

Indonesian Gay Men's Perceptions of Thailand as a Gay-friendly Destination

Sarah Geraldine Wullur^{a*}, Jessada Salathong^b

^aBangkok Hospital Headquarters, Thailand, ^bChulalongkorn University, Thailand

ABSTRACT

Thailand is widely perceived by Indonesian gay men as a gay friendly destination that offers spaces for social interaction and the expression of sexual identity. Despite its popularity, limited research has examined how these perceptions are shaped and the social, cultural, and media influences behind them. This study employed a qualitative design using in depth interviews with 15 Indonesian gay men, aged 18-45, who had travelled to Thailand and participated in LGBTQ+ activities. The findings highlight three key themes: 1) respondents generally view Thailand as welcoming and progressive; 2) media representations, particularly Boys' Love/Yaoi (BL/Y) series, along with events such as Pride parades and the Songkran Festival, strongly influence these perceptions; and 3) while some participants experience internal conflict due to Indonesia's cultural and religious norms, others reconcile these tensions and express confidence in embracing their identities. Collectively, the study contributes to the growing literature on LGBTQ+ tourism and offers practical implications for destination marketing and development in Thailand.

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Introduction

Thailand's progressive stance on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and more (LGBTQ+) rights has garnered significant attention, especially within Southeast Asia. In January 2025, Thailand became the first country in Southeast Asia to legalize same-sex marriage (Pongruengphant, 2025). According to The Government Public Relations of Thailand (2025), the amendment to the Civil and Commercial Code replaces the terms "men and women" and "husband and wife" with the words, "individuals" and "spouses." The law also allows same-sex couples to jointly adopt children. This policy has not only sparked conversations within Thailand but also resonated across neighboring countries, including Indonesia, where LGBTQ+ rights remain a contentious issue.

The Nation (2026) mentioned that nearly five million tourists participated in the Bangkok Songkran celebration. These numbers include the gay tourists who also engaged in the activities. Over the years, Thailand has developed a prominent reputation as a premier destination for LGBTQ+ tourism, frequently being designated as a "pink destination". From the 1980s, Thailand has been referred to as the LGBTQ most friendly or 'vagaytion' destination (Armartpon, 2021).

According to Hughes (2006), the word 'Pink' describes the term "Pink Pound" or "Pink Dollar," which aims to connect gay and lesbian appeals. Pink is used by homosexuals with the inverted pink triangle symbol, which gays used at the time of concentration at the camps of Nazi Germany. As a tourism segment, gay individuals

CONTACT

Sarah Geraldine Wullur (M.A., Chulalongkorn University, Thailand) is an international marketing officer, Bangkok Hospital Headquarters, Thailand.

Jessada Salathong (Ph.D., Waseda University, Japan) is Assistant Professor, Mass Communication Department, Chulalongkorn University, Thailand.

***Corresponding author's email:** wullursarah@gmail.com

show a definite preference for destinations that are friendly to them and where they are acknowledged (Wong & Tolkach, 2017). In 2013, the Tourism Authority Thailand (TAT) launched a campaign called 'Go Thai, Be Free' to provide contents as a source of LGBTQ+ travel inspiration for those traveling to Thailand. The website of this campaign proposes travel ideas in different cities in Thailand based on different themes such as adventure, art, culture, honeymoon, local experiences, luxury, nature, and nightlife (Veilleux, 2021).

The openness of Bangkok to diversity, the gay-friendly bars and restaurants, popular saunas, and the many drag shows and explosive nightlife have made Bangkok the 'gay capital of Asia' (Veilleux, 2021). Silom area is commonly known as the central hub of gay community in Bangkok. Coetzee (2023) argues that such events may create "existential moments" that transform attendees' understandings of their sexual identities.

As the country with the largest Muslim population in the world (Ridho & Bangun, 2025), Indonesia places social and cultural constraints on such behaviors. Public expressions of same-sex affection are largely taboo, and LGBTQ+ individuals face significant social pressure to conform to heteronormative expectations. For example, under the implementation of Shari'a Law in Aceh, two men were subjected to public caning as punishment for engaging in same-sex acts (McKirdy, 2018). Heteronormativity is a socially constructed framework that reinforces gender and sexual inequalities, disproportionately affecting marginalized groups, including the LGBTQ+ community. As a result, individuals who diverge from heteronormative standards frequently face stigma and are made to feel that their identities and lifestyles are invalid or abnormal (Wullur, 2022).

Public attitudes may lead many gay men in Indonesia to be more cautious when expressing their identities. Discussions about sexuality are generally not widespread and are often regarded as sensitive or taboo topics (Listiorini, 2019). Representation of gay men in Indonesian media, educational institutions, and public discourse remains limited, contributing to feelings of invisibility and marginalization. For many Indonesian gay men, particularly within sociocultural contexts where dominant norms and regulatory frameworks may restrict self-expression, navigating identity can be especially challenging.

