

Understanding the LGBT subculture in Vietnam: Toward theories of cultural studies

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<p><i>Received: 12 Jul 2022;</i> <i>Received in revised form: 03 Aug 2022;</i> <i>Accepted: 10 Aug 2022;</i> <i>Available online: 20 Aug 2022</i></p> <p>©2022 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).</p> <p>Keywords— <i>LGBT subculture, cultural studies, Vietnam.</i></p>	<p>In Vietnam, the gay, lesbian, bisexual & transgender/transsexual group - abbreviated as LGBT - is a social minority group that receives little attention. However, in recent years, the LGBT community has been mentioned more and more in social media, becoming the object of a survey in several NGOs' research programs and intervention projects. But for the government, research community, and even the LGBT group in Vietnam, the LGBT community has not been recognized as a cultural entity, a piece of Vietnam culture. Is the LGBT community, in the opinion of cultural researchers in Vietnam, too sensitive, or are cultural researchers rejecting the LGBT subculture as part of Vietnam's diverse culture? In this article, we will repeat a few cultural definitions and analyses to confirm that the LGBT community is a cultural entity that needs to be studied and the LGBT subculture in Vietnam is part of Vietnamese culture. Moreover, we search and synthesize the characteristics of the LGBT subculture in Vietnam from cultural studies.</p>

1. Research Background

With the historical presence of the LGBT community in Vietnam, the LGBT subculture has never been a cultural entity in the point of view of the government, the media, and even the LGBT community. As a result, it never has a small piece in the overall culture of Vietnamese culture. That is a reason that has hindered the promotion and protection of human rights in Vietnam for the LGBT community. Moreover, the LGBT community has never been unrecognized for contributing to the construction of culture and society in Vietnam. And so far, the research and understanding of LGBT from a cultural perspective is still relatively new, if not an unexplored area.

Until now, many research topics and research surveys have mentioned the LGBT community. For example, as *Transgender people in Vietnam - practical and legal issues* of the author group Pham Quynh Phuong, Le Quang Binh, and Mai Thanh Tu were published in “Aspiration to be yourself” book by World Publishing House in 2012. This topic has mentioned transgender groups and their problems, such as stigma and discrimination in families, schools, and public spaces, difficulties in job opportunities, health risks, and legal issues (Q. P. Pham et al., 2012). Also, another study on *The employment of transgender women - the reality and challenges* of Pham Quynh Phuong again focused on the subject of transgender women. This study mentioned the difficulties that transgender people face in terms of employment. “The work argues that

the barriers to transgender women's employment opportunities are complex, reciprocal but mainly rooted in social stigma.” (2014)

In addition, there are research topics, literary and artistic works, as well as typical internet surveys such as research on *Stigma and discrimination of health workers in providing medical services to patients men who have sex with men (MSM) - A case study of some FHI referral medical facilities in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City* of the Institute for Studies of Society, Economy and Environment (iSEE). The research report on the stigma and discrimination of health workers against men who have sex with men in health services in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City (iSEE, 2011). Or *A study of the socio-economic characteristics of MSM in Viet Nam* by the iSEE survey presented the problems faced by men who have sex with men in Vietnam and suggested specific solutions (Nguyen, 2009). In addition, the literary works have brought readers the emotions of gay people vividly and authentically through literature such as “Transgender” (*Chuyen gioi*) (N. T. Pham, 2016b) or “Mom! I'm a gay” (*Me oi! Con dong tinh*) (N. T. Pham, 2016a) of author Pham Ngoc Thach, “Mom! I need to become a girl” (*Me oi! Con phai la con gai*) (Everlyn, 1998) of author Just Everlyn, translation team Ngoc Anh, Hong Nhung, and Dinh Nhung.

In addition to the text documents, there are also unique image documents. Can mention such as the photo series “Another Me” (*Mot toi khac*) (2013b) of iSEE, dedicated to giving the gay community more than 15 pages of vivid pictures of their lives. Also, the “Pink Choice” photo series by photographer Maika. “Moments in life” (*Khoanh khac cuoc doi*) (CCIHP, 2011) photo series by the Center for Creative Initiatives in Health and Population (CCIHP) has supported the MSM community, taking pictures to talk about their lives with worries, pressures, and love and happiness.

