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**Exploring the Influence of Globalization and Self-Expression in Shaping the Vietnamese  
LGBTQ+ Community in Urban Vietnam**

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World Learning, SIT Study Abroad, Vietnam: Culture, Social Change, and Development

Spring 2023

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### **Abstract**

The LGBTQ+ community is estimated to make up around 9% to 11% of Vietnam's total population. Over the past few decades, Vietnam has undergone significant changes, marked by its increasing interconnectedness with the global community. These changes have also brought about a shift in perceptions and advocacy toward the LGBTQ+ community. Also bringing along a change in attitude towards the LGBTQ+ community in Vietnam is self-expression and fashion. Through drag or wearing gender-nonconforming attire, queer individuals are able to challenge the restrictive gender binary prevalent in Vietnamese society. Self-expression and fashion are also critical in helping queer individuals form and assert their identities. Through in-depth interviews with six members of the Vietnamese LGBTQ+ community residing in Hanoi, along with an online survey, this study will determine how the Vietnamese queer community situates itself within the broader global community and the role of fashion and self-expression in shaping Vietnamese queer identity-making. The results of this study reveal the foreign influence on the LGBTQ+ community in Vietnam. The spread of LGBTQ+ language and culture across the globe has played a large role in shaping the experiences and identities of queer individuals in Vietnam. Additionally, this study highlights the connection between fashion and self-expression with LGBTQ+ resistance, recognition, and empowerment. By using fashion and personal style as a means of self-expression, Vietnamese queer individuals assert their identities and challenge conventional gender norms and stereotypes.

*Keywords: LGBTQ+, Self-Expression, Fashion, Identity, Globalization, Queer*

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## Introduction

*“Being queer is like being human. We have our struggles, our desire, our niches, and our dreams for the future. We are just human, and we also suffer from human conditions too.”*

In May 2023, I had the opportunity to live in Hanoi and learn more about the lively LGBTQ+ community in Vietnam’s capital city. While sipping coffee in a quiet cafe, I chatted with a thoughtful 25-year-old man. As our conversation was ending, I asked him one final question, what his queer identity meant to him. His response left a lasting impression on me.

Throughout my time in Hanoi, I had the privilege to talk to widely different LGBTQ+ individuals who all shared their perspectives about their queer identities with me. The intention of my paper is to explore two key areas within the Vietnamese queer community. First, it aims to understand the intricate relationship between self-expression and identity, focusing on the ways fashion is used among LGBTQ+ individuals. Additionally, my paper explores the dynamic relationship between the Vietnamese LGBTQ+ community and the global LGBTQ+ movement, and the ways in which the increased interconnectedness of the world has impacted queer individuals in Vietnam.

In order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the contemporary experiences of the LGBTQ+ community in Vietnam, it is important to examine the historical context that has shaped perceptions about queer individuals. Various factors have contributed to these perceptions, including the prevalence of religious philosophies such as Confucianism, which historically upheld a binary model of gender and reinforced heteronormative values. Additionally, the spread of discriminatory discourse, particularly from the West, has also had an impact on the LGBTQ+ community in Vietnam. Further, Vietnam’s modernization after Đổi Mới

increased communication and the exchange of ideas within and outside Vietnam, influencing attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community.

## **Literature Review**

### *Philosophical Underpinnings*

Part of the attitudes toward sexual minorities in Vietnamese society can be explained by the country's prominent religious philosophies like Confucianism and Taoism. Both of these teachings originated in China and were brought to Vietnam during their rule over the country. Confucianism operates on a hierarchical system of superiors and subordinates and extends to all relationships in society. Children are expected to obey their parents and wives are expected to be subordinate to their husbands within this hierarchy. Confucianism embodies highly collectivist and patriarchal values and has the Three Obediences and Four Virtues as guiding principles for women to behave virtuously and remain subordinate to the men in their families (Le et al., 449). Vietnamese society has been shaped by Confucian beliefs and the ideal woman is characterized as modest, submissive to men, and subservient to traditional heterosexual marriage (Le et al., 450). Although Confucianism does not explicitly mention sex and sexuality in its teachings, the philosophy creates an ideology of sex and sexual relations with a strong heteronormative belief in traditional familial structure and gender roles. From the Confucian perspective, LGBTQ+ individuals are portrayed as a failure to meet heteronormative familial expectations, as queer people place their desires over the collective (Le et al., 452). This religious philosophy has played a huge role in how queer Vietnamese people navigate their sexual and gender identities. A 2017 study published by the *Journal of Homosexuality* shows that there is a significant correlation between LGBTQ+ individuals raised in a strong Confucius household and



internalized homonegativity and low self-esteem (Nguyen et al., 1626). Confucian values continue to hold a significant influence on queer individuals today, shaping how they perceive themselves and how others view them both within and outside of the community.

Taoism's ideology emphasizes harmony between individuals and between people and nature. Within the Taoist philosophy, Yin-Yang is a circle where Yin symbolizes the feminine side associated with soft, cool, calm, and passive whereas Yang signifies the masculine side associated with hard, hot, aggressive, and active (Le et al., 450). Yin-Yang is applied to all aspects of humanity and the restoration of harmony between Yin and Yang is often considered a solution for any misfortune. This binary thinking between male-female duality enforces an understanding that harmony is caused by a heterosexual relationship between a man and woman (Le et al., 452). No harmony can be found within same-sex partnerships, as homosexuality is placed outside the realm of what is considered natural within this school of thought.

Philosophical teachings such as Confucianism and Taoism have contributed to how same-sex relationships and behaviors are perceived in Vietnamese society and in part explain the history of why queer individuals have been considered socially unacceptable.

Religious philosophies played a significant role in shaping the strict sexual dimorphism that is rooted in Vietnamese society. An example of this is yin/yang, which symbolizes distinct gender attributes for females and males (Blanc 4). Like in many other places in the world, gender in Vietnam has historically been viewed as a binary concept. The status and roles of men and women are defined based on their anatomical differences, and as a result, there is no space for a third gender.