Within this context of limited representation and constrained self-expression, the perception of alternative sociocultural spaces becomes particularly salient. As argued by Allifiansyah (2025), many Indonesian gay men frequently perceive Thailand as a setting in which LGBTQ+ and queer communities are able to assemble and articulate their identities more openly. Thailand's LGBTQ+ nightlife, Pride events, and comparatively more permissive public attitudes toward same-sex relationships are often cited as contributing factors that shape its image as a favorable destination. Building upon this context, this qualitative study seeks to explore how Indonesian gay men construct and interpret their perceptions of Thailand as a gay-friendly destination.

By foregrounding participants' lived experiences and subjective meanings, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of consumer perceptions and market dynamics within LGBTQ+ spaces, while offering insights that may inform tourism development and marketing strategies. In other words, this study seeks to explore how Indonesian gay men perceive Thailand as a gay-friendly destination and to identify the social, cultural, and media-related factors that shape these perceptions. By examining these influences, the research aims to provide deeper insights into the intersection of tourism, identity, and representation, highlighting the ways in which media portrayals, cultural events, and broader societal attitudes contribute to the construction of Thailand's image as an inclusive space for LGBTQ+ travelers.

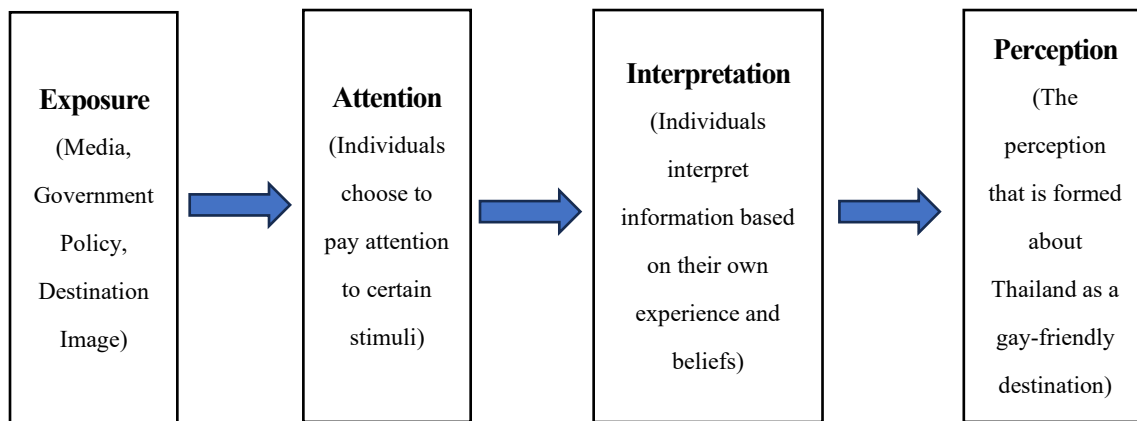
Literature Review

To understand how Indonesian gay men perceive Thailand as a gay-friendly destination, this section focuses on defining and expanding upon this concept. The literature review draws from previous studies, academic journals, and relevant articles.

Perception

This study examines the perceptions of Indonesian gay men by applying the perceptual process framework proposed by Solomon (2020). According to Solomon, perception consists of three sequential stages: exposure, attention, and interpretation (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Perception Process



Source: Adapted from Solomon, M. R. (2020). *Consumer behavior: Buying, having, and being* (13th ed.). Pearson.

In his study, exposure refers to the stage at which individuals encounter stimuli through their sensory receptors. In this stage, individuals encounter a variety of informational sources, including media content and interpersonal communication, which interact to influence how messages are processed and interpreted within their social context (Lee, 2009). However, exposure does not occur arbitrarily, as it is influenced by individuals' motivations and the surrounding social environment. Kumar and Patra (2012), argued that exposure may depend on consumers' motivation to engage with market environments, supported by factors such as social infrastructure and a sense of security.

Although previous studies emphasize the role of individual motivation and social context in determining exposure to stimuli, they often overlook the influence of broader environmental factors, such as the structure of the environment and the availability of information, which can limit the generalizability of their findings. Camaj (2019) argued that although people may encounter information that aligns with their preferences, selective exposure does not necessarily imply avoidance of challenging information, and that the selective process continues as audiences engage with and incorporate encountered information into their decision-making.

Attention represents the process by which individuals selectively focus on specific stimuli. Hovland et al. (2017) believed that consumers direct their attention toward messages that align with their personal interests, beliefs, values, expectations, and prior knowledge, while ignoring information that conflicts with these cognitive frameworks. Continuous exposure to sensory-rich information leads individuals to selectively attend to and process stimuli, depending on both the

immediate context and a range of influencing factors (Endo & Roque, 2017).

Interpretation is the stage in which individuals assign meaning to the stimuli they have attended to (Solomon, 2020). This process is shaped by personal experiences, cultural values, expectations, and existing belief systems (schema), which may lead to different interpretations of the same stimulus. Ultimately, interpretation influences how individuals evaluate products, messages, or experiences and construct their perceptions (Madichie, 2012).