The summary that the studies mentioned earlier, surveys, literary works, and pictures only focus on researching and paying serious attention to a specific part of LGBT people, such as transgender people, MSM. Or the research only stops at presenting basic scientific knowledge in biology, health, economy, society, etc. Issues surrounding LGBT people haven't been viewed from the perspective of cultural studies by researchers. Is the LGBT group, in the opinion of cultural researchers in Vietnam, too sensitive, or is it because we still consider this group of people not yet considered a cultural entity or, in other words, a

subculture within a broad whole of culture. Therefore, with the understanding and inheritance from the previous research, I want to confirm and clarify the essential characteristics to identify the LGBT subculture from a cultural perspective.

2. LGBT who they are

2.1. Understanding LGBT

According to Queer Theory, people's sexual identity is much more complicated than the current way of dividing gender into male and female (Jagose, 1996). Such division of essence into two extremes represents a way of looking at it as the binary opposite of life's inherent form. Regarding sexual orientation, in work published in the late 1940s, Alfred Kinsey and colleagues showed that sexual orientation could divide into seven categories, from entirely heterosexual to entirely homosexual, and bisexual are the midpoints (A.C et al., 1949). Furthermore, many research documents from anthropology, culture, history, religion, politics and social activities show that *gender pluralism* (G. Peletz, 2009) is quite common in Southeast Asia.

Who are LGBT people? Biologically speaking, LGBT people have the same body state as other human beings. However, to identify LGBT people with others, we need to understand what human sexuality is. Human sexuality comprises four elements: sexual biology, *gender identity* (APA, 2012), *sexual orientation* (APA, 2008), and gender expression.

Of the four factors, biological sex is the one that cannot be changed by nature because it is a biologically determined factor. Biological sex is mainly associated with attributes such as sex chromosomes, hormones, and the internal and external body. Humans are usually born with two biological sexes to distinguish between female and male, defined by the external genitalia: clitoris/penis, testicles; and genitals in the uterus: ovaries/prostate. However, there are exceptions for genitals that are unclear or have both genitals. People are called intersex and will receive medical intervention to determine their biological sex. Although it is a natural factor that can be interfered with by medicine, biological sex combined with other factors will more accurately determine human sexuality.

Sexual orientation is one of the four factors that make up sexuality and is defined as a sustained emotional and/or sexual attraction to others. From there, we can distinguish three basic types of sexual orientation: heterosexual – people who are attracted

to the opposite sex; homosexual – someone who is attracted to people of the same sex; bisexual – someone who is attracted to both sexes. Unlike sexual behavior, sexual orientation includes personal feelings. Therefore, a person's sexual behavior may not reflect their sexual orientation.

Gender identity is a factor in sexuality, expressed through the perception of one's gender as male or female. Gender identity does not necessarily coincide with biological sex. Gender identity is also independent of sexual orientation, as gender identity has to do with who a person thinks they are. In a word, sexual orientation has to do with who a person is attracted to and who I love.

Gender expression is how a person unconsciously/consciously shows their gender identity through their behavior, clothing, hairstyle, voice, or physical features. However, in today's society, gender expression goes beyond gender identity. It gradually becomes a determining factor by personal preferences and trends of the times, so the element of gender expression is not the decisive factor that defines who you are, or what your sexuality is.

2.2. Population of LGBT people in Vietnam

There is difficulty in researching LGBT people because there is no specific number of their population in Vietnam. And Vietnam has not conducted a nationwide survey on the number, distribution, and characteristics of LGBT people. Therefore, it isn't easy to approach and research this group of people, only through typical representatives. For example, in Vietnam, the Report published at the Scientific and Technical Conference held by the Ho Chi Minh City Dermatology Hospital on September 26, 2006, said no firm data on the number of gay men's corpses. However, let's take the average rate that many scientists accept as 3% (2013a). Therefore, the number of LGBT people in Vietnam estimates at more than 2,900,000 people (according to the population of Vietnam in 2020, more than 97.5 million people (GSO, 2021)).

Moreover, transgender people are not only limited. Maybe they have had surgery or not. But if they understand their gender identity differently from their sexual biology, they are transgender people. Of course, they also have a tendency or wish to be transsexual. But it may not be and never will in reality (Q. P. Pham, 2013). There has been no national census on the number of transgender people in Vietnam. Transgender people classify into two groups: male to female (also known as Trans Girl or

Trans Women, or Male To Female - MTF) and female to male (also known as Trans Guy, or Female To Male - FTM). The population of LGBT people is also many times smaller than that of the Vietnamese people. However, whether the population is large or small, the LGBT subculture must be understood and recognized.

