8.7.3 Absolute compliance

*Absolute compliance* was easily identified. It was when participants totally accepted and conformed to social morals, norms and values, accepting their socially constructed gender roles, as well as the ways they were treated by society, as ‘normal’ and ‘the way that things should be’. This was usually referred to, by my participants, as a conventional or typically ‘eastern’ mentality. Participants who absolutely conformed to social and moral norms demonstrated conservative attitudes towards premarital sex, and abstained from engaging in
any sexual activity. Sexual abstinence was also a strategy to avoid social risks altogether. Although, a couple of female participants continued to express worries about their reputation because they either engaged in kissing or slight intimate touching with their former boyfriends. For these participants, their perceived bodily boundaries were greater, much more restrictive, self-controlled and self-regulated compared to their counterparts, who demonstrated more relaxed attitudes towards premarital sex. Just getting close to any of their bodily openings was perceived as risky and dangerous. Whereas, to other female participants who engaged in some sort of sexual intimacy (non-vaginal-penetrative-sex), all female bodily orifices were permissive with the exception of the vaginal orifice, which was perceived as the riskiest and most dangerous boundary for most women.

8.7.4 Non-compliance

Non-compliance meant that participants challenged the social norms, publicly and privately, and acted against them. Non-compliance brings along with it many social risks and negative consequences such as social inferiority, isolation and stigma, specifically in the case of women’s non-compliance. Yet, as mentioned in the previous chapter, the level of social risks, which accompanies non-compliance depends on the individual’s social and familial milieu, as well as their level of religiosity and/or moral convictions. For instance, my data indicated that social risks were more acutely felt by women whose families were religious and conservative. Whereas, social risks seemed to be less significant among women whose families were liberal and non-religious, or did not have male guardians (if the father was deceased or divorced or in cases where there were no older brothers). Non-Compliance was more evident among men because discourses around masculinity allowed them to have some sexual knowledge and freedom. However, only one of my female participants demonstrated non-compliance publicly and privately.

Nevertheless, Marwa (F, 23, Christian- Orthodox) attributed her non-compliance to a number of factors. One of which was the death of her father when she was fifteen. Her mother, a very open-minded woman, raised her and two other two siblings (brother and a sister) as a single mother. This strengthened the relationship between them. Eventually, as
Marwa was studying, she worked at Helem (the first LGBT⁴ rights voluntary association in the Arab world), became independent and knowledgeable about sexual health and rights. Marwa admitted that it took her years to be able to openly stand for her own values and convictions in relation to her rights and her body. She described it as a “long fight” with society, and, at a certain point, with her younger brother. Then she reached a stage where she was comfortable and at ease to be herself in both public and private spaces/spheres. She ignored opposing opinions which called her “bitch” [sic] and disgraced her. Therefore, although Marwa was stigmatised, she had a friendship network who shared her view of the world as well as her family support to help her reject the social norms. This provides her with an alternative space to build her own life. However, those without this social support, find it impossible to reject the performance of virginity, in certain settings, without feeling excluded and stigmatised.

8.8 Trust

So far this chapter has shown the different strategies my participants employed to manage and negotiate social risks. All these different strategies aimed at one major purpose: hiding evidence of previous sexual experience, specifically among young women. Therefore, central to the success of these negotiations were elements of ‘secrecy’, ‘privacy’, and ‘disguise’ that all featured in making trust. Assessing trust was an important aspect of managing social risk. Trust came out strongly in all the interviews with young women. For instance, as some of my participants indicated, a woman could undergo hymenoplasty; however, that surgery would be useless if the former partner was not trustworthy, exposing the woman and revealing the nature of their intimate relationship. On the other hand, some women did not choose to have surgery; instead they chose to keep their sexual relationships private and under cover. Their main fear was trusting that the man they engaged in a sexual relationship with, would not shame, disgrace, or degrade them. To these young women, who try hard to disguise their intimate and sexual relationships, the concept of ‘trust’ meant magnanimity, good manners, respect and support. In other words, ‘trust’ was closely

⁴ LGBT stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender
associated with what my participants perceived as ‘noble’ masculine traits of manhood, essentially protecting a woman’s reputation and ‘honour’ [sic].

“I do not trust men at all… the man himself does not allow you to give [sic] him all this [sexual intimacy]. He doesn’t permit trust, because tomorrow he will come to hold you accountable and he will shame you and disgrace you for this. He will say ‘I took everything from you, but you were not able to take anything from me’!!! what does it mean he took everything from me [she says sarcastically] I don’t understand!… ... I have lots of fears... the man who I take this step with must be someone whom I truly love, been together with for a long time, and my trust in him is very high. He must be someone who thinks in a very ‘humane’[sic] way, genuinely open-minded, and understands what’s religion... Because having someone whom you love and trust and consider him as a support is very difficult...... Nowadays, there are no men, there is no support from them” (Raneem, F, 21, Muslim-Shiites).

Therefore, trust was essential to keeping the intimate relationship private and secretive. Dareen (F, 22, Agnostic [Muslim-Shiites]), for example, talked about being blackmailed by her ex who threatened to publish intimate photos of her on social media. Although it remained a mere threat as he did not end up publishing them, Dareen talked about the fears and anxieties she went through during that period.

“He sent me a threat – like because he had [intimate] photos of me - back then he threatened me with these photos. It was like... I cannot tell you how much... like I experienced horrible things in life, but this one was very very shitty. I had to block him all the time, I could no longer trust him, and surely I stopped talking to him, and I stopped seeing him...” Dareen (F, 22, Agnostic [Muslim-Shiites]).

Data showed that the difficulty of establishing trust between Lebanese young men and women started at the point of first meeting, when they assessed each other’s performances of possible girlfriend/boyfriend. In other words, participants were fully aware of the different performances of the sexes and related this to the discrepancies between one’s attitudes and behaviours. The gendered performances were referred to as “double standards”, “duality” and “ambivalence” by my participants, as explained in chapter 6. Both, male and female participants, claimed experiencing these inconsistencies in their everyday life. This created difficulty in establishing trust because of a substantial gap in
honest communication within any relationship. Partners found themselves hiding or masking their actual intentions to secure their own interests.

“...it is not her fault if she has this caution, I don’t blame her... because she has the right in such a stupid and fake society to be scared...... Most [Lebanese] men are fake and there are so many of them......like why do you have the right [as a man] to live and enjoy your life and to experience the pleasure, but then you want the young woman to be ‘kham’ [meaning raw or unexperienced or fresh] as you [as a man] describe her ‘kham’. Although the most beautiful young women are those who know how to experience feelings and enjoy them” (Nisreen, F, 26, Druze).

“I don’t think women are hypocrites or fake, well sometimes they are, but also women have fears... it’s not because they do not want to be themselves, but because society is oppressing them... there are obstacles which prohibit women from having the courage to stand in front of her father or brother or even her mother and declare that she is sexually active” (Marwa, F 23, Christian-Orthodox).

