

RECREATION MATTERS: AN EXPLORATORY ANALYSIS OF DOMESTIC LGBT TOURISM IN VIETNAM

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ABSTRACT

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Over the last decade, LGBT has emerged as a minority group that academics in Vietnam and around the world are interested in, especially when it comes to their rights, policies, and health. LGBT tourism has been seen as a profitable niche market in the growing global tourist industry. However, this group's tourist and leisure activities remain an under-researched topic. This study attempts to dissect the characteristics of LGBT tourists and explores the prospects for LGBT tourism development in the Vietnamese context. To aid with data collection and analysis, a mixed-method design with embedded orientation combining quantitative and qualitative research was deployed. The findings illustrate that LGBT people have a considerable need for travel and prefer economical travel options with friendly customer service. LGBT tourist activities have become more prevalent in Vietnam and are promoted through mass media. However, information is still limited, and the service quality has never been publicly validated. This paper identifies two approaches to delivering tourism services to LGBT customers in Vietnam: (1) giving services to the general population while being open to LGBT people and (2) providing specialized tourism services for LGBT customers. We recommend that LGBT tourism not be marginalized and establishing sustainable LGBT tourism with attractions and services customized for the LGBT community, or able to show empathy, should be included in the development agenda of the Vietnamese tourism industry.

Keywords: Gay tourism; specialized services; LGBT tourism; pink tourism; Vietnamese tourism

1. INTRODUCTION

As a minority population with significantly diverse sexual identities, there have never been precise numbers on the proportion of the LGBT+ groups in different countries. Globally, the LGBT+ Pride 2021 Ipsos Global Survey (Boyon, 2021, p. 4) reveals that on average 80% identify as heterosexual, 3% as gay, lesbian, or homosexual, 4% as bisexual, 1% as pansexual or omnisexual, 1% as asexual, 1% as "other", and 11% do not know or are not willing to say. The stigma and discrimination against homosexuality remain a significant barrier to them having the same chance to live a healthy life and being protected by the law as any other minority in society. In recent years, the worldwide community's attention to LGBT issues has been increasing, and there have been positive advancements. Thirty-one countries worldwide have legalized same-sex marriage

(Human Rights Campaign Foundation, n.d.), and 96 nations have systems in place to allow transgender people to change gender legally (Chiam et al., 2017). Various research and efforts have been carried out to raise the general understanding of the LGBT+ community and minimize stigma and discrimination towards LGBT+ people. However, other concerns, including their emotions and social lives, have received insufficient worldwide attention, with Vietnam being no exception. It is safe to assert that like any independent individual, LGBT+ people have requirements for social interaction and recreation besides fundamental human needs. This is demonstrated by the relatively early establishment of underground entertainment venues for LGBT+ people, such as gay bars and gay clubs.

In particular, the expansion of LGBT-related tourism and entertainment activities has contributed substantially to the tourism industry as a dynamic segment and promoted the value of LGBT individuals in society. Founded in 1983 with 25 travel agents and hotel owners, The International Gay and Lesbian Travel Association (IGLTA), the first gay organization to receive affiliate member status in the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), has expanded with more than 2,200 dues-paying member businesses. Many businesses have developed services explicitly geared toward this prospective market. For over 25 years, Community Marketing and Insights (CMI) has conducted an annual survey of the LGBT community, mainly in tourism and hospitality areas. LGBT travel remains a “dream market” owing to increased same-sex marriages, honeymoons, and LGBT-related events and festivals (Vorobjovas-Pinta, 2021). LGBT tourism has had the ability to alleviate the existing stigma and prejudice toward homosexuality in recent years. Tourism destinations that welcome LGBT people as visitors help improve the perception, knowledge, and awareness of LGBT individuals as customers in marketing. Furthermore, close-up photos of LGBT people at tourist attractions provide signals of humanity and respect for all groups who use travel services. Also, there is an indisputable link between the development of LGBT+ tourism and the advancements in LGBT people’s rights and regulations (Liberato et al., 2018; World Tourism Organization [UNWTO], 2012, 2017).

Despite its significance in economic growth, few researchers have considered the topic of LGBT tourism in the cultural context of Vietnam. There has only been one preliminary study on tourist consumer behavior among Vietnamese LGBT individuals, which was included in the “Second Global Report on LGBT Tourism” (UNWTO, 2017). Enterprises or service businesses should identify the demands for travel among LGBT communities as with any other customers, which is a critical basis for accessing and offering suitable and tailored tourist services. It is a significant problem for suppliers to ignore the socio-psychological aspects of target customers. Because of their identity connections and mutual support, the LGBT segment has operated as a community rather than as individuals (Liberato et al., 2018). Understanding the characteristics of LGBT people as a possible consumer group is more crucial than ever in the context of the tourist market being highly impacted by an integrated series of elements, including regulations, rights, social settings, communication, and media.