*Epistemology*

In the nineteenth century, two distinct sexological discourses circulated in Europe. The first was an anatomical lexicon where the physiological anatomy determined someone's sexual identity (Q. -A. R. Tran 37). Within this framework, gay men were classified on the lower end of the gender identity spectrum, alongside individuals whose feminine and masculine features were indistinguishable, such as hermaphrodites and "masculine" women (Tran 12). The second was a psychiatric notion that became popular with the rise of medical institutions. The latter paradigm gave rise to the concept of "sexuality," which attached a field of psychology and psychological disposition to sexual identity (Q. -A. R. Tran 37). To this medical establishment, males who liked males were called "inverts" and had an illness that was derived from their "effeminate features that were mapped onto his physiology and psychology." In this context, inverts were 'really' women (Tran 12). Both of these paradigms spread from Europe to Vietnam. In the Vietnamese context, Dr. Richard Quang-Anh Tran used the term "gender-crossing" to describe both paradigms, as Vietnamese sources often mixed and confused them (Tran 13). Although how these sexological discourses were made popular in Vietnam is not fully understood, the country's transition into a post-socialist market period offers a clue. These discourses were popularized among health experts through sex education manuals and print media during the 1990s (Tran 13). The economic and political reforms after the late 1980s enabled Vietnam to establish closer ties with the global community, facilitating the exchange of ideas and ideologies across borders. As Vietnam opened up to the world, it became a hub for cross-cultural exchange and dialogue, allowing the country to tap into new sources of knowledge.

The Đổi Mới reforms of 1986, also known as Renovation, was the Vietnamese Communist regime's response to the severe hunger and struggling economy. These policies

aimed to integrate Vietnam into the global economy, reduce bureaucracy, and limit the one-Party's interference in various aspects of Vietnamese life (Tran 14). To justify the State's ongoing authority after Renovation, one of the things it did was to mobilize movements to promote family values. The State executed the Cultured Family Program to target issues like health, population control, women's behavior, and general social conduct (Tran 14). Through this program, women were encouraged to return to traditional gender norms. By 1996, the State executed the Social Evils Campaign to manage "social evils" like drugs, prostitution, and pornography, that allegedly resulted from the free market (Tran 15). Along with the medical sexological discourses, these two campaigns regulated the ideals of the body, gender, and sexuality, and affected the cultural construction of homosexuality in the Renovation period.

Documents through gender-crossing discourse were widespread in late twentieth-century Vietnam. The vocabulary words "gay" and "lesbian" were not popular (Tran 22). Instead, homosexual identities were defined through terms that centered on gender. For example, a manual by Dr. Đào Xuân Dũng published in 1995 called *Sexual Education* stated that "The male homosexual has a feminine appearance and the female homosexual a masculine one revealing her sexual preferences even more clearly" (Tran 24). Theories like this were widespread in this period, equating gender-crossing with homosexuality.

### *Modernization and Globalization*

The way in which the LGBTQ+ community situates itself in contemporary Vietnamese society is intimately intertwined with its positioning during the country's shift towards modernization. Between 1986 and 2005, Vietnam experienced a period of modernization during the post-socialist era, which began with the introduction of the Đổi Mới reforms. In Vietnam's

context, “modernity” was marked by “rapid social, cultural, and economic modernization, a profound departure from traditional practices, beliefs, and epistemologies.” Vietnam’s adoption of a market-based economy allowed its integration into the global exchange of products, commodities, ideas, trends, and fashion (Tran 5). Before the Đổi Mới, Vietnam did not have any policies that targeted homosexuality (Phuong 423). The 2000 Marriage and Family Law explicitly forbade same-sex marriage and the National Assembly institutionalized a heterosexual cultural norm (Horton 962). Along with this, the Head of the Social Issues Committee of the National Assembly declared “homosexuality is a disease and an evil thought” in 2004 (Phuong 423). However, although homosexual behavior was not legally criminalized or prohibited prior to 2000, sexual minorities in Vietnam were and are still subjected to discrimination and violence. A 2015 study published by The Institute for Studies of Society, Economy and Environment (iSEE) found that LGBT people “encounter negative comments and foul acts from colleagues, superiors and clients, as well as partners, at the rate of around 33% to almost 50%” (Huy et al. 15). Further, rather than being recognized as a full member of society, individuals with non-normative forms of sexuality are still silenced or portrayed as pathological (Horton 961).

For a long time, LGBTQ+ people have been socially invisible and misrecognized in Vietnamese society. However, Vietnam still has made significant strides toward LGBTQ+ equality in the past decades. During the late 1980s and early 1990s, “non-government,” “civil society,” and international nongovernmental organizations started being introduced to state agencies and society (Phuong 426). NGOs and other civil society groups have played a significant role in transforming the perception of LGBTQ+ individuals in Vietnam since 2008. A number of Vietnamese organizations and groups, including iSEE, ICS, and It’s T Time were created and helped advance the LGBTQ+ movement through policy advocacy and social

awareness (Phuong 428). In 2012, the Vietnamese LGBTQ+ movement shifted its focus to policy advocacy, with organizations and leaders using empathy and investment in personal relationships as tactics to achieve recognition and promote policy change for the community (Phuong 429). iSee invited state cadres from the Ministry of Justice and other governmental agencies to serve as consultants for their research projects, which led to a shift in consultant views from opposition to support for same-sex marriage (Phuong 430). This was a partial success, as homosexuality was reclassified from a “social evil” in public online discussions on the Government Web Portal on July 24, 2012 (Phuong 431). In 2014, the National Assembly voted to revise the Marriage and Family Law, removing the prohibition on same-sex marriage without actually recognizing it (Phuong 432). While not necessarily a defeat or victory for the LGBTQ+ movement in Vietnam, this action represented a lack of recognition for the community.

Many of the LGBTQ+ organizations in Vietnam are funded heavily by international LGBTQ+ organizations from the West. This funding source may impact the Vietnamese LGBTQ+ movement’s tactic for gaining recognition, as it is dependent on non-Vietnamese organizations. Vietnamese LGBTQ+ activists face scrutiny over their motivations and inventions and often need to navigate informal networks to seek advocacy opportunities (Phuong 426). To achieve recognition, the movement has traditionally focused on identity and rights-based claims, which have been successful strategies globally. However, International Governmental Organizations (IGOs) based mainly in the U.S. and Europe have institutionalized the global LGBTQ+ human rights movement and painted a universal picture of LGBTQ+ rights through data and reports. The Euro-American NGO dominance in the movement has allowed them to dictate the terms of the international LGBTQ+ agenda, from funding to transnational attention, creating a new political niche in the NGO world (Newton 263). This has led to a stratification of

the Vietnamese LGBTQ+ community, where certain political projects receive more resources than others. Further, western notions that distinguish gender and sexual orientations as separate constructs may pose conflicts in Vietnam. Vietnamese NGO researchers who use “SOGI” (Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity) and “LGBT” to promote LGBTQ+ human rights in Vietnamese media encounter difficulties in translating these new terminologies (Newton 271). This highlights the need for cultural sensitivity in the internationalization of LGBTQ+ rights.