For instance, my female participants perceived the majority of the Lebanese men as ‘players’, ‘fake’, and ‘not trust worthy’ because gendered constructions of sexuality meant they did not risk much by engaging in sexual encounters with women. They argued that what young Lebanese people say may be different from what they actually think or believe. Young women stated that no matter how ‘cool’ and ‘open-minded’ a Lebanese man pretended to be, he should not be trusted nor taken for granted. Similar to Raneem, female participants stated that men do not provide women with a secure feeling of loyalty and sincerity.

“It is difficult to trust young men these days... like I always hear from my friends and so on, that this [man] cheated on that [women], and that man slept with so on and so on, and you hear about a lot of scandals. They talk badly about her that she is not good and so on... I don’t know it is difficult to feel secure with Lebanese men. I feel they do everything to get out what they want from you then they dump you or cheat on you or say bad things you... Not all of them are like this of course, but the majority are like this” (Sireen, F, 20 Christian-Orthodox).

“Eastern men specifically, I don’t like to generalise, but in general, the majority of eastern men, pretend that they accept this [meaning women having sex before marriage] and such ideas and they claim to accept sexual or physical relationships before marriage, but once it comes to reality, they start disgracing you: ‘it is YOU
who gave me’, they consider the girl [sic] as an endowment... they do not see the girl [sic] as someone who gave herself wholeheartedly, and that it is a mutual pleasure, love and giving... and that it is not a process where I surrendered myself to him and awarded him my body.. it is not like this at all” (Nisreen, F, 26, Druze).

“…….. So just by considering that two thirds of the Lebanese young men- if not more- have this eastern mentality [in Arabic: sharqiyya] no matter how much they try to pretend to be cool, close to the Europeans, open-minded, and living life freely and so on, however, they have this thing [meaning conservative eastern mentality] from the way they are raised probably or maybe from the society! [To them] I live my life the way I want it and everything but when I want to get married I want to find this girl ‘mesh hayes temma ella emma’ [meaning a girl whom never been kissed on her mouth by anyone except her mom]” (May, F, 22, Muslim-Shiites).

Most of my participants considered ‘lack of trust’ as a main barrier to the sexual relationship. For young women, the fear of being deceived, dumped, shamed, disgraced, cheated on and most importantly being talked about and consequently disclosing the secrecy of the sexual relationship were all issues related to lack of trust.

“of course I have fears from the partner... I do not blame any woman for having fears... there is no longer trust in the Lebanese men’s mentality.........At a certain moment, they [men] go back to their true selves and to their reality... like you [as a man] are still the son of your environment, of your home, and you are unable to get liberated... you’re just as a ’sexual’ man... like a sex machine” (Nisreen, F, 26, Druze).

“... by the way, the man drops off his respect [in Arabic: btenzal min A’yno] for a girl [sic] who sleeps with him before marriage... so yes of course I fear that he dumps me [if I sleep with him] ... well, he [her ex] dumped me after we kissed, imagine what would happen if I had slept with him!... I definitely do not want to be with someone like this... Like if I was missing you (her ex), hugged you and kissed you, you conclude that I’m promiscuous and throwing myself on you or that I can be with you in bed!!!! No darling!!! not in your dreams” (Faten, F, 22, Muslim-Sunni).

“you know what! I’m one of those people who struggled a lot when trying to date or go around with one [a woman] ... because it is very difficult for them to trust... they would say that all men are the same, they come to get what they want and leave... you know... that’s why!” (Moneer, M, 25, Muslim Shiites).
Consequently, ‘trust’ influenced the risk-taking decisions of my female participants. My findings revealed that young women learned to be more cautious and alert within their relationships when taking such risks. Almost all sexually active female participants stressed the importance of “knowing the person (man/partner) they are with” in the sense of getting to know him well enough to be able to eventually trust him. Female participants as well considered that a woman’s maturity and awareness played a role in how bad the situation could become if her sexual activity was disclosed. They mentioned some of the precautions they took to avoid the risk of being exposed. These are, besides ensuring being with a trustworthy partner, keeping the relationship private and low profile, and not leaving behind any evidence which might later allow the woman to be blackmailed (such as intimate photos, videos, and so on).

However, stories about the risks and happenings to women, once they were perceived to be sexually used by men before marriage, also shaped women’s fears about who to trust. Engaging in sex could lead to them, ultimately, being viewed as a whore. One interviewee told me about what happened to a friend of hers:

“... you must really know with whom you are with [the person you are with] ...Ok, like it is still possible to have shocks, but if you really know ‘who is the person you are with’ and you trust him, you would still manage to avoid or go beyond these issues... ... but sometimes it happens that you trust someone and he turns out to be a bad person. I know a lot of women who regretted what they did... like I heard a lot about men who did dirty things. For example, I know someone who had been with her boyfriend for years; so one day he took her to his place, and they were a group [he and his friends], and they raped her. You cannot trust anyone. It is really difficult” (Noor, F, 25, Christian-Maronite).

This rape of her friend reinforced the dangers of trusting even long-term partners, and the risks of engaging in any sexual activity for women.

Some women tried to assess the trust worthiness of their boyfriends by seeing how they behaved and treated their sister(s) in personal relationships. For instance, one of the female participants believed that, for a girl [sic] to know the real intentions of the man she was with, she had to observe the way he treated his sister and whether he allowed her to have
boyfriends and sexual relationships. If the man had conservative views and attitudes towards his sister, then most probably the man was not trustworthy.

“.... three quarters of society is like this [differentiates between the sister and the girlfriend]. So here the girlfriend should realise that ‘hullooo’ what’s the situation with his sister?! If his sister is so cool and so on, then perfect, feel free, you know. If what he accepts for you, really accepts it for his sister, then this is amazing. If not, like you [as a girlfriend] have to wake up!” (Dalia, F, 23, Muslim-Shiites).

On the other hand, the issue of trust among men was mostly related to the honesty and purity of the women they intended to be in a relationship with and, more specifically, they intended to marry. The majority of male participants seemed to be aware that some women nowadays perform an innocent and docile role. They were aware of hymen reconstruction surgeries and other forms of non-penetrative sex. Some of my male participants admitted that they would be really angry and upset if they discovered that their future wife or partner had undergone hymenoplasty without them knowing. To some that would put an end to trust and consequently the end of the relationship. Only a few stated that they would understand the reasons behind women doing it. However, almost all my male participants preferred honesty, while the majority preferred to know from the beginning about any previous sexual relationships and hymen reconstruction surgeries undertaken by their partner.

“Why would she have to lie about it... if you [as a man] and she are in harmony and you know each other’s mentality, there will be no need to hide it. But if she is getting into a relationship with someone with an eastern mentality, and she knows he would not accept it, of course she will hide it. I think it is all about trust. Once there is trust and harmony, all this stuff becomes trivial. It has no meaning” (Nadeem, M, 25, Christian-Maronite).