Within the scope of this study, we questioned a variety of Vietnamese LGBT consumers who used tourist services, including their experiences, needs, and expenditure on domestic and outbound tourism. Furthermore, as an exploratory study, we intended to identify opportunities and barriers to developing LGBT tourism while taking into account the country’s cultural and political context. LGBT-friendly services were mapped in some of Vietnam’s major cities, including tourist guide organizations, lodging facilities, and friendly destinations. Based on our findings of the LGBT community’s needs, motivations, and travel preferences in Vietnam, we analyzed the possibilities and made recommendations to promote LGBT tourism.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. LGBT+ community in Vietnam

Although homosexuality remains a contentious topic in Vietnam, various signs have shown that Vietnam will become a more open and safer environment for LGBT individuals in the future. Over the past decade, Vietnam has taken significant steps to advance the rights and liberties of LGBT+ people, including removing barriers to same-sex marriages, consulting on amending the Civil Code to allow transgender people to legally change their gender and providing diverse and open-minded spaces to discuss LGBT+ rights issues, educating the public, and advocating for policy and law reform. Vietnam’s Law on Marriage and Family repealed the prohibition of same-sex marriage in 2014 (Kara et al., 2021). In 2015, Vietnam became the 62nd country in the world and the 11th in Asia to allow transgender people to be re-issued identification based on gender identity (Huynh et al., 2021). However, encouraging effective enforcement is a difficulty that the LGBT+ community needs addressing. The Labor Code currently lacks a clause against discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity, and the proposal to legalize same-sex marriage has been rejected. Despite the growing need to incorporate personal information (name, gender) into legal documents for freedom of

movement, medical health treatment, and intervention, the draft Law on Gender Affirmation has not yet been approved.

Vietnam is seeing an increase in the number of organizations and movements toward LGBT rights. By October 2020, 11 organizations registered advocacy for LGBT rights as one of their primary areas of activity. Furthermore, numerous local groups with the format “LGBT + name of province/city” (e.g., LGBT Dong Nai, LGBT Tay Ninh, LGBT Bac Giang) have been established to implement local programming. With the support of COC Netherlands, the PRIDE initiative, which allowed local communities to lead and establish their agenda based on their objectives, has been implemented at around 15 different sites. Most Vietnamese organizations continue to use the label “LGBT” to refer to this sexual minority community rather than LGBTIQ, LGBTI, or LGBT+, while others have made flexible alterations to assist in campaigning for rights and policies for their target groups (Kara et al., 2021). Public events in favor of the LGBT community exploded in 2012, with the capital Hanoi hosting its first Gay Pride march (AFP, 2012). Then, in 2013, the first queer art festival, “Queer Forever,” was held in Vietnam, connecting modern art and Vietnamese culture with queer sensibilities. Throughout the two-week festival, various arts and multidisciplinary conversations provided an unprecedented opportunity for everyone to interact, exchange, and explore the issues of queer and gender from the perspective of art and literature (Hanoi Grapevine, 2013).

Safe spaces and shelters are also a positive addition to providing welcoming environments for LGBT people to express themselves confidently and engage in the LGBT community. Three safe initiatives have been conducted in three major cities in Vietnam to establish a network of sites that offer LGBT-friendly services for diverse human needs. To date, there are 52 Queer Zone network sites in Hanoi, 20 Pride Map-linked places in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC), and 3 LGBTI+ Friendly Spot network locations in Da Nang (Kara et al., 2021). All of these changes are significant steps toward demonstrating that aspects of the LGBT community’s spiritual and social lives are beginning to pique the interest of activists and policymakers in Vietnam, as well as an opportunity for businesses and organizations to contribute to the LGBT community’s development by promoting equal values and recognizing diversity for their targeted customers.

2.2. LGBT tourism & LGBT tourism products

Although the term LGBT tourism was coined to categorize this market niche, much of the study has focused on gay and lesbian travel behaviors; there has been a paucity of literature on bisexual and transgender travel. Gay tourism was more widespread in the tourism field with the term so-called “gay holidaymaking” in the late 1900s (Hughes, 2006). In this study, we broadly defined “LGBT tourism” to include all tourist components that appeal to the LGBT population. LGBT tourism is the development and promotion of tourist goods and services for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender individuals. LGBT tourism, in other words, is a type of specialty tourism marketed to LGBT individuals and has become increasingly popular in many countries worldwide. This is a method for members of the LGBT community to participate in LGBT-specific service activities while feeling safer and more comfortable about their consumption when traveling (UNWTO, 2017).

LGBT tourism is not dissimilar to general tourism. Figure 1 describes four tourism components (4A’s tourism component): Attraction, Accessibility, Amenity, and Ancillary (Andrianto & Sugiana, 2016). Some tourism services were specifically intended for LGBT tourists (nearly exclusively for gay and lesbian tourists), such as honeymoons and wedding ceremonies for same-sex couples, as well as accommodations or excursions for LGBT groups (UNWTO, 2017). LGBT people also want tourism destinations and service providers to recognize gender and sexual orientation diversity and welcome them as consumers with specific needs when using the services.

An LGBT tourism product may be handled from interrelated aspects, including (1) providing an LGBT-friendly environment, (2) creating positive social interaction for LGBT+ individuals, and (3) allowing LGBT+ people to be themselves. LGBT friendliness is emphasized while developing tourism services for sexual minority customers. However, each tourist location has a varying level of LGBT friendliness based on local regulations and policies. For example, San Francisco and Sydney give broad city-wide safe spaces for homosexual visitors, but Moscow and Singapore have many boundaries for LGBT people, only providing a few LGBT-friendly venues for them to visit, such as gay clubs, hotels, cafés, restaurants, resorts, and bathhouses. Service providers should give adequate information on where LGBT individuals can communicate with other community members (e.g., language, gesture, etc.) without breaching local social standards for LGBT individuals to participate freely and sociably in travel experiences. This decreases the possibility of forming a negative image of LGBT people in the eyes of residents who have never encountered LGBT individuals or have pre-existing biases towards non-heterosexuality. Finally, LGBT people have a high need to disclose their sexual or gender identity. As a vital component of supporting LGBT people enjoying their travel experience, providing them with an enabling atmosphere helps them assert their identity without having to play a “straight” role in preventing stigma and prejudice from anyone else (Ooi, 2021, pp. 23–24).

