

# Cultural Perceptions and Identity Formation of Chinese Tourists in Thailand's LGBTQ+-Friendly Tourism: A Qualitative Inquiry

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## Abstract

The objectives of this study were to explore how mainstream tourists from culturally conservative backgrounds perceive and respond to LGBTQ+-inclusive tourism environments. Focusing on Chinese tourists in Thailand, the research examined how these encounters influence cultural perception and identity formation. Adopting a qualitative methodology grounded in the constructivist paradigm, the study conducted 25 semi-structured interviews and employed grounded theory techniques, including open, axial, and selective coding. The findings reveal a dynamic three-stage transformation process—perceptual reframing, identity negotiation, and post-travel integration—shaped by five key variables: cultural familiarity and contrast, symbolic engagement, emotional safety and liberation, reflective identity awareness, and behavioral intention toward social openness. Theoretically, the study extends cultural perception theory by introducing symbolic interactions with gender and sexual diversity and refines identity theory by highlighting unintentional, affect-driven self-reflection among non-LGBTQ+ individuals. Practically, the research offers insights for tourism managers and stakeholders seeking to create inclusive, emotionally safe, and culturally resonant destinations. This study contributes new knowledge by showing that LGBTQ+-friendly tourism can serve as a catalyst not only for leisure and cultural consumption but also for identity exploration, empathy, and cross-cultural understanding, particularly among travelers previously unfamiliar with gender and sexual diversity.

**Keywords:** LGBTQ+ tourism; cultural perception; identity construction; Chinese tourists; grounded theory

## Introduction

Tourism is increasingly serving as a site for cross-cultural encounters and reflection on identity, particularly in relation to gender and sexuality. As individuals travel across borders, they are exposed to unfamiliar cultural norms and symbolic expressions that may challenge existing beliefs and stimulate new forms of understanding (Lugosi & Ndiuini, 2022; Zhang & Xu, 2023). Within this context, LGBTQ+-friendly tourism has emerged globally as both an economic segment and a cultural space promoting inclusion and diversity.

Thailand has positioned itself as a leading LGBTQ+-friendly destination in Asia, celebrated for its tolerant social climate, gender-diverse performances, and symbolic visibility of identities such as kathoey (Achuthan, 2021; Tungao, 2021). While such environments offer affirmation for LGBTQ+ travelers, they may provoke more ambivalent responses among visitors from culturally conservative societies. In the case of Chinese tourists, whose values are deeply rooted in heteronormativity, filial piety, and conformity, exposure to obvious LGBTQ+ expressions can elicit reactions ranging from fascination to cognitive dissonance (Xiang et al., 2024). According to the China Family Panel Studies (CFPS, 2022), less than 15% of Chinese respondents expressed strong acceptance of same-sex relationships, reflecting entrenched cultural norms.

These dynamics are gaining significance as China's outbound tourism has expanded dramatically in recent years, particularly among younger, urbanized demographics seeking cross-cultural engagement (Tan & Nguyen, 2024). However, despite the visibility of LGBTQ+-friendly spaces in destinations like Thailand, academic attention remains limited regarding how non-LGBTQ+ tourists from conservative societies perceive, interpret, and emotionally respond to these environments (Dixon, 2024; Alguero-Boronat et al., 2024). Existing studies have centered mainly on LGBTQ+ travelers themselves or on destination marketing perspectives, overlooking the broader implications for mainstream tourists. Moreover, the potential for unintentional identity negotiation and cultural learning, particularly among those unfamiliar with gender diversity in their home countries, remains empirically underexplored.

This study addresses this gap by investigating how Chinese tourists interpret and engage with Thailand's LGBTQ+-inclusive tourism environments. It adopts a qualitative approach rooted in the constructivist paradigm to examine how such encounters affect tourists' perceptions of inclusion, challenge normative assumptions, and stimulate shifts in identity awareness and social attitudes.

## Research Objectives

1. To explore how Chinese tourists construct their perceptions of Thailand's LGBTQ+-friendly tourism environment, focusing on aspects of safety, inclusiveness, and cultural acceptance.
2. To investigate how their travel experiences in Thailand influence their understanding of LGBTQ+ culture and potentially reshape their personal or social identities.