Therefore, as per my findings, ‘trust’ remained one of the crucial aspects underpinning the relationship dynamics between Lebanese young men and women, regardless of their social and religious backgrounds. However, the issue of trust appeared to be much more significant among female participants due to the seriousness of the social risks, and sometimes even, the physical and mental risks of rape, that can impact young women when
engaging in premarital sexual relationships. ‘Trust’ played an inevitable role in influencing young women’s risk-taking decisions when involving themselves in a sexual relationship.

8.9 Summary and conclusive remarks

Findings from this chapter suggested that, despite the associated social risks of engaging in premarital sex, which influenced females more than males, participants continued to take such risks primarily to help them develop relationships that would lead to marriage, but also for fun, intimacy, pleasure, experience and exploring their sexuality, in some cases. The participants’ confidence in their ability to manage these social risks, as well as their perceived level of the seriousness of these risks influenced their risk-taking decisions. This chapter showed that both young men and women were not passive in negotiating, challenging or reinforcing the risks around engaging in sexual encounters. Many of the actors/players seemed to master this risky and pleasurable game as they became very well acquainted with its rules. Most of the time avoiding the social risks of premarital sex among young women required actors to perform different roles at the same time to please the audience. Performing seduction, chastity, virginity and compliance were among these performed roles.

All the findings which I have presented so far in the three chapters 6,7 and 9 revealed that gender bias was deeply embedded within the Lebanese social structure. Yet it did not stand on its own. It stood as an inseparable aspect of gendered power relationships. The findings confirmed that gender discrimination existed along with power imbalance. Men are more privileged than women, and some even considered it the ‘norm’, as if it is a ‘natural’ outcome or reality. Yet, being aware of gender bias, double standards, power relationships, social expectations, as well as moral boundaries and restrictions appeared vital to shaping the relationship dynamics between young men and women. Awareness of these issues also hindered ‘trust’ between the sexes, and influenced their risk-taking decisions in relation to their sexual behaviour; and guided their strategies in managing social risks.
Moreover, it was evident that the value of women’s purity was essentially linked to the physical preservation of the ‘intact hymen’ rather than preserving chastity. However, there was a whole grey area where what counted as ‘sex’ was contested. A range of strategies were used to help women manage and negotiate the social risks of engaging in premarital sex, such as, performing virginity, non-vaginal-penetrative sex and hymen reconstruction. This does not indicate, though, that ‘performing chastity’ was not as important as ‘performing virginity’. Most of the time, these two performances went hand in hand, as per the findings. One performance (performing chastity) was essential to confirm the other (performing virginity). However, the moment these young women took the decision to engage in any form of physical and sexual intimacy indicated that they treated the social boundaries of ‘women’s purity’ (which necessitated both chastity and virginity) in a selective way. Their partial violation of the social and moral boundaries of purity served to minimise the severity of the transgression. At the same time, if all women totally complied with the social and moral boundaries of purity, social change would not be possible. In the last chapter of her book Purity and Danger, Douglas states that “purity is the enemy of change, of ambiguity and compromise. Most of us indeed would feel safer if our experience could be hard-set and fixed in form” (1966:163). Yet at the same time, she argues that the notion of purity is rigid and uncomfortable; therefore, when it is strictly followed it would be conquered by contradictions and impose hypocrisy (Douglas, 1966: 164). Hence, different cultures try to find ways to justify the transgression of boundaries or to reduce the power of the sacred notions of purity (Douglas, 1966). In the case of my research study, the strategies used by my participants to avoid or minimise the social risks represented their approaches of rejecting the constructed notion of women’s purity. Yet, because their transgression was mostly partial or performed, it continued to generate what my participants referred to as contradictions or double standards.

Social change and shifts in attitudes towards premarital sex are happening – as some of my participants stated. However, such changes and shifts might take some time. The data highlight how difficult it is to step outside of sexual norms without family support, friendship networks and communities that share the same views about female sexuality. The majority of participants believed that, contemporary young Lebanese people, on the
whole, are being more open and more accepting of premarital sexual relationships. Yet, this has to be a carefully managed performance, and despite an increasing acceptance, women remain reserved about admitting it. In brief, this chapter demonstrated that, although sexual behaviour among unmarried women specifically could lead to numerous social risks as shown in chapter 7, my participants managed these risks carefully to protect themselves and their families.
CHAPTER 9
Discussion and conclusion

In this chapter, I take the opportunity to wrap up some of the sociological meanings and interpretations in relation to my empirical findings, which I already highlighted in the earlier chapters. I establish links with the existing sociological literature, and I highlight some of the implications of my main research findings. Finally, I draw my research to a conclusion and suggest some possible directions for future research in this area.

9.1 Relationship between sexual health risks and social risks

Research studies addressing the risks of sexual behaviour among young people, mainly focus on sexual health risks as I mentioned earlier in the literature review. Whilst examining sexual health risks is of high importance, the associated problem of social risk should not be devalued. The findings from my research study revealed that, in conservative and semi-conservative cultural contexts, such as in Lebanon and other countries in the Arab world and Middle East, sexual health risks are only one aspect of the continuum of risk, which young people could be exposed to when engaging in premarital sex. Social risks as explored throughout this study, is another. Yet, this is not to say that health risks and social risks occur independently from each other. My research study confirms that both the social and health risks of engaging in premarital sex go hand in hand with each other. They are closely interrelated, especially among young women.

This interconnection between the two types of risk was evident when some sexually active female participants stated that unmarried young women would be hesitant and even avoid visiting a gynaecologist due to their fears of being caught or seen by someone they know—such as a relative, family member, friend of a family or other acquaintances (see chapter 7). To these women, being seen at a gynaecologist’s clinic meant exposing their sexual activity status. They feared that other people would make assumptions about them and label them
as “sexually active”- with all the social stigma and disgraceful meanings such a label could bring. I think that this widespread misconception - that usually it is only “married” women who visit a gynaecologist- reflects, to a certain extent, lack of knowledge and awareness on sexual and reproductive health related issues in general. Also, female participants who were not fully aware of the sexual health risks, beyond having unwanted pregnancy, were less concerned about their exposure to health risks compared to that of social risks. This is not surprising considering the lack of sex education in school curricula and programs as well as the social taboos surrounding such topics, as I mentioned in the introduction chapter.

On the other hand, female participants who were knowledgeable about sexual health risks and were fully aware of the preventive measures required for practicing safe sex, demonstrated more confidence and control of their sexual health risks. At the same time, some of these women did not trust the confidentiality and privacy of the patients’ medical records or stories within certain health care centres. For example, one of the female interviewees who used to work at a reputable hospital, told me stories about the easy-spread gossips of patients’ health problems, amongst health care professionals themselves. The perceived probability that such gossips might make its way to the individual’s social network is high, considering that Lebanon is a very small country where people are socially connected and families, widely, know each other. In both cases, women who were knowing or not knowing about health risks seemed to put a high emphasis on the presence of social risks, indicating the significance they played in their lives in Lebanese society.