3. Culture Definition

To begin with, identifying the LGBT subculture, we should still look at some perspectives on the definition of culture. However, we also know that the definition of culture from the time people recognized the culture and studied it has few definitions and studies.

In terms of method, there are two types – descriptive definitions and featured definitions. The descriptive definition lists the elements of culture. For example, according to EB Tylor (1871), *culture* (E.B., 2012) is a complex consisting of knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and all other abilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.

In the featured definition, three major trends can encounter: The first is the tendency to see culture as specific outcomes (products). It can be values, traditions, ways of life, standards, ideas, social institutions, symbols, signs, information created by a community, designed surplus, and accumulation. The second tendency sees culture as a process. It can be creative activities, technologies, processes, ways of existence, living and development, adapting to the environment, and ways of human behavior. Finally, the third trend considers culture as relationships, structures between values, between people and their fellow human beings and species. All these different definitional tendencies have their logical nucleus. The difference between them is mainly because the authors have emphasized one aspect or another of the concept. However, regardless of the trend, all definitions of culture contain an ordinary meaning of people, both recognizing and affirming the close relationship between culture and people.

Tran Ngoc Them also affirmed that culture and humans are two concepts that are not separate from each other (Tran, 2013). From when people appeared, culture appeared from that time. Humans are the creators of culture. Throughout the history of its formation and development, people have always been creative incessantly to create cultural values. One of the cultural values created by people is people themselves - people with culture. Humans create

culture, and at the same time, people are also products of culture. As a product of culture, man is a typical cultural carrier. Material cultural values may be lost, but as long as people-cultural pages remain, the culture will continue to exist and develop. From this point of view, looking back at the biological identity of LGBT people, it is clear that they are also complete human beings, a part of society. According to a simple inference, the LGBT group also has its own culture.

For a long time, somebody understood the phrase culture in Vietnam in a very narrow sense: the level of civilization was graded from 1 to 12 on administrative documents. However, stopping at this understanding leads to a misunderstanding and forms the concept of people with and without cultures. More frightening is that this cultured person identified with an educated person. The wrong understanding deeply ingrains in the Vietnamese people's concept, which gradually creates barriers and prejudices against people in the LGBT community. If LGBT people, especially transgender people, cannot afford to go to school. They will be considered uncultured or countercultural. Moreover, culture is always associated with a set of historical values inherited from generation to generation (Tran, 1999), leading to the limitation of other small subcultures born later historically long enough. Or subcultures that are not in the same frame of reference, the human view of values quickly leads to cultural conflicts and is considered contrary to the central culture.

Anthropologists have developed many theories to analyze and explain ethnicity. In the Euro-American anthropological tradition, cultural anthropologists in North America and social anthropologists in the United Kingdom have developed significant theories that explain culture and society, including ethnic themes. Prominent among them are two opposing theoretical views. First, the academic view of cultural evolution (What Is Cultural Evolution, 2018) holds that human culture in general and specific ethnic groups' cultures have developed from low to high along a single path. Since then, anthropologists studying particular ethnic groups have often placed this ethnic culture somewhere in the evolutionary framework from barbarian to barbarian or civilized. For example, Morgan labels seven different stages of human culture: lower, middle, and upper savagery; lower, middle, and upper barbarism; and civilization (Lewis H., 2013). Because anthropologists in the late 19th century and early 20th century usually came from the West, they used the values and cultural

standards of their ethnic group to reflect and analyze their subject's research. As a result, it leads them to fall into ethnocentrism in exploring the cultures of other ethnic groups, creating an unscientific perception that some ethnic groups are superior to others is different.

The anthropologist Franz Boas developed the theoretical view of cultural relativism, arguing that there is no high culture or low culture to reject the cultural theory of evolution. Instead, each culture is a product formed from its geographical and historical context. Cultural relativism is the ability to understand a culture on its terms and not to make judgments using the standards of one's own culture. This goal is to promote an understanding of cultural practices that are not typically part of one's own culture. Using the perspective of cultural relativism leads to the view that no one culture is superior to another culture when compared to systems of morality, law, politics, etc. (2009). It is a concept that cultural norms and values derive their meaning within a specific social context. This is also based on the idea that there is no absolute standard of good or evil. Therefore, every decision and judgment of what is right and wrong is individually decided in each society. Cultural relativism also means that any opinion on ethics is subject to each person's perspective within their particular culture. Overall, there is no right or wrong ethical system. A holistic understanding of the term cultural relativism tries to promote the knowledge of cultural practices that are unfamiliar to other cultures, such as eating insects, genocides, or genital cutting.