With the rise of modernization, new forms of connections within the LGBTQ+ community emerged. The introduction of the Internet to Vietnam in 1997 gave rise to various online platforms, including Yahoo!, 360, blogs, and forums, which provided previously unavailable spaces for gay, lesbian, and transgender individuals to connect and engage with one another (Phuong 429). In 2010, a group of lesbians organized an LGBTQ+ cycling event via a lesbian web forum (Newton 212). Following the event, the organizer shared photos and an article on the forum, which was one of six online spaces for lesbians in Vietnam (Newton 213). This is another instance where LGBTQ+ individuals were able to establish connections and form community through the emergence of online platforms.

### *Self-expression*

Within the LGBTQ+ community, self-expression is extremely important, with fashion and personal style serving as a way to authentically represent one’s identity. Transgender, non-binary, effeminate, and intersexual bodies all disrupt traditional norms of gender expression and challenge societal expectations of masculinity and femininity. Through the stylization of LGBTQ+ bodies, power relations are re-evaluated, challenging the hegemony of the heterosexual matrix and combating heteronormativity. This opens up opportunities for

organizations to embrace queerness and become more inclusive of diverse identities (Siqueira et al., 3). Self-expression can also be used as a form of resistance, as it challenges traditional notions of sexuality and gender and develops new ideas outside of mainstream thought. One form of resistance is reclaiming language, such as the term ‘queer,’ and using it as a new way of thinking and living. Another is to deconstruct societal discourse and challenge conventional ideas of knowledge, leading to a shift in how society views queer individuals (Siqueira et al., 3). The LGBTQ+ community challenges traditional gender norms and introduces new perspectives on gender. Drag serves as an example of this. Judith Butler notes in her book, *Undoing Gender*, that drag is a powerful tool for challenging societal constructs of gender, as it “not only makes us question what is real and what has to be, but by showing us how contemporary notions of reality can be questioned, and new modes of reality instituted” (217-218). Drag performers present themselves in ways that are not confined to their assigned gender at birth and undo the gender binary. Drag introduces viewers to alternative ways of conceptualizing gender and encourages them to consider the fluidity of what gender is.

## **Methodology**

### *Overview*

Most of the research that I did took place in Hanoi from April 30th to May 9th, 2023. I then relocated to Ho Chi Minh City until May 18th, 2023. The information gathered in this research study comes from in-depth interviews, an online survey, and secondary literature resources. From this, I was allowed to collect both qualitative and quantitative data, all of which supported my findings.

I conducted a total of six semi-structured interviews with different individuals belonging to the LGBTQ+ community in Hanoi. I obtained both written and verbal consent to conduct these interviews and use the information found in my research paper. Because human memory is often inaccurate, the interviews were recorded on an iPhone and were transcribed for further analysis. Two of my interviewees opted to remain anonymous in their personal identities. Those who are anonymous still participated in and were critical to my study. All of the people I interviewed included in my data are in their twenties. I also interviewed a queer white drag performer who moved to Hanoi from the United States to get a foreigner's perspective on how they related to the Vietnamese LGBTQ+ community. She is excluded from my data but will be kept for my analysis. The interviews are the qualitative portion of my data. My approach to finding interviewees varied throughout my research process. I was connected to someone who worked with LGBTQ+ rights from iSEE through SIT. However, the majority of the people I talked to I connected to myself. I used social media platforms to connect with Vietnamese individuals who identified as queer. Additionally, I attended various queer events such as drag shows and movie nights, which I found online. I would approach attendees and exchange contact information for an interview. I also visited queer clubs and engaged in conversations with individuals, exchanging contact details for later interviews.

In addition to the interviews, I also created an online survey that mostly matched my interview questions. I received a total of 15 responses to my survey. This quantified my data and helped me gather more information in the short period of time I was able to do my research. I created the online survey through google forms and posted it on Vietnamese LGTBQ+ Facebook groups and distributed it through word-of-mouth. The survey was completely anonymous, and the recorded respondents are mostly from Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. Besides demographic



questions, I asked a total of 12 questions regarding their experiences being LGBTQ+. However, I will only be using five of the questions in my analysis, as the other questions are not as relevant.

### *Limitations*

There were several limitations that I faced while conducting this independent research project. The primary challenge I faced was the language barrier, which sometimes hindered my ability to fully convey my ideas to respondents. Although all of the individuals I interviewed spoke English, the nuances of communication can be lost due to differences in our native language. Also, because I only spoke with those within the LGBTQ+ community who spoke English, my research contains some biases as my data does not contain the experiences of those who only speak Vietnamese.

Another limitation I had was the restricted one-month timeframe for data collection. I was only able to conduct a limited number of interviews and obtain a modest amount of survey responses. While the data I gathered met the requirements of my research, more time would have allowed me to gather a more extensive range of insights into the experiences of the LGBTQ+ community.

The last limitation I encountered was my sampling approach. To find individuals to interview, I focused on those who were openly “out” and connected with people who went to queer spaces or were involved with LGBTQ+ organizations. I conducted my survey online, which introduces potential biases to my sample. In an ideal scenario, a random sampling approach would have provided more accurate and unbiased results.

Despite these limitations, I was able to gather a sufficient amount of both quantitative and qualitative data. My research provides a unique perspective on the lives of the LGBTQ+ community in urban Vietnam.

### *Ethics*

There were several steps that I took to ensure that my research study was conducted in an ethical manner. As my research focuses on the LGBTQ+ community, a sensitive group in Vietnam, I made sure that my project was fully transparent to participants. Survey responses were anonymous, and those I interviewed had the option to have their identities remain anonymous as well. I have both verbal and written consent from those I interviewed. Throughout the interview process, I made it clear that interviewees had the right to back out at any point or decline to answer any questions that they were not comfortable with. I arranged all the interviews either virtually or at a location and time that was most convenient for them.