Therefore, the social risk of being seen or known to have been seeking sexual and reproductive health services acts as a barrier to accessing essential sexual health services and consultations (such as STI screening and treatment). At the same time, avoiding regular health check-ups might also lead to sexually related health problems (such as contracting STIs and not treating it, or aborting unwanted pregnancy) and eventually to the disclosure of the individual’s sexual activity. Disclosure of sexual activity due to sexual health problem results in sexually related social risks.
This shows an inseparable relation and synchronisation between health and social risks. Thus, examining the social risk of sexual behaviour is crucial, as it impacts the overall sexual health and well-being of young unmarried people, especially women. These findings support similar findings from an ethnographic study conducted among Iranian women by Mahdavi (2009). The author argues that, for Iranian women, “safe sex referred to ‘socially safe’ sex” (ibid.:12). Mahdavi (2009) goes further to show how the fear of being socially exposed was a main barrier to accessing health care services – including HIV treatment and drug rehabilitation centres- as explained in chapter 3.

Acknowledging the relation between health and social risks has implications on future related-research and on developing sexual health programs and services. I argue that the importance of understanding the risks of sexual behaviour beyond its “health” aspect is vital in assisting researchers, academics, and programmers with designing better health interventions, sex education programs, and youth friendly services. Raising awareness and promoting knowledge alone, may not always be sufficient considering young people’s concerns with being caught, seen and exposed. Therefore, findings from this study calls for doubling the efforts in ensuring safe environment, where young people can access sexual and reproductive health services without being endangered or exposed to social risks.

Nevertheless, I also suggest that emotional and economic risks might also be other types of risks, which would require future investigation, in future research studies, to assess their significance. As such this thesis offers an innovative understanding of sexual behaviour and its associated attitudes by applying a sociocultural view of risk.

9.2 The social construction of risk

Another important point to consider when designing future sex-related health interventions, programmes, and services is the cultural sensitivity. Since risk is socially constructed as I discuss below, such programmes, interventions and services cannot be merely adopted from similar applications in different cultures such as, from western countries, for example.
These have to be *context specific* and tailored to respond to the needs of young Lebanese, although they can partially consult existing programmes in other contexts.

My findings assure that the social risks associated with premarital sex are socially constructed, learned, reproduced, and instituted. They are highly shaped and influenced by social pressures and moral values, especially among young women. The knowledge that young people established about the social risk of engaging in premarital sex was generated or constructed through the constant social interaction of individuals in society. The social risk that was associated with sexual behaviour showed the extent to which the notion of *risk* was flexible and changeable. My findings confirmed that the notion of risk was not static, nor fixed, and should not be perceived as an objective or calculable concept. Rather, *risk* should be understood within the sociocultural processes, as Douglas (1992) say. Social risks of engaging in premarital sex are strongly related to the social and cultural environment in which young people live. The importance of the notion of risk, as socially constructed, was evident in a number of empirical works such as: Sanders’ (2004) empirical work among sex workers; Plumridge and Chetwynd (1999) work with young people who inject drugs; Lupton and Tulloch (2002) study which aimed to understand how a group of Australians interpret and deal with a number of risks; and Austen’s (2009) study on school-students’ perceptions and definitions of a list of risks.

### 9.3 Social risks of premarital sex and morality

Social risks of premarital sex identified in this study were divided into three categories moral risk, shared risk and future risk. Yet, the core theme which shapes the notion of social risk as defined and explored in this study, is the social and moral boundaries which outline social order. This explains the importance of identifying what is moral and what is immoral, what is good and what is bad, what is pure and what is dirty or polluted in different cultures. Central to Douglas’ (1966) use of symbols of purity and pollution is the analogy she makes between social boundaries and bodily boundaries. She argues that all societal pollutions have bodily reference. Understanding bodily pollution relies on
understanding the links between the conceived dangers of each different society, and what
the bodily themes represent to that society. The bodily margins and the power, which
different parts of the body represent, depend on what these body parts are symbolising or
mirroring (ibid.: 122). For example, certain cultures have the belief that anything that goes
in or out of the body (such as bodily fluids) are deemed as dangerous pollutions because
they have transgressed the bodily boundaries, which are represented by the body’s
openings. Hence, societal control, imposed on the body, is crucial to protect bodily
boundaries, especially when it comes to the orifices of the body, as they represent the most
vulnerable margins or dangerous points.

In the case of my research study, it was evident throughout the data analysis that social
risks, in relation to engaging in premarital sex, are highly gendered and affect females more
than males. I argue that women’s bodies are a symbol of “purity” and “social order”; therefore, their bodily boundaries are dangerous. If transgressed (penetrated outside the
legitimate framework of marriage), they become dirty and they symbolise a disruption of
the social order. I understand this analogy between the social boundaries and bodily
boundaries as a shift between the “what” and the “who”. In other words, it is not only about
“what” is deemed to be pure or dirty, but more importantly “who” is deemed as pure or
dirty, moral or immoral. In the case of this study, it is women, not men, who symbolised
“purity” and “morality”. This goes in line with Douglas’s argument that patterns of sexual
danger can be seen to express symmetry or hierarchy (1966: 3). Therefore, to question why
women, not men, symbolise purity we have to understand the social hierarchy and power
relations that are represented through the gendering of bodies. As such, social conceptions
of dirt and purity cannot be separated from the societal hierarchy and gendered power
relations, as they are reflections of the cultural values and beliefs that exist on the basis of
that specific social structure. Understanding all this helps us rethink the ways we study and
analyse risk and sexuality.
9.4 Social risk as a form of social control and power

Central to Douglas’ work on risk (1992) is the moral aspect associated with it. Risk can be utilised to hold people accountable or morally responsible. By applying Douglas’ approach to risk (1966, 1992), to my findings, I argue that women who engage in premarital sex and transgress the social and moral boundaries, are blamed for disrupting social order, consequently, are punished by the society. Falling foul of social norms leads to punishments, and engaging in sexual activity before marriage is attached to risks such as social exclusion, loss of respectable reputation, stigma, verbal and physical violence, and becoming unmarriageable. These social risks become a way of cultural defence, as Douglas (1966) argues, to protect the identity of the community, group or the society from perceived threats, which might ruin societal cohesion, disrupt social order, or lead to what is perceived as deviant behaviour. Therefore, the social risks of engaging in premarital sex serve as a form of social control, which reminds the individuals of their moral obligations and responsibilities to maintain social order. That is why “blame casting” (whose fault?) and “punishment” become central to the notion of “risk”. Blame and punishment, in my study, were not only imposed on the individuals themselves but also on their families (especially the male guardian and senior women). They also bear the responsibility and obligation to preserve social order through ensuring that their family members behave in line with social and moral values. As such the notion of shared risk, which came out strongly across the majority of accounts, particularly those of women, becomes inevitable.

I think that shared risk highlights the significance of collective culture in people’s everyday life, where the family’s interests are more important than that of the individual. Thus, these findings challenge the risk society thesis of Beck and Giddens, which theorise that risk is rather individualised. Lupton and Tulloch who conducted their empirical work in western contexts (among Australians and British) also concluded that people experience risk differently, and that risk can sometimes be joint risk or “spread over more than one body/self” (Lupton and Tulloch, 2002: 324). This was specifically true when risk-taking affected, not only the individuals themselves, but also their family members (for example, taking financial risks). Therefore, the risk society thesis fails to address other factors
influencing risk-taking decisions and management at the micro-sociological level, such as age, gender, social class, and having a family amongst others.