Every society has its own unique culture in which people will have different ideas of moral codes. The diversity of these cultures cannot be said to be correct or incorrect. Every society has independent standards of ethics within its community, and these standards are culture-bound. Cultural Relativism has a perception in which the rightness or wrongness of an action depends entirely on the bounds of the culture.

4. Characteristics of the LGBT Subculture in Vietnam

The LGBT community has been a member of society for a long time in Vietnam. However, in Vietnamese culture, there is limited recognition or reference to the presence of LGBT people. Therefore, in the process of research and observation, we see that cultural events and phenomena are sometimes minor, inconsistent, or not universal for a group of LGBT people. But in fact, those cultural events and

phenomena bring the representativeness and specificity of the LGBT subculture.

4.1. VietPride - The series of events

The VietPride series of events - the most significant series of affairs of the year of the LGBT community in Vietnam to bring pride, cheer to the community, spread the values of love, the courage to live true to yourself, and the world celebrate sexual diversity.

In June of 1969, patrons and supporters of the Stonewall Inn in New York City staged an uprising to resist the police harassment, and persecution LGBT Americans were commonly subjected to. This uprising marks the beginning of a movement to outlaw discriminatory laws and practices against LGBT Americans. Today, celebrations include pride parades, picnics, parties, workshops, symposia, and concerts, and LGBT Pride Month events attract millions of participants worldwide. In addition, memorials are held during this month for those members of the community who have been lost to hate crimes or HIV/AIDS. The purpose of the commemorative month is to recognize LGBTQ individuals' impact on history locally, nationally, and internationally (n.d.-b).

Accordingly, with the humanistic meaning, PRIDE has become a wave, constantly spreading to every country. From a global activity, LGBT people in Vietnam, in general, have turned it into a unique and meaningful one of their own. That is also an intercultural exchange between the significant global LGBT culture and the Vietnamese LGBT subculture, if not exaggerating.

Initially, the Pride project implemented in Vietnam was just a project initiated by a small group of LGBT friends in the Hanoi capital in 2011. And then, it spread to many people in provinces across the country. From 10 provinces participating in VietPride in the first year, more than 30 provinces and cities have connected. Moreover, the series of Viet Pride activities from North to South lasted from the end of July 2017 to the beginning of October 2017. It has once again affirmed the irreplaceable role of Viet Pride in the LGBT community across the country. As a result, society is also gradually transforming, smashing stereotypes about gay, transgender, and bisexual people (2017a). Every year, the LGBT community brings the VietPride events a different theme: Come out in 2012; Strive with pride in 2013 (201 C.E.); Blossom your life in 2014; Spread my wings in 2015; Be yourself free to love in 2016; Seeds of equality in 2017; It's our pride in 2018; Out and

proud in 2019; Light up the Pride in 2020; No matter what in 2021 (n.d.-a).

Accordingly, many heterosexuals, parents, and friends of LGBT people held hands and joined the Viet Pride parade to support the LGBT community. The journey of the past ten years has brought Viet Pride beyond its initial limitations, bringing about positive changes in the whole society, with a correct and positive view of gay, transgender, and bisexual people. People have come closer together, joining hands to create excellent human values. And Vietpride gradually becomes the Tet holiday for LGBT people in Vietnam.

4.2. Lo To Show

Besides, the sexual pride of the LGBT group itself through the Viet Pride cultural event, an activity that is considered a way of life for LGBT people, primarily transgender women. Therefore, from a living activity mainly of transgender women, it has gradually become a feature that everyone knows about LGBT people, which is the Lo to Show - a similar fair bingo game. Lo to Show is a form of entertainment very familiar to the people of the South in Vietnam. The bustling atmosphere in the theater troupes in the western towns, with folk games, funny bingo papers, and colorfully dressed girls, has become a typical memory of cultural range—the feeling of holding the purchased tickets and anxiously waiting for the girls to dial the numbers. Familiar songs that are “mixed” are always interesting to find the numbers. Whoever has five numbers appearing on the same row will be “Kinh” – it means bingo. *Gifts are nothing big, just packets of instant noodles, and a few bags of MSG, but it's still fun* (2017b). In addition, Lo To Troupe, a group of LGBT people in provinces or cities, moves from one location to another. They set up fairs with game booths and stages in empty spaces; they sing, dance, do circus, and do magic activities at night. They are still there to earn enough money. If the audience does not come to play bingo or watch the show, the LGBT people will continue to move.