## **Results and Discussion**

*“I think queer for me is just a rejection of the norms. It is much more than an expression of sexuality.”*

### *Interviews*

#### *Fashion and Self-Expression*

Every single person I interviewed relates fashion and self-expression to their queer identity. Quốc Anh, a twenty-five-year-old trans man working as the Team Leader of the Advocacy team at It's T Time, shared with me that he had never felt comfortable dressing as a stereotypical girl. Since he was three years old, he wanted to dress like a boy and has consistently done so. He

purposefully chooses clothing that aligns with masculine gender norms and that helps him “pass” as a man in society (Nguyễn). Quốc Anh acknowledged that this pressure to conform to societal expectations of what a “man” should look like highlights the impact of gender stereotypes on fashion choices. For trans individuals, clothing can serve as a way to validate and express their gender identity. However, societal expectations can limit their choices and make it difficult to be perceived as their true gender. For example, if a trans man does not “pass,” they may face discrimination and be perceived differently than a cisgender man who wears feminine clothing. Quốc Anh told me that he used to be concerned about other people’s judgment of the way he dressed, especially in a medical space. There, people could look at him more closely and think that “maybe he is not a man” because his body didn’t conform to the gender standards associated with males. However, he no longer has this concern because he has taken hormones for seven years, and along with his clothing, he can physically “pass” as a man. Fashion is one of the many ways that people express their gender identity, and for Quốc Anh, wearing masculine clothing helps him feel more authentic in his identity.

Phong, the LGBTI Rights Program Manager at iSEE, shared his perspective on clothing as a form of self-expression. He believes that clothing is a powerful tool to convey what someone wants to say to the world. Growing up as a man, Phong was taught to present himself as more masculine. However, becoming more comfortable with his identity, Phong began to dress more feminine. Working in advocacy, Phong also considers how dressing against gender norms can be used as a tool for showing resistance to the normative gender binary. He told me that he “loves to use clothing as a way to poke at the discomfort of straight people.” Once, in an advocacy meeting with the Ministry of Health, Phong intentionally wore a formal black skirt to show his feminine side. He stated, “The goal is simple: to get people to realize that expression is

just like that, it does not have anything to do with being queer or straight” (Vuong). In this instance, clothing was used as a tool for promoting understanding about the fluidity of femininity and masculinity and clothes don’t have to be associated with specific genders. Fashion can communicate meaning beyond the surface level of expression and can be used as another form of advocacy alongside policy briefs and presentations.

Something to note is the difference between how Phong and Quốc Anh express their gender identity. In her book, *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler states that it is important “to trace the moments where the binary system of gender is disputed and challenged, where the coherence of the categories are put into question, and where the very social life of gender turns out to be malleable and transformable” (216). As a cisman, Phong uses clothing as a tool of resistance against societal gender norms. By wearing feminine clothing, he is able to subvert the norms of the rigid gender binary. There is a normative assumption in society that biological factors, like chromosomes, are the ultimate determinant of gender (Schilt et al. 50). Phong goes against those assumptions, refusing to fall into the pressures of conforming to the ideas of what a man should look like. Quốc Anh was born in a body that did not align with his gender identity and his clothing choices were a way of validating his male identity and pushing back against the societal assumption that associates gender to biological sex. Unlike Phong, as a transgender individual, Quốc Anh must navigate both societal gender classifications and the risks of not “passing.”

When talking to a twenty-five-year-old gay man, he shared with me his perspective on the rigid gender expectations surrounding clothing in Vietnam. He revealed that being queer disrupted this societal norm and changed his views on dressing to express himself. In the past, he only cared about the function of clothing. Recently, he started to value how his clothes made him feel. He loves wearing colorful, floral, and nature-inspired clothing, which makes him feel a

sense of belonging (Anonymous). As he became more open and accepting of his sexuality, he felt more liberated in his clothing choices and no longer felt confined by the expectations of traditional male attire. This man's clothing choices reflect his desire to break free from the societal norms and gender expectations associated with traditional male attire. As a gay man, he has likely experienced prejudice because of his sexual orientation, but his fashion may be a way to assert his identity in a society that may not always fully accept him for who he is. His clothing choices are a way of rejecting the traditional masculine norms and breaking free from societal expectations, which have historically limited the expression of queer identities.

During my conversation with a female bisexual college student, I learned that she used fashion as a tool to move across the spectrum of femininity and masculinity. Her apparel allows her to switch between the realms of "masculinity" and "femininity." She says that when she dresses more masculine—like wearing baggy pants, having many rings, and cutting her hair short—she feels more visible to other queer individuals. It also changes the way she acts, saying that when she wears more masculine stuff she "becomes more of a bro and is like to people, hey, brother what's up?" Other times, she likes dressing femininely, putting on makeup, and doing her nails (Anonymous, Interview 5). Through her experience, she highlights the impact of societal expectations and stereotypes on fashion choices and how fashion can be used as a tool for self-expression and recognition.

Clothing is highly gendered and can have a significant impact on an individual's sense of identity. For example, the female college student uses clothing to navigate across the gender spectrum and hints at her queerness through nonverbal communication and self-expression. When she dresses in a more masculine style, it allows her to signal her identity to others and establish connections with LGBTQ+ members, even if it reinforces the stereotype of masculine

women being perceived as lesbians. Similarly, for the twenty-five-year-old male, fashion is a tool for exploring his queerness and pushing back against the cultural norms that assign gender to clothing. Style empowers queer individuals to challenge the notion that links gender and sexuality to clothing and accessories and gives them the opportunity to form connections in creative ways. Apparel is a powerful way to disrupt the gender binary and foster greater inclusivity in society.

*“Clothing and accessories are not just a function, but they are also a feeling of the freedom of expression that it brings us when we wear them. My friends say, when you wear your earrings to walk, it is like putting on your armor. It prepares you when you go outside to fight the war. I feel the same way when I wear my clothes and accessories. I feel lifted up and empowered.”*

### *Drag*

I first saw CumDumb-ling at a drag show in Hanoi hosted by Peach. He<sup>1</sup> was the drag performer hosting the event that night, and I reached out to him via Instagram to ask him about his story. During the interview, he shared that his queer identity centers around creativity. According to him, he has always felt the need to pursue something “bigger and more creative.” He became interested in drag when he started watching the Netflix show, *Rupaul’s Drag Race*. Before watching, he wondered why any gay man would dress like a woman, as gay people have to be more masculine to hide being gay. However, after giving the show a chance, he fell in love with the art form, describing it as a “whole new world” (D. A. Le).

---

<sup>1</sup> CumDumb-ling uses she/her pronouns while in drag, but he was not in drag when I interviewed him and goes by he/him pronouns normally. I will be referring to CumDumb-ling using he/him pronouns throughout this paper because of this.