Nevertheless, where there is social control, there is power. As mentioned in chapter 7, deciding on what is risky and what is not, what is moral and what is not, which bodies are to be controlled, who is to be blamed and punished is a matter of power. In my study, power seemed to be displayed at different levels and amongst different individuals, though, on the whole, hegemonic males dominantly held power over females and other males with feminine traits. Unlike conventional patriarchy, power and control, in this study, were not merely restricted to the father and other males in the family who usually try to control the misbehaviour of other family members - especially in matters of the family’s sexual and moral honour. Senior women (like mother and older sisters) also played a role in ensuring that other family members, especially females, were conforming to social and moral values. This coincides with Connell’s (1987) theory of ‘hegemonic masculinity and emphasised femininity’. Whilst she identifies different forms of masculinities and femininities building on a general structural fact that men are dominant over women, the theory recognises that the complexities of human relationships are not merely ruled by gender, but also by a variety of other factors such as ethnic, generational and class variances. Whilst ‘hegemonic masculinity’ is essentially related to heterosexual males, not all males fall under this category, as explained in chapter 4. Similarly, Connell argues that there are multiple diverse forms of femininities, one of which is the ‘emphasised femininity’, which complies with notions of patriarchal hierarchy, and helps maintain hegemonic masculinities. I argue that senior women, who ensure that younger women conform to constructed social and moral values, are themselves, although maybe reluctantly, also accepting their subordinated and obedient role. Their compliance feeds this patriarchal structural hierarchy of power, which preserves gender inequality by using the physical body as a central reflection of this asymmetry.

Moreover, power seemed to be displayed both in the forms of hierarchy and relation. It is institutionalised and practiced by an entire social system, established to ensure the maintenance and regeneration of social and moral norms and values (including abiding by
gender roles). This was evident through collective power, as explained in chapter 7, where the community in which people live and interact, collectively exert social pressures on families (mainly on parents/guardians and males in the family) to ensure they maintain social order through scrutiny and a system of blame and punishment.

However, considering the diversity of Lebanese society, power hierarchies appeared to be negotiable and shifting. For example, in some cases, parents, including the father, secretly colluded with their daughters (that is, they performed public compliance) and tried to protect them from the wrath of society. They themselves were controlled by the collective power of the society, which makes power relational. They worried about their social image and reputation considering the negative consequences this would bring, not only at the social level, but also at the economic level. Some parents were concerned about protecting their businesses and economic interests. It is important to note, though, that the parents who colluded with their daughters were mostly non-religious, which helps explain why they were able to not conform to expectations of their society’s social and moral boundaries. On the other hand, even parents who established strong emotional bond and cohesion with their children, yet, did not collude with them, were also under societal pressure to conform to social and moral values. Accordingly, they imposed restrictions on their daughters and, to a lesser extent, on their sons. These findings confirm that power is not merely hierarchal but also relational, and there is an entire social system in place to maintain what is perceived to be the social order of a particular society.

Therefore, despite some flexibility in dealing with, what is fundamentally considered a “moral behaviour”, the Lebanese society on the whole remains submissive to religious values and traditional social norms when dealing with matters of sex and sexuality. Understanding how power is exhibited plays an important role in the ways young people manage their social risks in relation to their intimate lives.
9.5 Different experiences of social risk

Before I move to discuss the important role of social performances in managing social risks, I would like to stress on the point that social risks are perceived and experienced differently by young Lebanese. The extent to which social risks were perceived as dangerous differed from one participant to another, reflecting the diversity of Lebanese society and the shifting tensions within it. Lebanon’s social, cultural and religious diversity resulted in the construction of various forms of social boundaries. Some social groups identified rigid social and moral boundaries in relation to sex and sexuality, while other groups enjoyed more flexible or fluid boundaries. In some geographical areas and among certain religious groups, women’s honour, sexual virtue and morality is taken seriously, and women are harshly punished when they “sin” or misbehave. On the other hand, among other groups in society, engaging in premarital sex might be dealt with lightly or with less intensity (such as turning a blind eye to it). Therefore, the level of intensity of the perceived social risk differed from one woman to another due to a range of factors including variations in their social backgrounds, family and friendship networks and their moral and religious values and convictions. It also differed within the religious groups themselves (for example, amongst Christians themselves or Muslims themselves). This confirmed that the religiosity level of the individual impacted their views rather than their religion.

I argue that realising the magnitude of social risk helps us understand the way young people assess and rationalise their risk-taking decisions. This goes in line with Douglas’ (1992) notion of risk, where she argues that:

“A risk is not only the probability of an event but also the probable magnitude of its outcome, and everything depends on the value that is set on the outcome. The evaluation is a political, aesthetic, and moral matter. In practical life private decisions about risk are taken by comparing many risks, and their probable good and bad outcomes. No risk item will normally be considered in isolation. Nor does intellectual activity happen in isolation.” (Douglas, 1992: 31)

Taking this into account, female participants seemed to be more relaxed about their sexual relationships if their families, particularly their parents, as well as their social environment,
demonstrated considerably less conservative attitudes towards sex and sexuality. At the same time, young women were aware, that even if their nuclear family turned a blind eye to their sexual behaviour, Lebanese society, conservative elements within it, would not.

9.6 Social performance

Engaging in premarital sex is, in the case of my research study, is a voluntary risk-taking decision. Young people, especially women, were fully aware of the social risks they were taking and of the underpinning issues which rules and dominates intimate and sexual relationships – including gender bias and double standards. I argue that what was perceived as “double standards” by my participants reflects inconsistent social ‘performances’ in line with Goffman’s (1990) terminology and interpretations of everyday social interactions. Goffman (1990) argues that humans are active and knowledgeable of the social and cultural context they are in. Individuals decide on their own conduct, guiding and controlling how they want to be seen or to be perceived by others through different performances. Whenever there are social interactions, there is the social performance of different roles present. These performances differ in different social settings. When performing, individuals become what others want them to be.

Indeed, my findings go in line with Goffman’s work (1990), as my data suggested that social performance appeared to be part of young people’s everyday lives. Social performance was mostly evident through the strategies participants, especially females, used to avoid or minimise social risks. Regardless of whether participants practiced non-vaginal-penetrative sex, or undergone hymen reconstruction or temporary religious marriages, ‘performance’ cut across all these strategies. It appeared to be the most essential component in negotiating sexual life. This indicates that actors (young people) mastered a risky and pleasurable game as they became very well acquainted with its rules. Avoiding the social risks of premarital sex among young women required actors to perform different roles to please their social ‘audiences’, as if they were wearing different ‘masks’, in Goffman’s expression. Young women, for instance, displayed a series of masks to others,
enacting roles of seduction, chastity, virginity and social compliance in different social settings and in front of different audiences and observers. By performing these social roles, they controlled how they wanted to portray themselves in front of others, who were, at the same time, forming ideas and obtaining information about them through observing these performances. Therefore, it placed young women in a powerful position and enabled them to actively negotiate and take control over their intimate relationships.