In 2014, Nguyen Thi Tham's feature-length documentary on this topic - *Chuyen di cuoi cung cua chi Phung* (The Last Trip of Phung) - was warmly received by domestic and foreign audiences with haunting emotions. The Last Trip of Phung is actual footage recorded by director Tham who followed Phung for many years to record. Although it is a documentary, it attracted a lot of attention. It bought tickets from a large part of the audience because it showed a different perspective on the matchless people who take entertainment as a livelihood. And

director Huynh Tuan Anh decided to make a movie Loto inspired by this story.

4.3. Drag queen

Drag (Gerstner, 2006) is the reception of an international artistic activity associated with the transgender community. The phrase *Drag-queen* (Rodriguez Gonzales, 2008) was first used around 1870 in England to refer to male actors playing female roles, stemming from various theatrical causes, including a shortage of female workers. Today, the term is generally used for artists who dress up as women, not necessarily stage actors, singers, dancers, television actors, comedians, or contestants of the show beauty contests. Most especially lip-sync artists - an iconic art activity of the "Drag-queen" world.

Asia, especially Thailand, is an influential drag queen in Vietnam. Initially, the drags experimented with styles from Europe and America but gradually formed their style, returning to the original inspiration of the Asian Drag Queen.

Lip-syncing performances, gorgeous costumes, and thick makeup are the characteristics of Drag Queens. But Vietnamese Drags do not often update the trend. Instead, they only reference musical performances like Whitney Houston and Celine Dion.

In Thailand, drag-queen shows can be performed outside the stage. However, people can only go outside to watch the show. In Vietnam, there will be many performances during the night. Although society has opened up to the LGBTQ+ community in recent years, it is still not open. Therefore, the Drag queen community needs a place where it can be more open to society but not afraid of being abused or feeling unsafe.

Disgusting glances, jokes, or even violent fights are typical for gay and transgender people, especially when they show signs of being deviant. When faced with such a situation, people often have two choices: Hide or live for it. That's one of the reasons that the "drag queen" movement was born. These guys did not try to affirm their masculinity but calmly turned their faces and covered themselves with lipstick and silk. They live and work as true artists with the affirmation: "Feminine does not mean weak and only men who are strong enough dare to show it. "Drag queen" is considered a highlight in the colorful nightlife of the LGBT community. Not only are the men dressed in fancy clothes and lip-syncing the masterpieces of the Divas, but they are also true artists who work hard every night for the audience.

Making money from art activities is the biggest challenge for the Drag Queen community. However, as mentioned, perceptions are still skewed towards the performance activities of the LGBT community. Not only that, performing continuously late at night adversely affects the artist's health.

5. Conclusion

If talking about a culture in general, or a subculture in particular, there will be many things to mention, such as customs and habits, costume culture, food culture or specific religious beliefs, etc. However, these aspects are often associated with the culture of the ethnic group. With the LGBT group having a specificity related to sexual orientation, as I shared above, their subculture identification is also somewhat different. But there are also identifiable aspects, such as festivals, cultural events, cultural activities, livelihood methods, etc., and other identifiable factors, such as sexual culture and family culture, cultural behavior, etc., of LGBT people. However, within the framework of an essay, I would like to present the typical and conspicuous identifying factors of the LGBT group to see that this group of people is also eligible to be considered a subculture and needs to consider a subculture. are interested. Because when we identify LGBT people who have their own culture, they also have their own identity, it will take this group of people out of the counterculture group as is commonly thought. That is also the reason that leads to LGBT people being scorned, stigmatized, and overlooked in society. Up to now, the issue of Vietnamese LGBT people group is only interested in health issues, social fields associated with social evils, social diseases, etc., in general, are problems that are not few positives. And the way agencies and organizations support mainly human rights, law, media, health, etc. If we stop there, we can only solve cultural reality but not yet solve it. That core issue is a cultural mindset. When the LGBT group is considered a cultural entity, they are a community with distinct and distinct cultural characteristics with its own cultural identity. Different culture is not to be shy, but to see the contribution to big culture's colorful picture. Therefore, identifying the LGBT subculture will create a premise not only for the study of LGBT groups from a cultural perspective but also for promoting the rights and presence of LGBT people in society.

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