## Literature Review

LGBTQ+—an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and other sexual and gender minorities—has evolved from a Western activist term into a globally recognized framework symbolizing identity diversity and inclusion (Bhugra et al., 2022). In tourism studies, the LGBTQ+ population is viewed both as an economically significant market segment and as a subject of inquiry into identity performance, cultural consumption, and symbolic belonging (Russell et al., 2023; Robinson, 2024). A growing body of research has examined the motivations, preferences, and experiences of LGBTQ+ travelers, often emphasizing the importance of safety, visibility, and inclusive atmospheres in shaping destination choices (Andrade et al., 2021; Lai et al., 2024).

However, scholarly attention has remained limited regarding how non-LGBTQ+ tourists from culturally conservative societies perceive and respond to LGBTQ+-friendly tourism environments. While LGBTQ+ travelers benefit from affirming spaces, mainstream tourists—especially from regions like China, where Confucian ethics and heteronormativity prevail—may experience emotional ambivalence, symbolic resistance, or reflective engagement when encountering gender diversity (Huang & Liu, 2024; Liu, 2022). Recent studies (e.g., Xiang & Cheah, 2023; Qiu et al., 2024) have begun to explore the embodied experiences of Chinese gay tourists, yet few have addressed how heterosexual or normatively aligned tourists interpret LGBTQ+ visibility. This reveals a notable knowledge gap in understanding cross-cultural empathy, identity shifts, and cultural learning in inclusive tourism spaces.

To bridge this gap, the present study integrates Cultural Perception Theory, which examines how individuals interpret unfamiliar cultural signs based on prior beliefs, emotional readiness, and sociocultural distance (Zheng et al., 2022). While widely applied to studies of ethnicity- and religion-based perceptions, it has rarely been extended to interpret tourists' reactions to gender and sexual diversity, making it a promising lens for examining symbolic encounters in LGBTQ+ tourism.

Complementing this perspective, Identity Theory conceptualizes identity as situationally fluid, socially constructed, and responsive to liminal experiences such as travel (Anglin et al., 2022; Weststrate & McLean, 2024), provides opportunities for identity experimentation and symbolic re-evaluation; however, most applications focus on deliberate self-exploration, with less emphasis on unintentional identity tourism negotiation triggered by ambient exposure to unfamiliar cultural markers. Recent theoretical developments (e.g., Brody, 2025; Fatima & Jami, 2025) suggest that emotionally charged environments may induce subtle yet enduring self-reflection among mainstream tourists.

This study, therefore, contributes to the literature by reframing LGBTQ+–friendly tourism not only as a space of leisure or affirmation, but also as a site of identity formation and cultural empathy for travelers who are not part of LGBTQ+ communities themselves. By synthesizing cultural perception theory with a contemporary identity framework, the research provides a new model for analyzing how mainstream Chinese tourists engage with gender-diverse environments, potentially reshaping their self-concept and social attitudes through unintentional yet meaningful symbolic interactions.

## Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual framework, showing how LGBTQ+ cultural symbols encountered in tourism settings lead to cultural confrontation, interpretation, and identity positioning—emotional safety and symbolic familiarity act as mediating influences in this process.

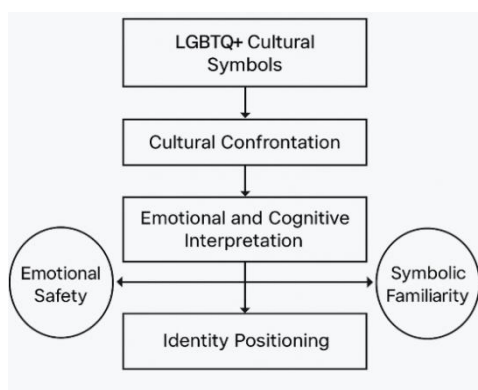


Figure 1 Conceptual Framework

## Research Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in the constructivist paradigm, which views social reality as subjectively constructed through interaction and interpretation. Given the aim of exploring how Chinese tourists perceive and engage with LGBTQ+–friendly tourism environments in Thailand, a qualitative approach was considered appropriate to capture the nuanced, contextual, and emotionally situated nature of their experiences.

Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling strategies to ensure relevance and information richness. Eligible individuals were adult Chinese nationals who had engaged with LGBTQ+–inclusive spaces in Thailand, such as ladyboy performances, themed nightlife venues, or accommodations that were inclusive of LGBTQ+ individuals. A total of 25 semi-structured interviews were conducted in Mandarin, either face-to-face or via video call, based on participants' availability. Interviews lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes and continued until theoretical saturation was reached. All interviews were recorded with consent, transcribed verbatim, and translated where necessary.

Of the 25 participants, 13 identified as female and 12 as male, with ages ranging from 23 to 51 years (mean age, 32.4 years). Participants were drawn from diverse occupational backgrounds, including university students ( $n = 7$ ), professionals in service industries ( $n = 10$ ), self-employed individuals ( $n = 5$ ), and retired persons ( $n = 3$ ). Approximately two-thirds of the sample had traveled to Thailand more than once, and all had experienced at least one LGBTQ+–inclusive space, such as cabaret shows, queer-friendly hotels, or pride-themed events. While not statistically representative, the sample was intentionally varied to capture a broad spectrum of attitudes and experiential reflections.

The interview questions were designed to explore two significant areas: perceptions of LGBTQ+–friendly tourism environments and the potential impact of these experiences on cultural understanding and identity orientation. The interview protocol was structured to elicit participants' symbolic, emotional, and cognitive responses to these tourism encounters. Each domain of inquiry was carefully aligned with the research objectives, encouraging respondents to articulate their thoughts on inclusiveness, comfort, self-reflection, and changes in values or social attitudes. The complete interview outline is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Interview outline form

Section	Interview Focus	Guiding Questions
<b>Part 1:</b> Perception of LGBTQ+-Friendly Tourism Environment	Understanding Chinese tourists' perceptions of inclusiveness, safety, and cultural acceptance in Thailand	1. How many times have you visited Thailand, and what was the primary purpose of your most recent trip?
		2. Prior to your visit, what impressions did you have regarding Thailand's LGBTQ+-friendliness? Where did these impressions come from?
		3. During your trip, did you perceive Thailand as welcoming or inclusive toward LGBTQ+ individuals? Can you share specific experiences that shaped this perception?
		4. How would you evaluate Thailand's acceptance of LGBTQ+ communities in terms of legal framework, social norms, and cultural openness?
		5. Did you intentionally choose LGBTQ+-friendly accommodations, bars, clubs, or events? If so, what motivated these choices?
		6. Did you interact with local LGBTQ+ individuals or communities during your visit? How did these interactions influence your perceptions?
		7. In LGBTQ+-themed spaces (e.g., nightlife venues, pride events), how comfortable or accepted did you feel? Were there any moments that stood out?
		8. Did you experience any form of special treatment—positive or negative—based on your gender or sexual identity?
<b>Part 2:</b> Influence of Tourism Experience on Cultural Understanding and Identity	Exploring how tourism experiences may reshape cultural awareness and personal identity	1. Did this trip provide you with a deeper understanding of LGBTQ+ culture?
		2. How did your experiences influence your perception of Thailand's LGBTQ+ community or related cultural expressions?
		3. In your view, what are the key similarities and differences between LGBTQ+ culture in Thailand and in China?
		4. Did this travel experience have any impact on your self-identification as an LGBTQ+ individual (if applicable)?
		5. Did you feel more liberated or authentic in expressing your gender identity or sexual orientation while in Thailand?
		6. Have you engaged in any reflection or change in self-perception as a result of this trip?
		7. Since returning to China, have your values, attitudes, or lifestyle changed in any way?
		8. Has this experience influenced your social relationships, partner preferences, or future life plans?
		9. Are you more likely to choose LGBTQ+-friendly destinations in the future? Why or why not?