Performance was not only restricted to women. Young men, parents and gynaecologists also seemed to perform different roles and sometimes even support the performance of others in their family. Young men, for example, performed different traits of masculinity and manliness, such as magnanimity, protection, potency, virility and open-mindedness. According to Goffman (1990), sometimes, individuals performed inconsistent roles, when they were, for example, in different social groups or among different audiences. This was strongly evident throughout the different accounts.

The different social performances young people display when managing their intimate relationships teach us a lot about the social interactions within young people’s intimate and sexual relationships. It also shows a high level of agency, specifically among women, when managing the social risks associated with engaging in premarital sex. They learned to act and perform according the set social and moral boundaries. Their gendered performances seemed to be culturally structured and very well maintained.

9.7 Social and moral compliance

Despite the significant level of control and agency my participants revealed, the vast majority of women (except one) continued to conform to social norms and expectations about sex and morality in different ways, in order to avoid being exposed to social risks. In chapter 8, I identified four types of social and moral compliance, as follows: a) performed compliance, b) partial compliance, c) absolute compliance, and d) non-compliance. The different types of social and moral compliance reflect the diversity of young people’s views
on sex, morality and values.

*Performed compliance* and *non-compliance* suggest that young people nowadays are challenging and diverting from the traditional existing social norms. They are creating their new social and moral boundaries and are demonstrating more liberal views, attitudes and behaviours towards sex-related matters. At the same time, those, especially women, who choose to boldly challenge the society, by being openly non-compliant, expose themselves to social stigma, shaming and exclusion. Unless non-compliant women are surrounded by a supportive family and social networks that share their views (which is not very common in Lebanon), it is difficult to step outside of sexual norms without being socially disliked and isolated. That is why the majority of young women, who are open and more accepting of premarital sexual relationships, prefer to keep their disclosed non-compliance within limited and trusted circles of friends or intimate partners who share them their liberal views. Therefore, they actively choose when, how, where and to whom they keep or disclose their liberal views and convictions.

Whilst I argued earlier that *performed compliance* can, in some ways, contribute to the reinforcement and maintenance of the existing patriarchal system and its undesired social and gendered norms, it can also be looked at as a form of resistance. I think it would be useful to further investigate how different types of compliance may collude with, resist or possibly break down existing social and moral norms, in future research.

*Partial compliance* on the other hand, reflects some sort of selectiveness. It suggests that some social norms are less sacred or sanctified than others, accordingly, are easier to reject. An example of this would be, valuing women’s right to education, work and mobility but not to sexual freedom. This again reflects the importance of the moral meanings and purity-dirt symbols assigned to the sexual body, as explained earlier. This selectiveness in accepting or rejecting certain conventional social norms or traditions, but not others, reflect conservative social change.
Absolute compliance like public non-compliance is not very common among my participants. However, this is not to indicate or generalise that absolute compliance to social and moral norms is uncommon in Lebanese society as a whole. My findings indicate that it is less common among university students in Beirut, who generally demonstrate more liberal views towards sex and sexuality, as well as towards other controversial issues. But, in general, women who comply with existing social norms may have more control over who they want to marry, without having to worry about the risk of being unmarriageable.

Overall, the insistence of hiding non-compliance and steering away from openly challenging social and gendered norms, in relation to sex and sexuality, suggests that Lebanese women are still unable to fully break free from a social system of hegemonic masculinities, which punishes their transgression more severely, and eventually harm their beloved ones- namely their families. Even in cases where families (particularly the parents) are supportive and collude with their children, they do it secretly. This tells us that, women are, in one way or another, still submissive to hegemonic masculinities which constructed restrictive and unequal gendered norms. Maintaining these restrictive social and gendered norms is ensured through exhibiting power relations at different levels and among different players. Power, as manifested in the Lebanese society is not one directional as in conventional patriarchy. It is rather diffused in the society and occurs at all levels of social interactions. Moreover, the collective power of this social system which places its members under scrutiny, blame and punishment, thus, endangering their social, economic and even political interests (in the case of Lebanon), might explain why people fear public non-compliance.

I also think that other factors play a role in assuring the fear of public non-compliance among young people, such as the existence of a steep generational and cultural gap between young people and older adults in their families and general society. Bridging this gap might not be easy, but it is one of the aspects worth investigating when conducting future research and building sexual health related interventions and programs.
9.8 Trust is all what matters

Women’s risk-taking decision to engage in premarital sex carried with it fears, anxieties and worries. Young women were mostly the ones who had to negotiate and manage these social risks. These findings support other research studies, which suggested that the notion of risk is fundamentally gendered (Sanders, 2004; Chan and Rigakos, 2002; Lupton 1999b; Walklate, 1997). Grand risk theories, namely that of the “risk society” and “governmentality” (Beck, Giddens and Lash, 1994), as well as that of “Edgework” by Lyng (1990) failed to acknowledge the different types of risks that existed between the sexes, and failed to address why women, in certain cases, tended to take less risks than men, rendering them as “risk aversive”.

Therefore, “trust” was an essential component in risk-taking behaviour in the case of my study. As stated in my findings, young men and women were both fully aware of the different social performances, gender bias, double standards, power relationships, social expectations, as well as moral boundaries and restrictions. Awareness of these issues appeared vital to shaping the relationship dynamics between young men and women, as such an awareness often hindered ‘trust’ between the sexes, influenced their risk-taking decisions in relation to their sexual behaviour, and guided their strategies in managing social risks.

For instance, the various strategies that were used by my female participants to manage social risks and minimise their associated dangers and undesirable outcomes, relied vastly on secrecy, privacy and confidentiality. This essentially requires trust. Avoiding rumours, which might risk young women’s reputation, and expose their sexual behaviour, was essentially based on trust. Trust was often used to mitigate risk, however, it was not always easy to judge, and many young women did not believe they could rely on trust alone or if at all. Trust was also inextricably linked to fear of the loss of trust and the consequences of this to reputation, family, and future marriage options. Many women were uncertain whether men could be trusted, as power relations within sexual relationship were always stacked in men’s favour because of patriarchal structures and gendered inequalities. This
indicates that engaging in premarital sex, for young women, could not become absolutely risk-free.

Again this has its own implications on future interventions. Talking about the barriers which hinders trust and having honest conversations with young people about their fears and worries, through consultation group sessions, might be another aspect to consider in future interventions and programs. It was apparent from my research that young Lebanese needed to talk about and discuss issues around sex and sexuality. They often expressed how difficult it is to address such issues with people who will listen, understand and help them rather than judge and stigmatise them. I believe it is not only the role of sensitised professionals to listen to young people, but also, creating sensitized and knowledgeable peer networks can play a fundamental role in addressing such issues and bringing them to light.