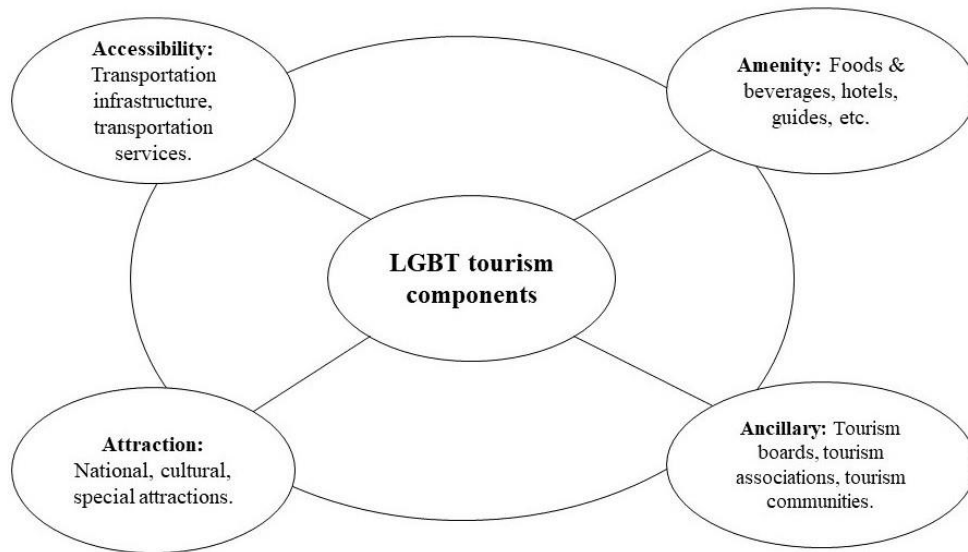


Figure 1: LGBT Tourism Components (Andrianto & Sugiyama, 2016)

2.3. LGBT tourism: From global profile to Vietnamese landscape

LGBT tourism is viewed as a profitable “pink dollar” (*money spent by members of the LGBT+ communities*) business that many scholars are interested in exploring and analyzing (Ro & Khan, 2022). Ginder and Byun (2015, p. 823) discovered that there were four fundamental research approaches among LGBT+ consumers, including (1) the viability of the gay and lesbian market, (2) the nature of gay/lesbian-targeted media and advertising, (3) consumer responses to gay/lesbian-targeted advertising, and (4) customer behavior and attitudes among gays and lesbians.

For many decades, homosexuals and lesbians have been a group of trailblazers who influenced the LGBT+ community’s consumer patterns, while people who identify as bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, and other non-heterosexuals appear to be overlooked. The Damron Address Book, published in 1964 by the Damron Company in the US, was the first gay men’s travel guide, followed by the first edition of the German-produced Spartacus International Gay Guide in 1970 (UNWTO, 2017). Passport Magazine, Out Traveler, Connexions Magazine, Gay Travel Magazine, and other gay-travel magazines have been published worldwide. The Spartacus International Gay Guide and FunMaps are other LGBT-friendly business promotional brand names. Despite being a minority of the general population, LGBT tourism accounted for around 10% of the total travel market (Community Marketing and Insights [CMI], 2018; UNWTO, 2012). Based on this data and CMI sample demographics, the yearly economic effect of LGBT travelers in the United States might be estimated to be more than \$65 billion per year (UNWTO, 2012). Furthermore, research of 3,703 LGBTQ respondents in the United States in 2017 revealed that LGBTQ participants took 3.2 vacations or leisure travels and 1.4 business trips on average in the previous 12 months. Although there are significant gender and generational variances, LGBTQ visitors tend to choose moderately priced services. Only 29% of respondents are budget travelers with an occasional splurge, and 11% are budget/ economy travelers (CMI, 2018).

Since the first publication in 2012, LGBT tourism has seen significant changes, confirming its value and importance in the global tourism industry (UNWTO, 2017). Initially, communication regarding LGBT tourism was limited to reports and surveys describing LGBT travelers as a varied and growing group of customers, as well as an overview of the social and economic effect of LGBT travel on destinations. As tourist marketing switched online, LGBT tourism evolved alongside the digital era. LGBT visitors efficiently use communication channels, whether online or offline, to locate and select appropriate tourism destinations (UNWTO, 2017; Liberato et al., 2018). Advertising is classified into two types: implicit advertising and explicit advertising. The ambiguous advertising expresses marketers’ deliberation in marketing products to gay and lesbian customers, making it difficult for heterosexual customers to recognize homosexual identities. Meanwhile, other advertisements may display LGBT patterns in their products. Nonetheless, both were created in accordance with heterosexual stereotypes, for example, “lipstick lesbians” or “young and strong gay men” (Coffin et al., 2019). LGBTQ media advertising has a more significant impact on LGBT consumers than general population media advertising, impacting 72% of LGBTQ purchasing decisions (CMI, 2019). According to Oakenfull and

Greenlee (2004) as well as Oakenfull (2005), lesbians and gays prefer commercials with images from their group over advertisements with heterosexual imagery. However, in a masculine setting, lesbian consumers are more convinced by lesbian imagery, whereas gay customers have the same propensity. She also proved that gay individuals' gender and level of LGBT identity influence their responses to various forms of gay-oriented advertising messages (Oakenfull, 2007).