Data analysis followed grounded theory procedures, including open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. During open coding, initial concepts were identified line by line from the interview transcripts. Axial coding was used to organize these codes into thematic clusters based on relational patterns, and selective coding further refined the central categories that underpinned the study's conceptual narrative. The process was supported by constant comparison, theoretical note-taking, and coding validation to ensure interpretive consistency. NVivo software was used to facilitate data organization and retrieval.

To ensure trustworthiness, several strategies were employed. Credibility was enhanced through member checking, whereby participants were invited to review summary interpretations of their interviews for accuracy and resonance. Dependability was supported by maintaining an audit trail of methodological and analytical decisions throughout the research process. Confirmability was ensured through peer debriefing sessions with two external qualitative researchers who reviewed codebooks and thematic structures in iterative stages. The lead researcher maintained reflexive journals to identify potential biases and record critical reflections on positionality, particularly given the sensitive and identity-oriented nature of the topic.

All participants provided informed consent prior to participation and were assured of complete confidentiality through the use of anonymization and secure data storage. Given the subject's potential emotional sensitivity and the cross-cultural nature of the topic, the study was conducted with careful attention to ethical integrity, cultural respect, and participant agency.

## Research Results

### Open coding

Open coding revealed ten key themes related to cultural perception and identity transformation, illustrating how Chinese tourists perceive LGBTQ+-friendly tourism environments in Thailand and how such encounters prompt reflection and shifts in identity. Participants described inclusive spaces as relaxed and authentic, often contrasting with pre-trip expectations shaped by Chinese cultural norms. Cross-cultural comparisons and direct interactions with local LGBTQ+ individuals deepened understanding, while many, particularly LGBTQ+-identifying tourists, reported emotional liberation and self-expression. Even non-LGBTQ+ participants experienced introspection, increased empathy, and post-travel behavioral changes. These findings form the basis for further analysis, with detailed themes summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Open Coding Results

Theme	Keywords
Perceptions of LGBTQ+–Friendly Spaces	Relaxed atmosphere, cultural acceptance, safety, symbolic visibility, and inclusive venues
Expectations versus Reality	Pre-trip stereotypes, media influence, attitude shifts, cultural surprise
Cross–Cultural Contrast	Thai openness, Chinese conservatism, public expression, and legal comparison
Interactions with Local LGBTQ+ Individuals	Direct communication, emotional resonance, cultural learning, shared stories.
Emotional Liberation and Self–Expression	Freedom, comfort, self–acceptance, psychological release, identity confidence
Reflective Identity Shifts	Self–awareness, introspection, attitude transformation, and implicit bias reflection
Cultural Empathy Development	Perspective–taking, increased tolerance, appreciation of diversity, humanization
Post–Travel Behavioral Intentions	Revisit intention, peer influence, social openness, and future travel preferences
Reassessment of Social Norms	Normative comparison, traditional values, generational views, identity discourse
Symbolic Engagement and Meaning–Making	Flag symbolism, pride events, performative culture, representation, and emotional symbolism

**Figure 2** Open Coding Keywords Word Cloud

Figure 2 presents a word cloud of open coding keywords, offering a visual overview of dominant concepts related to cultural perception and identity reflection among Chinese tourists in LGBTQ+–friendly tourism settings.



### Axial Coding

Building on the open coding stage, the axial coding phase reorganizes initial concepts into broader thematic categories that capture the dynamic process through which Chinese tourists interpret LGBTQ+-friendly tourism environments and negotiate identity-related meanings. Three core categories were identified: Cultural Encounter and Interpretation, Identity Negotiation and Emotional Response, and Post-Travel Reflection and Intentions. These categories represent a sequential yet interrelated trajectory, progressing from immediate cultural engagement to internal emotional processing and ultimately to long-term personal reflection. A detailed summary of the axial coding structure and subthemes is presented in Table 3.