9.9 Premarital sex is a matter of time

Finally, I argue that that engaging in premarital sex, among Lebanese young women, might sometimes be a matter of time and opportunity. As per my findings, non-sexually active women were aware that their attitudes and behaviours towards premarital sex might change with time, despite all the social pressures, which they were fully aware of. A study conducted by Salameh et al (2015) on the attitudes towards, and practice of, sexuality among university students in Lebanon, supports my argument. The findings of the study revealed that students of a higher age were significantly more likely to have tried sex, and to be engaging in regular sexual activity (Salameh et al, 2015). I suggest that this might also be linked to the increase in the waithood period (the gap between puberty and marriage), which I addressed earlier in the introduction chapter. The more the gap increases, the more likely it is that young people will engage in premarital sexual activity, and will have to negotiate strategies to avoid and minimise social risks. My data showed that one of the reasons why it is not too obvious that young people are having premarital sex might be due to their performed social compliance. As Douglas (1992) argues, that
“transgression against the norm is more visible than conformity” (1992: 25). As such, when transgression is hidden under social performance, it will continue to be less visible. In all cases, the findings from my research study suggests that young people, especially women, are constructing new sexual and moral boundaries, despite the tensions between the existing traditional moral values and the newly constructed ones. Young women proved to be actively negotiating their sexual lives utilising all strategies which protect them and their families from social risks. The findings urge us to acknowledge the fact that social change and cultural transition are happening, and young people are engaging in premarital sex, whether Lebanese society, in general, likes it or not.

9.10 Conclusion and future directions

This thesis investigated the social risks that Lebanese university students associate with engaging in premarital sex, and the ways they respond to, or manage, these risks. It also highlighted some of the underpinning issues, which shape and influence their risk-taking decisions. It was conducted in a religiously and demographically diverse, yet relatively conservative and patriarchal, context undergoing important social, political and economic shifts and engaging with wider international relations. As far as I am aware, this is the first study, which provides an in-depth understanding of these social risks and of the strategies used to manage them in Lebanon. Whilst some of the social risks highlighted in this study were addressed in the works of other scholars (See Abu Odeh, 2010; Saadawi, 1980; Baron, 2006; Wehbi, 2002; Awwad, 2011; Baydoun 2011-2012; Yasmine et.al 2014; Awwad et.al, 2013), I aimed to steer away from using featured frameworks of “honour crimes”, “Muslim women” and “patriarchy” when examining the social consequences of engaging in premarital sexual behaviour. As such, choosing a theoretical framework of socio-cultural notion of risk and linking it to sexual behaviour is an innovative approach of analysis. In that respect, this thesis contributes to filling an important gap in the literature, especially since the vast majority of research studies which addressed risks of sexual behaviour, focused on sexual health risks and were quantitative as opposed to qualitative.
This study also contributes to a growing body of literature on risk in the field of ‘sociology’, and feeds into other fields of health sciences, such as ‘public health’ and ‘psychology’ fields. For example, public health researchers and practitioners can learn more about young people’s sexual behaviour and its associated risks—beyond physical health—as well as, the ways they manage social risks in their intimate relationships. Consequently, this piece of evidence can be accounted for in future public health interventions and programmes which aim at promoting healthy sexual behaviours; or when establishing youth friendly health care centres; or when developing comprehensive sex education curricula for example. On one hand, this study encourages an interdisciplinary research approaches and projects in the future. On the other hand, it urges us to think of innovative ways of building future interventions, in support of the ecological model of public health, which does not only tackle the individuals themselves at the interpersonal level, but also accounts for the broader socio-cultural influential components such as family; community; institutions; and eventually public policies.

Moreover, this research study can be taken up further to draw on correlations between socio-demographic variables (such as gender, age, religiosity, social class, autonomy, and parents’ education), and sexual attitudes and behaviours, perceived social risks, risk-taking and risk-avoidance decisions, as well as social compliance, among others. Although, most of this socio-demographic information was gathered from participants through a short questionnaire, it was not included in the analysis. That was mainly because I avoided adding additional layers of complexity to my findings in cases where I was not able to triangulate the data from the questionnaire against the data from the interviews. Besides, drawing conclusions from such a quantitatively small sampling size, without being able to triangulate the data against my interviews, would have lacked rigour. On the contrary, I was able to triangulate data in relation to gender, religiosity, attitudes and behaviours towards premarital sex, as well as information related to geographical areas. Accordingly, for future studies, I would recommend conducting a larger study with mixed methods approach and quantitatively representative sample size.
The interesting findings from this research study suggest that understanding young people’s attitudes and behaviours towards sex and morality is a complex topic with many layers of analysis. It can be looked at from various aspects. Whilst this thesis focused on the socio-cultural notion of “risk”, I suggest that investigating the notion of “identity” and the role it plays in shaping and identifying young people’s perceptions, behaviours and decisions towards sex, as well as their social performances (including performed compliance) would be a notable component to look at in future research. Examining “identity” might be particularly appealing among Lebanese university students who are straddling two cultures (that is, secular and modern vs. religious and traditional/conservative) and are struggling, as a result, in establishing and identifying their own moral values and convictions which shape the way they experience life, including their perceptions and behaviours towards premarital sex. This identity struggle is peaked during university years, considering that universities in Beirut are physical venues which bring together Lebanese from different religious sects and cultural backgrounds as I explained in chapter 6. Thus, future empirical work can further investigate how this identity struggle influence young people’s attitudes and behaviours towards sex - a behaviour deemed rooted in these moral, social and religious values.

It is also important to highlight that the findings of this research study reflected the views of an educated group of young people, who are most likely to be exposed to, and be in constant interaction with, peers from a diverse social, religious, economic and political background. Even though my research focused on university students, in particular, future research might be able to investigate the extent to which my findings correlate to the rest of the Lebanese society and other sections of the youth population.

Finally, it must be acknowledged that the vast majority of the work, which had been carried out to understand and conceptualise the notion of risk in our modern world, was established and intellectualised by western social theorists and from a western perspective. As such, the work in this thesis tried to apply a “westernised” concept of “risk”, constructed to mostly fit within an industrialised and developed context, to a less advanced and relatively traditional context. However, using the unique and rich work of the anthropologist Mary Douglas’s to conceptualise the findings of my study was very helpful and inspiring. Therefore, the
empirical work of this thesis offers a new approach to the notion of risk, not only through addressing risk from the perspective of its social aspect but also, specifically, in terms of its meaning, and in the ways Lebanese young people responded to and managed these risks. Moreover, the literature used throughout this thesis was limited to studies published in the English language. This indicates that a number of Arabic and French research studies, which might have been published or released by Arabic or French academic institutions in Lebanon and elsewhere, might have been left out.
APPENDIX A

Semi structured interview questions

1- In general, how do you describe Lebanese youth nowadays in terms of their lifestyle, interests, mentality, (conservativeness and openness) and so on? Can you please give me some examples?