Within a spectrum of tourist types, two concepts should be highlighted in the current study context: allocentric and psychocentric. The allocentric tourist is an extrovert who views travel as an opportunity to learn about cultures and is enthused about experiencing novel ideas, while the psychocentric tourist takes traditional routes and feels more at ease in familiar situations (Plog, 1991). There are two types of homosexual tourists: those who regard travel as a chance to meet friends or seek sexual experiences and hence visit exciting gay-friendly areas; and those who, like allocentric tourists, are interested in learning about new cultures and are more likely to explore a non-gay destination (Clift & Forrest, 1999). LGBT visitors generally declined to visit countries where homosexuality is "taboo," leading to the conclusion that while sexuality may not affect choice, it could be a significant factor in culling available options (Pritchard et al., 2000).

Although the "LGBT tourism" term is still largely undefined in Vietnam, leisure activities for this community have evolved for many decades. During the Vietnam War, one of the first studies on Vietnam's LGBT community found 18 gay bars and three lesbian bars in Sai Gon (now known as Ho Chi Minh City). Because homosexuality was considered a sexual aberration in the South, gay couples were forced to spend their time together in hidden underground clubs and bars in Saigon (Queen In The World, n.d.). Many clients in these businesses were middle-aged males and students under 20. There were some LGBT-friendly nightclubs, cafés, and saunas. Many orphaned or underprivileged children were openly introduced to clients' street corners. At that time, at least four businesses offered "call-boy" services to wealthy Chinese merchants or to foreigners (mostly French) (Pastoetter, 2001).

Because of legal openness and the development of the LGBT movement, the entertainment activities of LGBT organizations have been more prominent and prevalent since 2011. Community activities have attracted a diverse range of attendees, including non-LGBT individuals. The Pride project was started by a small LGBT group in Hanoi and has extended to more than 30 cities and provinces. The *lo-to* spectacle is also known as a frequent kind of entertainment associated with the image of transgender people. It is Vietnam's unique version of drag queen shows, with transgender people performing a combination of musical pieces, dramas, and comedic sketches while drawing and shouting out numbers for the night's bingo games. Although it is a reasonably popular entertainment program in Vietnam's South, few people identify *Lo-to* spectacle as a stage art form since it lacks distinct qualities and is frequently connected with the image of LGBT people. However, in recent years, the *Lo-to* show has transformed to reinforce its position with positive portrayals of transgender individuals, as shown in a typical *Lo-to* show— "Gánh hát ngàn hoa" [Thousand Flowers Singing Troupe] (Nguyen, 2019; Khue, 2019).

3. METHODOLOGY

For this study, we employed an embedded, mixed-method design. This design can help generate data congruent with research objectives from many aspects (Creswell & Clark, 2011). The quantitative data in this design provides information on the experience of LGBT tourism in Vietnam. The qualitative approach contributes to data on the actual global LGBT tourism, socio-cultural background, and elements directly associated with the growth of LGBT tourism in Vietnam.

Two surveys were undertaken to collect data from Vietnamese LGBT people. The first survey was done in 2013 using a survey disseminated via Google Forms with 73 participants, and the findings were published in the World Tourism Organization's LGBT tourism report (UNWTO, 2017). The second survey was likewise performed online and distributed through the social networking site Facebook in 2018, mainly through two fan pages: Taosinh (126,926 likes) and Hanoi Queer (16,674 likes). The LGBT people completed the survey voluntarily and were obliged to answer all questions before submission, resulting in 108 responses. The questionnaire design was similar in both phases, including (1) the respondent's demographic details, (2) tourism consumption needs, (3) the LGBT-friendly destinations, and (4) the ability to develop specific tourism programs. The detailed questions of the 2018 survey form have been slightly altered to accommodate the objects and requirements of additional data.

Document review was used as the qualitative research approach to help systematize the growth of LGBT tourism worldwide and in Vietnam, and to map the current LGBT-friendly services in Vietnam. To our knowledge, no empirical study has examined LGBT tourism in Vietnam, so most of the references analyzed in this study were secondary sources (e.g., journal articles, books, abstracts, and reports). The quality of the secondary sources was evaluated using four criteria: authenticity (whether production is original and reliable

and has not been subsequently altered), credibility (whether the document's information is honest and accurate), representativeness (whether the reference is typical of such accounts) and meaning (whether the evidence is clear and comprehensible) (Kridel, n.d.). In addition, we obtain primary sources about tourism service facilities from websites, blogs, online magazines or newspapers, and Facebook. Besides, we searched for reliable tourism websites well-liked by the LGBT community and called their marketing departments to gain more relevant information.

4. RESULTS

This section describes the essential characteristics of LGBT travelers, focusing on their qualities, previous travel experience, and needs. Also, a list of LGBT-related popular tourist agencies, their services, and their operating status in Vietnam is provided.