**Table 3** Axial Coding Structure

Core Category	Subthemes
Cultural Encounter and Interpretation	Perceptions of LGBTQ+ spaces
	Expectations vs. reality
	Cross-cultural contrast
	Interactions with local LGBTQ+ individuals
Identity Negotiation and Emotional Response	Emotional liberation
	Self-expression
	Reflective identity shifts
	Cultural empathy development
	Symbolic engagement
Post-Travel Reflection and Intentions	Post-travel behavioral intentions
	Reassessment of social norms
	Future travel preferences

### Selective Coding

The selective coding stage integrates the core categories into a cohesive explanatory framework that traces how Chinese tourists' encounters with LGBTQ+-friendly environments in Thailand influence their perception, emotional engagement, and identity positioning. Three interrelated pathways were identified: the Perceptual Reframing Pathway, the Identity Negotiation Pathway, and the Post-Travel Integration Pathway. These pathways illustrate how cultural exposure initiates interpretive shifts, supports internal identity reflection, and leads to longer-term behavioral and attitudinal change. A summary of the selective coding structure and its connection to earlier analytical stages is provided in Table 4.

**Table 4:** Selective Coding Results

Core Pathway	Associated Axial Themes	Open Coding Themes
Perceptual Reframing Pathway: How initial encounters reshape assumptions about LGBTQ+ culture and inclusion	Cultural Encounter and Interpretation	Perceptions of LGBTQ+ spaces; Expectations vs. reality; Cross-cultural contrast; Interactions with local LGBTQ+ individuals
Identity Negotiation Pathway: How tourists emotionally process experiences and negotiate self-understanding	Identity Negotiation and Emotional Response	Emotional liberation; Self-expression; Reflective identity shifts; Cultural empathy development; Symbolic engagement
Post-Travel Integration Pathway: How tourists translate their experiences into long-term identity and attitudinal changes	Post-Travel Reflection and Intentions	Post-travel behavioral intentions; Reassessment of social norms; Future travel preferences

To extend the explanatory depth of the selective coding framework, five key variables were identified that shape the transformation process across perceptual, emotional, and behavioral dimensions. These include cultural familiarity and contrast, symbolic engagement, emotional safety and liberation, reflective identity awareness, and behavioral intention and social openness. Together, they illuminate how identity and perception co-evolve through culturally situated tourism encounters. Complete definitions of each variable are provided in Table 5.

**Table 5** Key Variables Influencing Cultural Perception and Identity Transformation

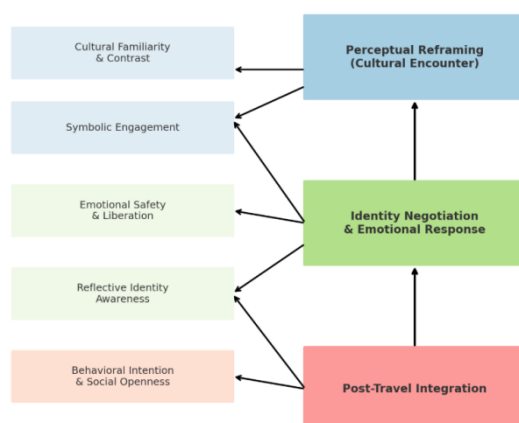
Variable	Definition
Cultural Familiarity and Contrast	The degree to which tourists recognize and contrast LGBTQ+ visibility in Thailand with cultural norms in their home country shapes initial cognitive interpretation of difference.
Symbolic Engagement	The extent of interaction with LGBTQ+-related symbols, performances, and environments that elicit emotional or reflective responses.
Emotional Safety and Liberation	Tourists' perceived sense of freedom, comfort, and psychological security in expressing or exploring identity in a non-judgmental tourism environment.
Reflective Identity Awareness	The process through which tourists engage in self-reflection, reevaluate their values or biases, and potentially reconceptualize their identity.

Variable	Definition
Behavioral Intention and Social Openness	Tourists' post-travel shifts in attitude, social relationships, or lifestyle preferences related to identity, tolerance, or future travel choices.