2- What do you personally think of premarital sex?
   - Why do you think so? (provide examples)
   - How would your answer differ if you were a man/ woman? In other words, how would this affect you as a male/ female? (provide examples)

3- In your opinion, what are the risks or fears young people think of when they decide to engage in or refrain from premarital sex. In other words, what are the things that influence their decision?
   - Why so you think so?
   - If social risks were not flagged, ask: what are the social consequences that one would think about when engaging in premarital sexual relationship.
   - How might these risks influence your decision in being involved in or in abstaining from premarital sex? Provide examples.

4- In general, how do you think young people deal with these risks?
   - Or what would young people do to protect themselves from the consequences of engaging in premarital sex
   - Or what alternatives they would seek?

5- In your opinion how should the relationship be between a woman and a man if they are not married? Who draws the limits (if any)? Can you provide examples?

6- Is there anything else that you’d like to add, or anything which you thought is important and we did not address? Anything that provokes you in relation to this issue, for example?
APPENDIX B
Short questionnaire

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Answer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Age                       | 1- How old are you?                        | □ Male
□ Female
□ Other, please specify: |
| Sex                       | 2- Are you?                                | □ Male
□ Female
□ Other, please specify: |
| Relationship status       | 3- What is your relationship status?        | □ Single
□ unmarried partner (or girlfriend/boyfriend)
□ Engaged
□ Other, please specify: |
| Religion                  | 4- What is your religious sect?             | □ Muslim- Shiites
□ Muslim- Sunni
□ Druze
□ Christian- Maronite
□ Christian - Orthodox
□ Christian – Catholic
□ Atheist or Agnostic
□ Other, please specify: |
| Religiosity               | 5- Do you consider yourself religious?      | □ Very religious
□ Somehow religious
□ Not religious
□ Not religious at all
□ Other, please specify: |
| University                | 6- At which university are you?             | □ Lebanese Public University
□ American University of Beirut (AUB)
□ Lebanese American University (LAU)
□ Haigazian University
□ University of Balamand
□ Sagesse University
□ Saint Joseph University
□ Lebanese International University
□ AUST
□ Beirut Arab University
□ Other, please specify: |
<p>| Year of study/             | 7- Currently, in                           | □ Freshman                                                             |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class</th>
<th>which class or at which stage of study are you?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ Sophomore (first year)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ Junior (second year)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ Senior (third year)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ Graduate (Master degree)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ Post-graduate (Doctorate degree)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ Other, please specify:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area of residence</th>
<th>Where (in which area) have you lived, the majority of your years, before you started your university years?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ I live in University dorms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ I live in my own place (outside university dorms)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ I live with friends (outside university dorms)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ I live with relatives (outside university dorms)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ I live with my family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ Other, please specify:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Residential Autonomy</th>
<th>Currently, with whom do you live?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ I live in University dorms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ I live in my own place (outside university dorms)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ I live with friends (outside university dorms)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ I live with relatives (outside university dorms)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ I live with my family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ Other, please specify:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Employment (reflects economic autonomy)</th>
<th>Do you currently work?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ Yes- full time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ Yes- part time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ No, I do not work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ I work only between semesters and during vacations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ other, please specify:</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pocket money</th>
<th>Do you take pocket money from anyone?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ Yes: from parents or siblings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ Yes: from relatives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ Yes: from others, please specify:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ No I do not take pocket money from anyone</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Socio-economic status (SES)</th>
<th>How much is your weekly pocket money?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ Less than 30,000L. per week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ Between 30,000 - 50,000L. per week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ Between 50,000 L. - 100,000L. per week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ Between 100,000L. – 200,000L. per week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ Between 200,000- 300,000L. per week</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>□ Above 300,000L. per week</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are four more questions to be filled after the interview is finished
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Questionnaire part 2- post interview</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attitudes towards premarital sex</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Involvement in premarital sex</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sexual activity</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age at first sexual intercourse</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Totally against premarital sex
- It depends on the situation
- Totally with premarital sex
- Other, specify:
- Yes (go to Q16)
- No (end of Questions)
- Yes (go to Q 17)
- From time to time
- No
- Below 13
- Between 13-15
- Between 16-18
- Between 18-20
- Between 21-23
- Between 24-26
- Above 26
- I do not know/ I do not remember
APPENDIX C
Participant information sheet

Introduction and aim of the research study:
My name is Taghreed El Hajj, a postgraduate research student at the University of Leicester, at the Department of Sociology, UK. I’m conducting a research study which aims to explore the attitudes and behaviours of young Lebanese university students towards premarital sex and the social risks associated with it, as well as investigating how young people deal with or respond to these risks.

Data collection:
I will ask for your agreement to participate in a one to one in-depth interview that will last approximately one hour. The interview will include questions on students’ attitudes and behaviours towards premarital sex; the social risks young Lebanese students associate with premarital sex; as well as your views of the social and cultural determinants affecting young people’s decisions in engaging in or refraining from sexual activity before marriage.

But before you agree to take part in the interview, I would like to ask for your approval to fill up a short anonymous questionnaire that has demographic-related questions in general on sex, age, socio-economic status, university, religion, sexual activity and so on. This short questionnaire aims to help me better understand my sample.

Voluntary participation:
Your participation on the research study is completely voluntary. You can refuse to take part in this study, as no one will oblige you to participate. You can even stop me at any time during the interview or pull out your participation if you feel that you do not want to continue in this or to answer my questions.

Confidentiality and privacy:
Privacy and confidentiality are two of the most important components of this study. All interviews and questionnaires will be anonymised and no identifiable data will be used. The interview will be conducted in a venue of the participants’ choice to ensure comfort and confidentiality. In cases where participants do not have a venue of preference, the research will identify a safe, private and comfortable venue to carry out the interview.

All interviews will be digitally recorded – only if you agree to it. The recorded interviews will be anonymously transcribed and analysed. To ensure confidentiality, all data provided by participants (questionnaire and interviews) will be saved in safe files and in a locked place. Only the researcher (myself) will access the data, transcribe it and analyse it. The findings and data from interviews will be presented anonymously without indicating the participants’ identity.

Contacting the researcher:
If you have any further questions or concerns, I’m more than happy to answer your questions and issues of concern. You can reach me through email: teh11@le.ac.uk.
Informed consent form

I agree to take part in the PhD research study on “Attitudes and Behaviours of Lebanese University Student Towards Premarital Sex and Negotiating the Social Risks Associated with It” which is conducted by research student, Taghreed El Hajj, at the Department of Sociology, University of Leicester.

I have had the research study fully explained to me and I have read the information sheet about the study which I may keep for my own personal records. I understand that my own contribution will be used for PhD research and that I can withdraw from the research at any time.

I also understand that this research study will be carried out in accordance with the University of Leicester’s Code of Research Ethics. Material gathered as part of this study will be treated as confidential and securely stored in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998.

Name [or initials] …………………………………………………
Signature ………………………………………………………
Date ……………………………………………………………
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Ozyegin, G. (2009) 'Virginal facades: sexual freedom and guilt among young Turkish women', *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 16(2), pp. 103-123.