During his time studying abroad in Australia in 2019, CumDumb-ling was further exposed to the world of drag and started practicing at home while watching *Rupaul*. Drag transformed the way he perceived his gay identity. Growing up, CumDumb-ling always forced himself to be “some kind of homosexual,” presenting himself nicely and being more masculine. He then told me about the multiple stages he went through after being introduced to drag. He first thought that to be a drag queen, one has to look the most womanly ever. Then he realized that you do not have to wear pads or wigs; in drag, you can do whatever you want (D. A. Le). Drag gave CumDumb-ling a creative outlet to explore and express his feminine side. Often, gay men are inherently associated with femininity and viewed as “lesser than” because of their attraction to the same gender. CumDumb-ling personally experienced this, which led him to believe that gay men had to conform to traditional masculine norms in order to be accepted by society. However, drag allowed CumDumb-ling to overcome the pressures to conform to traditional masculine norms as a way to overcompensate for his sexuality. Discovering drag allowed him to unlearn his belief that gay men have to be hypermasculine and gave him an outlet to experiment with gender-crossing and femininity.

Binary models of gender are still inherent in Vietnamese society. When CumDumb-ling performed in drag at a straight bar, he received a tip from a Vietnamese man who assumed CumDumb-ling was a trans woman seeking gender reassignment surgery. This incident proves the ongoing existence of the societal perception that males and females perform gender in distinct ways. However, drag performers challenge this binary system by blurring the lines between masculine and feminine characteristics through their embodiment and performance. Drag performers continually construct and deconstruct gender every time they “get into face” and “de-drag” (Guerrero 23). This process shows that gender does not have to be associated with

biological sex, and provides an opportunity for performers to push against societal conventions and explore the fluidity of gender. Drag performers expose audiences to a wider range of gender expression, prompting them to question contemporary and traditional gender norms.

When CumDumb-ling was hosting the show at Peach, he was using English to communicate. During our interview, I asked CumDumb-ling why he chose to host the show in English, and he explained that he usually hosts in Vietnamese. However, it is “harder to host in Vietnamese because all of the jokes have to be understandable for both foreigners and Vietnamese people” (D. A. Le). When we talked about the evolution of the drag scene in Hanoi, CumDumb-ling said that it has changed drastically over the past few years. The night he hosted at Peach, there were about 125 people there and the demographics consisted of both foreigners and Vietnamese individuals. This is a contrast to when CumDumb-ling attended his first drag performance in Hanoi in 2019, where there were only around 50 individuals—with around 40 being foreigners. He told me that even though drag has been around in Vietnam since the 2000s, not that many people knew what it was and the majority just thought it was cross-dressing for comedic performance. This has changed a lot in recent years, and now he observes that Vietnamese individuals usually make up the majority of the audience, accounting for around 60 to 70% of attendees (D. A. Le). Even though drag has been in Vietnam before event spaces like Peach, foreigners helped popularize Western drag. Originally, Western drag shows were mainly attended by foreigners, but there has been a steady increase in Vietnamese attendees in recent years. This has resulted in more Vietnamese performers, like CumDumb-ling, hosting shows and giving him a platform for both foreign and Vietnamese people.

CumDumb-ling believes that the West has had a significant influence on the popularity of drag in Vietnam and that foreign influence has impacted the formation of the drag scene in



Hanoi. Peach was established by an Irish drag queen named Lavender, alongside her friend David, and was later handed over to two American performers and a Vietnamese artist. To gain further insight into the foreigner's influence and experience within the Vietnamese LGBTQ+ drag scene, I interviewed one of the American organizers Peach was handed to, Annietagonist. She told me that initially, the show attracted mainly foreigners. However, the situation changed after the COVID pandemic, and more Vietnamese individuals started to attend. The show now features a diverse group of hosts, and they welcomed more Vietnamese hosts and hosts who speak Vietnamese in response to the changing demographic of the audience (Pressley). Western culture influenced the evolution of the drag scene in Hanoi and foreign-led drag shows have changed to become a more inclusive community that adapted to the changing demographic of its audience.

In addition to their local connections, Peach also has ties overseas. Every year, Peach hosts a fundraiser event where they donate all of their profits to a charity or an LGBTQ+ organization either in Vietnam or abroad. More recently, they have started to contribute a percentage of their profits every month to a Vietnamese organization, and they sometimes conduct an event dedicated solely to raising funds for a charitable cause. They have also been invited to perform at several international festivals, including Wonderfruit in Thailand (Pressley). Peach's participation in international events and international philanthropy highlights their global connections and impact within the local and international LGBTQ+ communities.

During conversations with Annietagonist and CumDumb-ling, I gained insight into the influence of the foreign community on the Hanoi drag scene. Annietagonist's connection with the Vietnamese queer community was established after she attended a *Rupaul's Drag Race* viewing party, where she witnessed local performers and saw an opportunity for her unique style of drag

as both a queen and a king. The popularity of the US-based show *Rupaul's Drag Race* has played a significant role in promoting drag culture globally, and it also introduced CumDumb-ling to the world of drag. This exposure led him to attend foreigner-led drag shows, and subsequently, he collaborated with two Vietnamese and two South African individuals to establish Wet Market, a drag event space created one year after Peach. The foreign community's cultural and practical contributions have significantly impacted the drag community in Vietnam by popularizing it through shows like *Rupaul* and the creation of queer event spaces. However, it is crucial to recognize that drag has been present in Vietnam much longer, but the recognition and appreciation for those performers were relatively low in comparison to Western drag culture. Solely crediting foreigners for introducing drag to Vietnam undermines the decades-long work and influence that Vietnamese drag performers had in building platforms that have long resisted the gender binary.

*“I am always very dynamic and changing all the time, but also at the same time my personality is very quiet, and I am very shy. I don't really know how to talk to people. I am pretty much an introvert. But when I get on the stage like—I don't know what clicks—it's just a complete switch.”*

### *Foreign Influences*

Phong is a worker at iSEE, a Vietnamese NGO that champions LGBTQ+ issues from a human rights lens. iSEE is an advocacy organization that produces original research by Vietnamese people on Vietnamese issues. Their LGBTQ+ program uses the research to educate the public on contemporary LGBTQ+ issues as well as for policy and public advocacy. They are largely funded by foreign aid, which Phong believes has contributed to the decline in the discussion of

LGBTQ+ issues in Vietnam in the past few decades. Most of the NGOs in the country do not receive government aid and are heavily reliant on foreign aid. There is a large imbalance in how international LGBTQ+ funding is distributed, with the largest funding going to North America, Europe, and Africa. Asia only receives a comparably smaller portion. The money that does go to Asia mostly goes to countries that have criminalization laws towards LGBTQ+ people, which Vietnam does not have. Further, the effects of receiving the majority of funding internationally can put advocacy workers in complicated positions, having to answer questions like “Where is your money coming from?” or “Who are you working for?” (Vuong). There are many challenges in advocating for LGBTQ+ issues in Vietnam when being heavily reliant on foreign aid. Because of the unequal distribution of international funding for LGBTQ+ issues that Vietnam receives, NGO influence may not be as influential when it comes to changing policies. Further, international aid also puts advocacy workers in complicated situations because of the mistrust in outside countries.