4.1. Demographics

In 2013, homosexual males accounted for 65.8% of the 73 LGBT people who took part in the study, followed by 13.7% lesbians and 11% bisexuals. Transgender people and others accounted for 2.7% and 6.8 % respectively. The proportion of gay males remained the highest in 2018, at 29.6%. However, the percentage of bisexual and lesbian respondents increased significantly, reaching 22.2% and 20.4%, respectively. Different sexual orientations were stated by 18 of 108 LGBT respondents, with more than half of those identifying as pansexual. The respondents' average age was relatively young. In the 2013 survey 94.5% of respondents were between 15 and 29, compared to 90.7% in the 2018 assessment. Of the 108 respondents in the 2018 study, 37% were under the age of 19.

Only one of the 73 respondents in 2013 lived outside Vietnam, with the majority residing in urban areas such as Hanoi (43%) and Ho Chi Minh City (40%), which are LGBT-centric cities with an open living environment and a diverse range of LGBT products and services. Other cities/provinces, including Hai Phong, Quang Ninh, Bac Giang, Nghe An, Vung Tau, Binh Duong, Long An, Soc Trang, and Tra Vinh, had a modest percentage of LGBT participants, ranging from 1 to 3%. In the 2018 survey, 65% of respondents lived in Hanoi, 13% in Ho Chi Minh City and 8% in Hai Phong, with the remainder in other cities and provinces like Bac Ninh, Phu Tho, and Vinh.

In both surveys, 93% of LGBT individuals acknowledged their sexual orientation to some extent, with the percentage of those who were entirely open about their sexual orientation being 18% in 2013 and 12% in 2018. Only a few of the LGBT respondents felt comfortable enough to share this with their families, at 5% (in 2013) and 3% (in 2018). During the two years of study, there was little difference in the rate of social connections between heterosexual and LGBT people. In 2013, 41% of respondents reported a balanced relationship with both heterosexuals and LGBT people, while 39% only made friends with "straight" people. In 2018, these figures were 39% and 40%, respectively. Furthermore, 13% (in 2013) and 10% (in 2018) merely had a connection with other LGBT+.

4.2. LGBT's tourism experience

The results unveiled that the frequency of travel in the Vietnamese LGBT community was comparably high (Table 1). Only 18% of respondents answered that they had not traveled within the previous year, in both the 2013 and 2018 surveys. Compared to the results of CMI (CMI, 2018), the data is similar with 13% taking no leisure trips or vacations and 22% for no trips to visit family or friends in the previous 12 months.

The percentage of respondents going abroad in 2018 grew dramatically compared to 2013 by 15%. In 2018, of those who traveled three or more years before, more than half traveled abroad. They usually had short vacations, from two to three days (50%) or four to five days (22%). In addition, 13% of respondents traveled for only one day and 15% for five days in the 2018 study.

Table 1: LGBT+ Tourism Experience Through Self-Reported Characteristics

		2013 (n = 73)	2018 (n = 108)
The frequency of traveling in the past 12 months	<i>Never</i>	18%	18%
	<i>1-2 times</i>	59%	45%
	<i>3-5 times</i>	11%	22%
	<i>> 5 times</i>	12%	15%

Table 1: LGBT+ Tourism Experience Through Self-Reported Characteristics (Continued)

		2013 (n = 73)	2018 (n = 108)
Having traveled abroad (any countries outside Vietnam)	<i>Yes</i>	33%	48%
	<i>No</i>	67%	52%
Expenditure for domestic travel	<i>< 3 million VND</i>	38%	41%
	<i>3-< 5 million VND</i>	43%	24%
	<i>5-7 million VND</i>	8%	17%
	<i>> 7 million VND</i>	11%	18%
Expenditure for the outbound trip	<i>< 3 million VND</i>	31%	32%
	<i>3-< 5 million VND</i>	44%	23%
	<i>5-7 million VND</i>	16%	31%
	<i>> 7 million VND</i>	9%	14%
Whom LGBT people traveled with	<i>Alone</i>	14%	2%
	<i>Family</i>	37%	45%
	<i>Friends (not LGBT)</i>	15%	20%
	<i>LGBT friends</i>	7%	15%
	<i>Colleagues</i>	8%	7%

Of the respondents, 37% regularly traveled with their families in 2013 and 45% in 2018. According to Huang and Hsu (2009), travel companions (friends or family) are one of the constraining variables influencing travel decisions. The data indicated that LGBT's families are also a group of potential customers for organizations and agencies that aim to develop specific services for the LGBT community. There was not much difference between choosing to go with LGBT or non-LGBT friends since they tended to be open-minded to travel with others rather than alone. In 2013, 14% of the respondents often chose to travel alone; by 2018, this figure was only 2%.

According to the findings, Vietnamese LGBT paid on average less than 5 million VND for domestic travel (81% in 2013 and 65% in 2018). Those who had traveled more than five times in the previous year spent an average of 5 million–7 million VND for each domestic trip. 75% of respondents preferred web services to directly book services, while 6% purchased tickets or tours through travel agencies. In 2018, 10% of LGBT participants selected travel agencies as service providers to reserve accommodation. Most of them directly phoned the accommodation (41%), used accommodation websites (17%) or use an online booking website/app (28%). Similarly, according to CMI (2012), reserving directly with a hotel or airline through the internet was the most popular booking option among LGBT people in the United States.