## Discussions

This study reveals that Chinese tourists, even those who do not identify as LGBTQ+, may undergo perceptual and identity-related shifts when exposed to Thailand's LGBTQ+-friendly tourism environments. The grounded theory analysis uncovered a dynamic three-phase transformation—perceptual reframing, identity negotiation, and post-travel integration—driven by five interrelated variables. These findings suggest that LGBTQ+-inclusive spaces can serve not only as destinations of leisure but also as emotionally resonant contexts that catalyze self-reflection, particularly among tourists from culturally conservative backgrounds. This unintentional identity engagement aligns with recent scholarship (Xiang & Cheah, 2023; Fatima & Jami, 2025), which emphasizes affective responses to gender diversity as a catalyst for identity questioning and sociocultural learning.

Furthermore, this study makes a theoretical contribution by extending cultural perception theory into the domains of gender and sexual diversity. Whereas prior applications primarily addressed ethnic or national cultural differences, the present findings demonstrate how emotional safety and symbolic engagement enable the temporary suspension of normative assumptions (Zheng et al., 2022). Simultaneously, the findings refine identity theory by illustrating that identity shifts can occur without deliberate intention, through passive yet emotionally impactful encounters. This perspective challenges traditional models of tourism-based identity construction that center on voluntary role play, offering instead an affect-driven explanation of how inclusive tourism settings stimulate reflective awareness and social openness.



**Figure 3** A Dynamic Framework of Identity Transformation among Chinese Tourists in LGBTQ+-Friendly Tourism.

Figure 3 presents the dynamic framework developed in this study, illustrating how cultural exposure activates identity processes through the sequential interaction of the five key variables. This model bridges empirical insights with broader theoretical debates on identity, inclusion, and cross-cultural tourism.

### **Theoretical and Practical Contributions**

This study contributes to cultural perception and identity theory by demonstrating how Chinese tourists, shaped by Confucian and heteronormative norms, interpret LGBTQ+-friendly tourism environments through emotional and symbolic engagement. It expands existing frameworks by revealing that identity reflection can occur unintentionally in response to subcultural visibility, rather than solely through deliberate exploration (Brody, 2025; Fatima & Jami, 2025). Practically, the findings suggest that LGBTQ+-inclusive destinations should foster emotional safety and symbolic authenticity to support inclusive experiences. At the same time, tourism stakeholders, particularly in the Chinese outbound sector, can integrate diversity-sensitive strategies to promote empathy, reflection, and intercultural understanding (Kaygalak-Celebi et al., 2022).

### **New Knowledge from Research**

This study presents a grounded, data-driven model of identity transformation among Chinese tourists in LGBTQ+-friendly Thai tourism, outlining three pathways—Perceptual Reframing, Identity Negotiation, and Post-Travel Integration—that explain how cross-cultural encounters lead to cognitive and emotional shifts. Mediated by five key variables, the model demonstrates that even non-LGBTQ+ individuals may undergo unintentional self-reflection and attitudinal change through symbolic and affective engagement with gender-diverse environments, thereby extending existing theories of identity and cultural perception in non-Western contexts.

### **Conclusion**

This study examined how Chinese tourists engage with LGBTQ+-friendly tourism in Thailand and how such encounters influence cultural perception and identity construction. Grounded theory analysis revealed a dynamic transformation process—perceptual reframing, identity negotiation, and post-travel integration—mediated by five key factors. The study extends cultural perception and identity theories by highlighting unintentional, affect-driven shifts triggered by cross-cultural encounters with gender and sexual diversity. Practically, it positions inclusive tourism as a site of

emotional and sociocultural learning. While limited by its qualitative scope and cultural specificity, the research offers a foundation for future cross-cultural, longitudinal, and mixed-method studies on tourism and identity transformation.

## Suggestions

This study highlights the importance of emotionally safe and culturally inclusive tourism environments in promoting identity reflection and cultural empathy among mainstream tourists from conservative societies. To maximize this potential, destination managers should prioritize symbolic representation and intercultural dialogue through initiatives such as pride-themed experiences, inclusive staff training, and community-based storytelling. For Chinese outbound tourism stakeholders, integrating diversity awareness into travel preparation and partnering with inclusive service providers can help better align with the values of younger travelers. More broadly, LGBTQ+-inclusive tourism should be recognized as a catalyst for cultural diplomacy and social change, offering opportunities for community organizations to develop emotionally resonant, educational tourism products that enhance mutual understanding and visibility.

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