Quốc Anh, who works at the community organization It’s T Time, a Vietnamese organization working to advance trans rights, said that the majority of their funding also comes from abroad (Nguyễn). He also told me that it is difficult to advocate for gender affirmation and identity laws because Vietnam is a developing country. The government thinks that LGBTQ problems are not as precedent as other matters like the economy. Although Vietnam is progressive on LGBTQ+ issues compared to many other countries in Asia, Vietnamese LGBTQ+ organizations still must navigate the complexities of receiving foreign aid while also advocating for human rights policies that aren’t viewed as important as economic policies.

In August 2022, Quốc Anh told me about a dialogue event It’s T Time helped organize to spread awareness of transgender issues and to discuss the drafting of the Gender Affirmation

Law (GAL) in Vietnam (Nguyễn). Among those who spoke was Alba Rueda, Argentina's Special Envoy for Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity. She is openly transgender and has many years of experience in formulating and implementing the 2012 Gender Identity Law in Argentina (Thao). She brought a new perspective that required attention and prioritization to the draft GAL in Vietnam. This event shows the powerful solidarity that the LGBTQ+ community has globally. Argentina is a developing country that passed one of the most progressive laws in the world on transgender people's rights, and their insight is important in helping to guide other countries in passing LGBTQ+ rights legislation. The success of Argentina's Gender Identity Law proves that other developing countries like Vietnam can also prioritize human rights laws and shows the impact of the fight for trans activists globally.

### *Language*

Throughout my interviews, several individuals shared with me how the English language and the globalization of LGBTQ+ terminology have assisted with their ability to express their queer identity. Quốc Anh, for instance, told me that when he was younger, he did not know the meaning of transgender (Nguyễn). At the time, he told me that the Vietnamese internet considered transgender in a medical context. When he looked at how it was defined in English, he realized that he was trans. Phong revealed that when he was younger, he did not identify as queer and instead defined himself solely as gay. He attributed this to the lack of available language to categorize LGBTQ+ identities, along with his limited English proficiency at the time. As he improved his language skills, he developed the tools to identify himself using various LGBTQ+ terminology, both in English and Vietnamese (Vuong). Similarly, Huy, a nonbinary nineteen-year-old, shared how the English vocabulary has helped Vietnamese queer

individuals identify themselves, especially given that many of the older Vietnamese terms relating to queerness were historically discriminatory. According to Huy, many individuals use “homosexual” to describe themselves instead of “gay” because the latter has a negative connotation in Vietnamese culture and has not been fully reclaimed yet (Pham). The globalization of LGBTQ+ English terminology has helped Vietnamese queer people express their identities when some Vietnamese terms still hold negative connotations or do not exist to describe certain queer identities.

Vietnamese queer individuals are reclaiming LGBTQ+ terminology by giving them a more positive lighthearted tone. An example is the word “pê-đê” (or “bê-đê”), which originated from the French and Americans (Nguyễn). Historically, “pê-đê” referred to the “unnatural” relationship between a man and a boy or another man (Tran 16). This term was associated with gender inversion, and bisexuality was likened to hermaphroditism (Tran 17). However, the Vietnamese LGBTQ+ community has taken back control of this term and it is now considered acceptable for community members to refer to each other as “pê-đê” (Nguyễn). I came across an Instagram handle called “bedebynight,” run by a drag queen in Hanoi. The bio states that the page was “The best place to update Drag Show events in the Capital of bedes for bedes and non-bedes.” In this context, “bê-đê” or “pê-đê” has been reclaimed by the drag community. Reclaiming language is a common form of resistance against the discrimination that marginalized groups have experienced throughout history. A word that was once used to belittle gay men and reduce their identity to “he” and “she” is now being used as a source of irony, empowerment, and pride within the drag community. This also shows that language has the power to change over time and the importance of marginalized communities taking control of their own narratives by reclaiming historically discriminatory terminology.

There are consequences to using the English language and consuming foreign media, one being undermining Vietnamese culture. When it comes to this, Phong believes that it is important to appreciate all of the good things that Vietnam has to offer, such as ideas of collectivism and strong familial bonds (Vuong). If people do not do this, they may overlook the valuable aspects of what Vietnam has to offer. Growing up queer in Vietnam and being exposed to Western media has taught Phong that Western words have specific meanings, and it is a process to unpack the messages that the media is telling him. There are alternatives to Western media, and Vietnam has a lot of good media with unique outlooks on sexuality (Vuong). When talking to another interviewee, he shared similar thoughts on the Western language. He works with youth in the LGBTQ+ community in Hanoi, and they start learning Western language to identify themselves. He sees that more people favor Western culture and that their roots are left behind them. There was even a period in his life when he wanted to leave his Vietnamese culture, but he changed his views. He now wants to explore the old language about sexuality and about the queer community and learn more about it (Anonymous). Although the English vocabulary has helped give many Vietnamese queer individuals a way to articulate their identity, the Vietnamese language is constantly changing and evolving, giving the LGBTQ+ community more ways to express themselves.

### *Survey*

For the demographics of my survey, 60% currently live in Ho Chi Minh City, 33.3% live in Hanoi, and 6.7% live in Hue. There were a diverse range of sexualities, as 40% identified as gay, 20% identified as demisexual, 13.3% identified as lesbian and asexual, and the rest of the respondents identified as queer or bisexual. For gender identity, 53.3% identified as a cis male,

26.6% identified as a cis female, and the rest identified as nonbinary or questioning. The majority of the respondents were aged 17-27, however, there were two respondents who were older than 35.

The following graphs show the connection between being queer and self-expression and fashion. When asked about the extent one’s queer identity influences one’s fashion and style from 1 being no influence to 10 being the most influential, the majority of survey respondents said that their queer identity influences their style. As shown in Figure 1, 73.4% of respondents answered greater than five, meaning that they strongly believed that their queer identity influenced their fashion choices.