4.3. LGBT's needs for tourism activities

In 2013, the top five categories of tourism favored by LGBT+ participants were sight-seeing, entertainment tourism, leisure tourism, backpacking, and eco-tourism. Notably, they were willing to spend most of their travel budget on food and beverages, with half of those being willing to pay a premium for it. In the 2018 survey, tourism fan pages on Facebook had the most effective communication strategies in the process of choosing a location (67%). The term "LGBT-friendly location" is growing more popular; in 2013, just 22% of the respondents had heard of it; in 2018, this percentage was markedly higher, at 52%. Additionally, 41% were aware of LGBT-friendly services in their vicinity, such as restaurants, cafés, bars, accommodations, and entertainment services.

According to the 2013 survey results, there were five primary aspects that an LGBT person considers when choosing accommodation: geographical location, amenities, level of LGBT-friendliness, costs, and customer service. More than half of those respondents said that affordable prices and friendly customer service are crucial, yet the cost is still the most significant consideration for most LGBT people surveyed. Since the LGBT population is incredibly diverse, it could be challenging to identify LGBT tourists' typical characteristics within a single culture. The previous studies in Western countries and other Asian countries merely focused on describing gay travelers' characteristics. Wong and Tolkach (2017) pointed out that topics discussed in these studies are often associated with the economic feasibility of attracting LGBT travelers to existing tourism locations and creating new ones that cater to their needs. Since most of gay travelers do not have children, they

are portrayed as having more discretionary cash to spend on vacations. Another topic that keeps coming up is the need for a secure atmosphere and gay-friendly areas at locations. In addition, prior works have highlighted the importance of socializing and romance as components of the trip experience that homosexual visitors want. Wong and Tolkach (2017) also observed that Western literature tends to portray homosexual tourists as wealthy individuals, emphasizing the significance of gay space and prospects for romantic encounters. Western researchers have also found that homosexual men tend to steer clear of traveling to places that are less accepting of their community. Undoubtedly, like other travelers, LGBT people travel with the aim of relaxation. However, Asian LGBT tourists seem to have taken budget, accessibility, and activities in tourist destinations into consideration before traveling (Wong & Tolkach, 2017). Thus, our finding is consistent with the results retrieved from Wong and Tolkach's research (2017) in six Asian countries, which revealed that many LGBT individuals are more concerned with how the cost of travel fits their budget than whether the tourist location is friendly. Contrary to many prior study findings on the LGBT population in the West, LGBT people are known as a group of wealthy people seeking a secure and welcoming environment where they can show their affection and sexual orientation (Hughes, 2006; Vorobjovas-Pinta & Hardy, 2016; Wong & Tolkach, 2017).

4.4. Existing LGBT-friendly services in big cities in Vietnam

LGBT-friendly travel agencies

Based on reviews of renowned travel consulting websites used by the LGBT community, such as Lonely Planet, TripAdvisor, Utopia, and Purple Roofs, 20 Vietnamese LGBT-friendly travel agencies have been listed. However, because representatives of some enterprises refused to provide information or could not be contacted via the phone numbers provided on their websites, the researchers only worked with six businesses to confirm and explore more information about service providers. Gay Hanoi Tour, Idea Travel Asia, Rainbow Tourism, Vietnam Gay Vacation, Xin Chao Private Vietnam Tour Guide, and See Vietnam Foundation were among the travel businesses that contributed information to the study. All businesses were founded within the last ten years and focused intensely on their target market. While Idea Travel Asia and Xin Chao Private Vietnam Tour Guide tend to internationalize and welcome foreign travelers to Vietnam, Gay Hanoi Tour and Rainbow Tourism cater to domestic LGBT customers. Unlike Gay Hanoi Tour or Vietnam Gay Tourism, owned by gay men and mostly communicated through fan pages, Rainbow Tourism has a varied service network on its standalone website, recognized by the Utopia website for service quality. Since its inception in 2012, Rainbow tourism has reported an average of 2–5 groups of LGBT visitors each month.

LGBT-friendly accommodation

The study gathered 103 LGBT-friendly accommodations based on recommendations from four websites (www.utopia-asia.com, www.travelgayasia.com, www.travelbyinterest.com, and <https://queerintheworld.com/>), as well as keyword searches for “LGBT friendly,” “gay friendly,” and “lesbian friendly” on consulting websites such as www.tripadvisor.com, www.intrepidtravel.com, www.indochinaexploretour.com. There were 13 B&B hotels or homestays, five hotels 2-stars and under, 17 3-star hotels, 31 4-star hotels, and 37 5-star hotels in the 103 categorized accommodations. Out of the 103 businesses, 7 are gay-owned, including B&B Mui Ne Michael & Viet, Royal Palace Hotel Hanoi 2, A74 Guesthouse, TS Beach House, Life's a beach homestay, Saigon River Boutique Hotel, and Artisan Boutique Hotel. The details are displayed in Table 2.

Table 2: LGBT-Friendly Accommodation in Vietnam

Provinces/Cities	B&B, homestay	<2 star	3-star	4-star	5-star	Total	Website references
Binh Thuan	1	1	2	2	1	7	Utopia, Travel by Interest
Can Tho					1	1	Travel by Interest
Da Nang					1	1	Utopia, Travel by Interest
Dong Thap	1					1	Travel Gay Asia
Ha Noi	2	1	10	9	6	28	Utopia, Travel by Interest, Travel Gay Asia, Queer in the World, TripAdvisor, Kilijourney, Intrapidtravel, Indochinaexploretour
Hai Phong					1	1	Utopia
Hoa Binh				1		1	Utopia
Hoi An, Quang Nam	1		1	4	3	9	Utopia, Travel by Interest
Hue				1	3	4	Travel by Interest
Nha Trang					8	8	Utopia, Travel by Interest

Table 2: LGBT-Friendly Accommodation in Vietnam (Continued)

Provinces/Cities	B&B, homestay	<2 star	3-star	4-star	5-star	Total	Website references
Phu Quoc, Kien Giang	3			2	1	6	Utopia, Travel by Interest
Quy Nhon, Binh Dinh	1				1	2	Utopia, Travel by Interest
Sapa, Lao Cai				1		1	Utopia
Ho Chi Minh City	3	3	4	10	11	31	Utopia, Travel by Interest, Travel Gay Asia, Queer in the World,
Tien Giang	1					1	Utopia
Vung Tau				1		1	Travel by Interest
Total	13	5	17	31	37	103	

Additional service facilities

Statistically, 88 companies offered LGBT-friendly food and entertainment services (six were closed), including 23 bars, clubs, and discos; 21 restaurants and cafés; 36 places offering spa, massage, and sauna services; and two fashion stores. These facilities were distributed nationwide in eight provinces and cities (Da Nang, Hanoi, Hoi An, Nha Trang, Phan Thiet, Phu Quoc, Ho Chi Minh City, and Vung Tau). Table 3 presents specific information.

Table 3: Additional Service Facilities Which are Friendly to LGBT in Vietnam

Provinces/Cities	Bar, pub, club	Restaurants, café	Fashion shops or souvenir shops	Spa, massage & sauna services	Total
Can Tho				1	1
Da Nang	1			3	4
Ha Noi	9	4		11	24
Hoi An	1	3	1		5
Hue				1	1
Nha Trang	1				1
Phan Thiet	1				1
Phu Quoc	1	1			2
Ho Chi Minh city	6	19	1	19*	45
Vung Tau	3			1	4
Total	23	27	2	36	88

Note: *Including two listed facilities but no specific information

The two central cities (Hanoi and HCMC) have the most service facilities and the most diverse services. HCMC proves its openness to these groups by having more than double the number of extra service facilities of Hanoi and more than 15–20 times the number in other provinces/cities. The amount of publicly LGBT-friendly cafés accounts for a substantial proportion of LGBT services in HCMC. In addition, restaurants catering to high-income LGBT international and LGBT customers have received several positive reviews and are visited by many LGBT customers. Many service providers are willing to identify their facilities' names that reflect the LGBT community's identity, such as Thuy Linh *pe-de* hot pot (*pe-de* is a term to depict gay men in Vietnam, which originates from the French word *pédéraste*), LGBT café, and Thai Cong Restaurant. However, it is noteworthy many other places; those having been widely advertised on media sites, were already closed, such as GC gay bar (one of the first and most famous gay bars in Hanoi), Nhà Ấm cafe (introduced by Vietnammoi newspaper as a meeting place for LGBT Hanoi), and No Stress Café (a famous coffee shop in Ho Chi Minh owned by one lesbian). This observation indicates that the operation of a firm that appears to be sensitive is clearly fraught with challenges.

Massage, spa, and sauna services for LGBT people are the main extra services sought that can also be illegal in some countries since they could be a front for criminal activities involving prostitution. There is a variety of information about this sort of service offered in forums and other places online, specifically for the LGBT community, but there is no recorded information about how it works. As a result, as indicated in Table 3, we only feature service facilities that have been proposed and remarked on by users of Travel Gay Asia, Queer in the World, and Utopia. Most of them are related to advertising images of men's muscular bodies. Some spas are established by gay men, such as Ami Spa, Spa Adam, Him Spa, and Rainbow Spa. Almost all these spas utilize Facebook as their primary communication channel, with only a few having standalone websites.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The current study has made a significant contribution to the understanding of Vietnamese LGBT travel preferences. The two surveys, conducted in 2013 and 2018, gave a description of LGBT groups' tourism characteristics, including their travel experiences, their preferences when selecting a travel service, and the sources of tourism-related information commonly accessed. Regardless of economic level, most LGBT individuals have a high need for tourism; based on their financial circumstances, they can choose reasonable travel options (domestic or international, how frequently they travel, and how much it costs). According to studies, the percentage of LGBT people who travel domestically and internationally increased considerably between 2013 and 2018. However, the study's small sample, which was primarily centered on two major cities, is insufficient to reflect the characteristics of Vietnam's LGBT community. Besides, the data was collected before the COVID-19 pandemic; the current trend, thus, may have slightly changed. The study has provided some analysis of the factors related to the development of LGBT tourism in Vietnam based on a review of available sources. However, there is still a lack of empirical data to consider whether there is an association between LGBT tourism and the policy advocacy process for LGBT people and the cultural and recreational activities. Therefore, more research is required to offer further knowledge of the characteristics of LGBT travelers in the context of Vietnam.

In Vietnam, the tourist and entertainment industries have become increasingly specialized for the LGBT customers. They are targeted by tourism agencies and businesses that offer accompanying services such as hotels, cafés, bars, restaurants, massage, and saunas. Others reach out to the LGBT community by increasing their reception and consulting services; they strive to provide a safe space and maximize support for LGBT consumers without judgment or discrimination. However, the information offered by service locations claiming to be LGBT-friendly service providers remains relatively ambiguous, mainly self-affirming and based on feedback from LGBT clients who have used their services. LGBT-friendly on-site services (restaurants, cafés, bars, and pubs) still localize in the big cities, Hanoi City and Ho Chi Minh City, and have yet to be fully diversified in other tourist cities or areas.