Xu hướng tính dục queer ảnh hưởng đến gu thời trang và phong cách của bạn ở mức độ nào? To what extent does your queer identity influence your fashion and style?  
15 responses

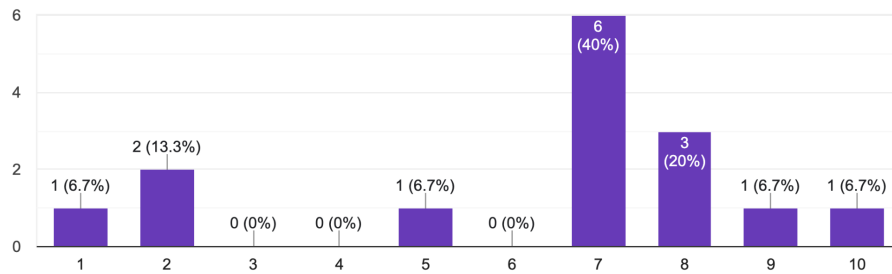


Figure 1

When the survey asked about the extent to which individuals wanted to convey specific characteristics or personalities through their clothing choices, 73.4% of the participants responded with a rating greater than five, indicating a strong desire to express themselves through their attire.

Bạn muốn thể hiện đặc điểm giới tính hoặc tính cách qua cách ăn mặc của bạn ở mức độ nào? How much do you want to express certain characteristics or personality with what you wear?  
15 responses

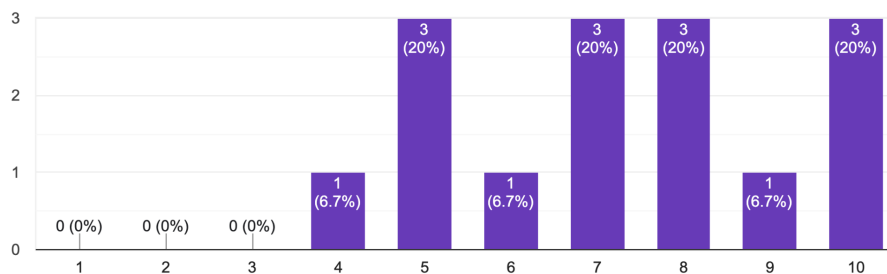


Figure 2

An overwhelming majority (93.3%) of respondents strongly noticed the changes in the ways LGBTQ+ individuals express themselves through fashion and style in Vietnam in the past few years. This could indicate that LGBTQ+ individuals are becoming more comfortable with expressing their identity through their clothing choices and fashion preferences in public. This shift may be because of the changing attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community in Vietnam, with society becoming more inclusive and accepting of queer individuals.

Bạn thấy cách ăn mặc của những người trong cộng đồng LGBTQ+ thay đổi ra sao trong những năm gần đây ở Việt Nam?  
 Have you noticed changes in the ways LGBTQ+ individuals express themselves through fashion and style in Vietnam over the past few years?

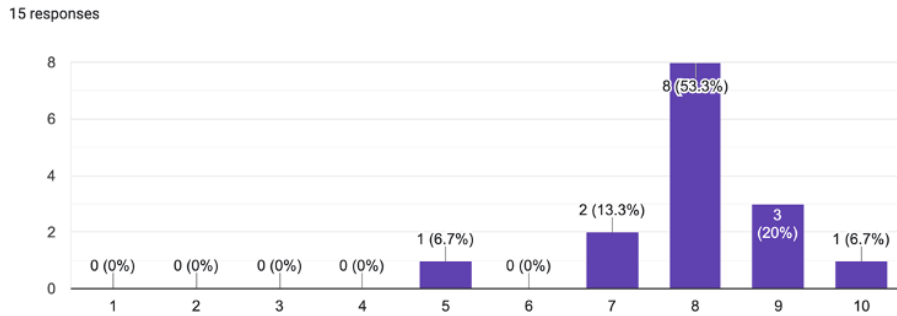


Figure 3

Figure 4 shows that 93.3% of the respondents strongly believe that the foreign community influenced the Vietnamese queer community.

Theo bạn văn hóa nước ngoài đã ảnh hưởng như thế nào đến cộng đồng LGBTQ+ Việt Nam? How much do you think the foreign community influences the Vietnamese queer community?  
 15 responses

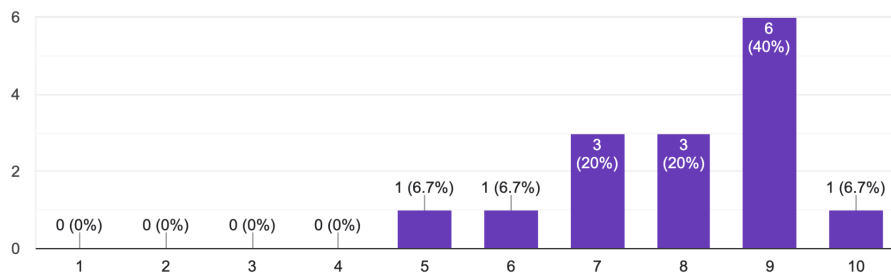


Figure 4



Figure 5 shows that 86.7% of respondents strongly believe that the English vocabulary helped express their identity and sexuality. This shows that the English language had a strong influence on how LGBTQ+ people discover and articulate their identity.

Các thuật ngữ tiếng Anh giúp bạn thể hiện xu hướng tính dục và giới tính của bạn ở mức độ nào? How has the English vocabulary helped you express your identity and sexuality?  
15 responses

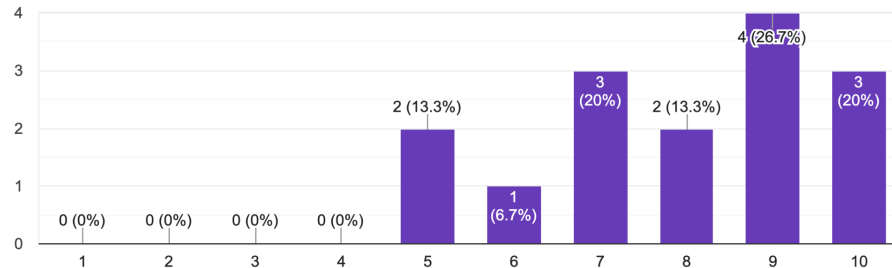


Figure 5

Contextualizing the survey answers with the interviews shows gives a more in-depth analysis of the how and why. For example, ways in which the foreign community has influenced the Vietnamese queer community are through international donations to LGBTQ+ nonprofits or through the introduction of Western drag from shows like *Rupaul* or foreigner-organized drag events. Further, the survey reveals that a significant number of LGBTQ+ individuals connect their queer identity with what they wear and express a desire to showcase their queer identity through personal style.