Almost all LGBT travel market research undertaken in the early 2000s focused on LGBT people's need for a private and safe space to be themselves. At that time, heteronormative places were possible for the stigmatization and marginalization of homosexuals and their freedom of expression. These spaces also function as communication and execution platforms for diverse services, such as dating, HIV testing, counseling, pubs, cafés, and hotels (Hall et al., 2012; Vorobjovas-Pinta & Hardy, 2016). However, it appears that this priority is no longer appropriate; many LGBT individuals do not have a strong desire to show their gender identity or sexual orientation in tourist destinations; instead, they like to enjoy a wide range of travel services at an affordable price. Visser (2014) explained this trend transition by stating that the emergence of technological platforms for gay men and LGBT people, such as Jack'D, Grindr, or Tinder, has transformed how gay men socialize. Travel safety has always been a pillar for the LGBTQ community, particularly during and after the pandemic. Travel safety is no longer limited to LGBT or queer spaces; it is also a requirement for travel service providers to ensure the safety of LGBT people with full human rights and protection when they travel to any country or region, especially for international tourism. Service providers must thoroughly research the laws, rules, cultural context, and acceptance levels of the LGBT population in the country or region where they offer tours to ensure their customers are respected and safe (Salvato, 2021). The fact is that not all LGBT tourists want to identify as LGBT. In this case, they have nearly the same activities and travel requirements as normal travelers. As a result, service providers need not market themselves as LGBT-only services; instead, they may be LGBT-friendly, which means safe and open, but also acceptable to heterosexual visitors. It is not required to approach LGBT visitors as a single market; even doing so may exacerbate the discrimination towards LGBT people (Vorobjovas-Pinta & Hardy, 2016).

Social networks are presently the primary communication channel to reach out to most Vietnamese LGBT people in their search for travel services, with Facebook being the most popular. According to Community Marketing & Insights' (CMI) 2019 research, Facebook and YouTube are the two most popular outreach platforms, followed by Instagram and LinkedIn. However, the unverified information makes it difficult for LGBT individuals to choose a service they can trust. Many businesses or companies claim to be LGBT-friendly, yet their advertising pictures tend to be masculine or feminine rather than explicitly presenting diverse LGBT sexual identities. Others were advertised by the media as having LGBT-friendly services but received poor comments from LGBT customers who had authentic service experiences. This is a significant challenge of selecting LGBTQ as target customers: whether their approaches are appropriate to make enough profit to maintain and develop their businesses in the long run. The Vietnamese marketing of LGBT tourist services is still fragmented and personal. In this study, many businesses (except those who declined to provide information) supplied ambiguous and personal information rather than actual statistics during their operation.

In the Vietnamese context, despite numerous debates over the role of media and image marketing in LGBTQ Pride parades and festivals, LGBTQ culture, arts, or film. It is also an excellent chance for businesses and corporations to advertise their travel services and demonstrate their sincere concern for the LGBT community, rather than just displaying a rainbow flag at their destination or advertising that “we provide LGBT-friendly services”. Signals to indicate whether a service is LGBT-friendly should include policies, practices, and marketing (Ro & Khan, 2022).

According to research figures, almost 200 LGBT-owned or LGBT-friendly service facilities exist in Vietnam, including travel agencies, hostels, hotels, bars, pubs, clubs, restaurants, cafés, massage services, spas, and saunas in more than ten provinces. LGBT individuals may completely express their affection and gender appearances at these facilities without fear of being stared at or discriminated against by the local population. This may demonstrate that Vietnam has entirely redefined its image as an LGBT-friendly country. Besides, the government could consider some tourist cities to promote as LGBT-friendly locations. Building an LGBT-friendly and functional image and information service is crucial to attaining this aim. During the last ten years, Thailand and Japan have made significant progress in redirecting LGBT-friendly tourism under government support. Thai businesses are encouraged to learn about LGBT consumer behavior and train employees to understand and respectfully interact with LGBT tourists; the public sector must set a policy and allocate budgets to launch marketing activities, organize national LGBT events, and launch social campaigns to educate the public to be more LGBT friendly (Techakana, 2021). Meanwhile, the Japanese government promoted their citizen’s awareness of the “LGBT market” and the national project of the 2020 Tokyo Olympics as one of the key strategies to attract LGBT travelers and boost LGBT tourism in Japan (Thelen, 2021). Data from over 200 LGBT-friendly service providers can be an initially valuable data source to publish on Vietnam’s respectable tourist website. Reducing stigma and prejudice nationally is also crucial for LGBT travelers. The Vietnamese government has issued various legislative laws applied to the legal recognition of the LGBT community; however, these legal documents need to be immediately amended to confirm the government’s efforts and commitment to defending the human rights of individuals who are members of the LGBT community. The future publication of the Law on Gender Transformation and the modification of the Labor Code’s protection of equal rights and non-discrimination against LGBT people in the workplace are undoubtedly significant.

Based on the current study's findings and limitations, we highly recommend that future research extend the scope of the study sample, which may include foreign LGBT tourists traveling to Vietnam. Additionally, it could be valuable to investigate how the government and policymakers perceive this specialized service in the context of incomprehensive legal regulations.

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