## Conclusion

The results of this study provide more information on how the Vietnamese LGBTQ+ community is connected to the global community as well as how fashion and self-expression are tied to queer identity. As Vietnam became more interconnected with the rest of the world, its LGBTQ+ community found new ways of expressing themselves through language and culture. Many queer individuals interviewed and surveyed noted that English LGBTQ+ terms helped them better

understand and articulate their identity. However, queer people also reclaimed certain Vietnamese terminology and took control over previously discriminatory narratives associated with those words. The growing popularity of Western media and shows like *Rupaul's Drag Race* shifted perceptions of LGBTQ+ identities in Vietnam within and outside of the queer community. Further, international LGBTQ+ organizations and foreign activists also played a role in influencing the push for LGBTQ+ rights in Vietnam through funding and dialogue. However, more tangible change can be made if the Vietnamese government allocates funding to the organizations, as people working there would not have to face questions about their intentions and would also get more resources to promote their agenda.

Different identities within the LGBTQ+ umbrella express the unique ways in which fashion has contributed to their ability to defy the rigid gender binary, connect with other queer people, and discover new ways to perceive their identity. Clothing may just be fabric threaded together, but attached to it are powerful meanings, emotions, and ideas that reflect the wearer's self-expression. It can help people feel more connected to their gender and sexuality, provide a way to explore the nuances of masculinity and femininity, allow individuals to transcend traditional gender norms, and so much more. Fashion is a tool that individuals can use to break free of the limiting labels imposed by society and express the colorful spectrum of humanity. By presenting ourselves to the world in ways that feel authentic and true, we can communicate who we are, who we want to be, and what we stand for.

### *Future Findings*

This research paper was only an introduction to the potential ways globalization and self-expression have influenced the Vietnamese LGBTQ+ community. If given more time, I

would have liked to conduct more interviews in both Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, as well as gather more survey results from both cities. There were only 15 survey responses, and this sample size is too small to draw accurate conclusions. Originally, I planned on interviewing people from both Ho Chi Minh City and Hanoi. Even though I was able to gather survey results from both cities, I only had time to interview people living in Hanoi. The survey results show that there are similarities between the LGBTQ+ community in Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City, but each city still has its own unique culture that impacts the experiences of the queer community that lives there.

The LGBTQ+ community is very broad, and interviewing more people would have allowed me to narrow down the unique ways in which different individuals use fashion to express themselves. I would have liked to explore what the Vietnamese drag community was like before the introduction of Western drag and research the influence of those who have been performing drag since the early 2000s. I would have also delved into the potential side effects that foreigners may have had on the already existing drag community in Vietnam. Further, interviewing queer people who only speak Vietnamese would give a more complete picture of understanding how non-English speakers express their gender and sexuality using Vietnamese LGBTQ+-related vocabulary. Incorporating these elements would be more interesting to build upon in the future of this research area.

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## **Appendix**

### *General Interview Questions*

1. How old are you?
2. Where do you live?
3. What is your gender?
4. What is your sexuality?

5. How do you define your queer identity?
6. Do you notice any differences in the way you dress compared to other people?
7. Where do you get your fashion inspiration from?
8. Has your fashion style changed before or after coming out?
9. Do you want to express certain characteristics or personality with what you wear?
10. How has the English vocabulary helped you express your identity and sexuality?
11. How do you think the foreign community influences the Vietnamese queer community?
12. Have you noticed changes in the acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community in Vietnam in the past few years?
13. What are some challenges or discrimination that LGBTQ+ individuals still face in Vietnam?
14. Can you share your experiences with LGBTQ+ governmental policies in Vietnam? To what extent have these policies impacted your experiences as a member of the LGBTQ+ community?
15. How do you connect with other queer individuals and form community bonds?
16. In what ways do you think modernization has influenced self-expression and the creation of queer spaces in your city?
17. How do you see the fight for recognition and visibility for the LGBTQ+ community evolve in the context of Vietnam's societal and economic changes?

### *Online Survey Questions*

1. Bạn hiện đang sống ở thành phố nào tại Việt Nam?/What city do you currently live in Vietnam?
2. Xu hướng tính dục của bạn là gì?/What is your sexual orientation?
3. Giới của bạn là gì?/What is your gender?
4. Bạn bao nhiêu tuổi?/How old are you?
5. Bạn có nhận thấy bất kỳ khác biệt nào trong cách ăn mặc của bạn so với một người không thuộc cộng đồng LGBTQ+ không?/Do you notice any differences in the way you dress compared to straight people?

6. Xu hướng tính dục queer ảnh hưởng đến gu thời trang và phong cách của bạn ở mức độ nào?/To what extent does your queer identity influence your fashion and style?
7. Phong cách thời trang của bạn đã thay đổi như thế nào sau khi bạn công khai về bản dạng giới và xu hướng tính dục của mình?/How has your fashion style changed after telling people about your gender identity and sexual orientation?
8. Bạn muốn thể hiện đặc điểm giới tính hoặc tính cách qua cách ăn mặc của bạn ở mức độ nào?/How much do you want to express certain characteristics or personality with what you wear?
9. Bạn thấy cách ăn mặc của những người trong cộng đồng LGBTQ+ thay đổi ra sao trong những năm gần đây ở Việt Nam?/Have you noticed changes in the ways LGBTQ+ individuals express themselves through fashion and style in Vietnam over the past few years?
10. Theo bạn văn hóa nước ngoài đã ảnh hưởng như thế nào đến cộng đồng LGBTQ+ Việt Nam?/How much do you think the foreign community influences the Vietnamese queer community?
11. Các thuật ngữ tiếng Anh giúp bạn thể hiện xu hướng tính dục và giới tính của bạn ở mức độ nào?/How has the English vocabulary helped you express your identity and sexuality?
12. Bạn có thường xuyên sử dụng các nền tảng mạng xã hội (Facebook, instagram, v.v.) để tìm các sự kiện LGBTQ+ không?/How often do you use social media platforms (Facebook, instagram, etc.) to find LGBTQ+ events?
13. Bạn có nhận thấy bất kỳ thay đổi nào trong việc chấp nhận cộng đồng LGBTQ+ nơi bạn sống trong vài năm qua không?/Have you noticed changes in the acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community where you live over the past few years?