Destination Image

Destination image refers to the set of beliefs, ideas, and impressions that individuals hold about a place, influencing travel intentions and related behaviors (Chen & Tsai, 2007). Gartner (1994) conceptualizes destination image as comprising cognitive (knowledge and beliefs), affective (emotional responses), and conative (behavioral intentions) components. For LGBTQ+ travelers, destination image extends beyond general perceptions to include considerations of safety, inclusivity, and social acceptance. These perceptions are shaped through both direct experiences and mediated representations, such as Pride events, LGBTQ-oriented promotions, and symbolic communication, with individual interpretation influenced by prior experiences and sociocultural context (Wongsunopparat & Hu, 2023).

Soft Power

As defined by Nye (1990), soft power describes a nation's capacity to influence others' preferences and behavior through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or force. Thailand has many distinctive cultures or soft powers, including food, films, Thai fabrics, fashion, Thai

boxing, as well as festivals, and traditions (Rinwong, 2022). In the past, the development of the country focused on the economy, neglecting social and human development, but later the development plan changed, soft power is distinctly used in the development of the country and society, and the effect is much better than using hard power (Roongsangjun, 2023).

Thailand's Soft Power Influences on Gay Tourists

Songkran Festival. The Thai Water Festival or *Songkran* marks the start of the traditional Thai New Year. It is characterized by its water-splashing festivities and is one of the most anticipated annual events for tourists and locals alike. Simultaneously, for many Asian gay men, Songkran signifies an environment in which joy coexists with the continual quest for visibility, acceptance, and equality (Chen, 2024). During this period, LGBTQ-oriented events and gatherings become more visible, contributing to the area's association with sexual diversity and public celebration (Duangwises, 2024). For some international gay visitors, participation in these festivities may symbolize temporary freedom of expression and social acceptance.

The Phenomenon of Y Series. Y Series, also known as *wai*, a term derived from the Japanese *yaoi*, is a genre featuring romantic and erotic relationships among attractive male characters. The broadcast of *Love Sick The Series* in July 2014 is widely recognized as the starting point of Thai Y series (Bunyavechewin et al., 2024). While Thailand has a reputation for being LGBTQ+ friendly, Y series were once seen as inappropriate by many people. Media used to frame the homosexual relationships as deviant behavior and actors who appeared in these shows faced negative judgments because of Thailand's traditional beliefs that only heterosexual relationships are acceptable.

Nowadays, as society becomes more open-minded about different sexual orientations, the demand for Y series has increased gradually. Unlike the challenges faced by earlier generations, young same-sex couples today experience fewer obstacles due to societal progress (Vo, 2022). During the COVID-19 lockdown, *2Gether The Series* (2020) gained both national and international popularity. Its popularity has contributed to greater portrayal and acceptance of varied gender and sexual identities in popular media (Daniswara et al., 2024). Due to the huge popularity of the series, people's interest in Thailand kept growing not just in the country, but also in its food, culture, and even the language. As a result, the government has taken steps to leverage the Y series as a form of soft power, recognizing the significant market demand.

Same-Sex Marriage Law. In January 2025, Thailand made history as the first country in

Southeast Asia to legalize same-sex marriage. This legislation redefines marriage as a partnership between two individuals and provides LGBTQ+ couples with equal rights, including tax benefits, inheritance rights, and the ability to adopt children. LGBTQ+ movements in Thailand have gained significant recognition, with widespread support from the Thai public for the introduction of new laws or amendments to existing ones to ensure equal rights for all citizens in terms of marriage and family laws (Aksornarn, 2024). A government survey revealed that over 90 percent of the population supports the draft of such a new law, reflecting a growing awareness and acceptance of LGBTQ rights in the country (Reuters, 2023).

Rainbow Marketing

The term rainbow marketing refers to the use of LGBTQ+ symbols, themes, and representations in marketing strategies to engage and attract consumers, particularly those within the LGBTQ+ community (Poornima et al., 2024). Marketing strategies for businesses have always included an important element called advertising appeal (Pham Thi Be et al., 2024). To attract the attention of gay consumers, a brand must ensure that its representations of gay identities are both accurate and reflective of the community's diverse experiences.

Leite (2022) indicated that LGBTQ + representation in advertising exists in a variety of forms of iconography such as LGBTQ + flag, rainbow, illustration of same-sex couples, etc. Explicit imagery in advertisements, which depicts LGBTQ individuals or couples, tends to be more effective in resonating with sexual minorities (Eisend & Hermann, 2019; Ginder & Byun, 2015). In general, advertising appeal under the moderating role of rainbow LGBTQ+ ads is a strong stimulus affecting consumers' perception and evaluation of a specific brand (Pham Thi Be et al., 2024).

Methodology

This study explored the experiences of 15 Indonesian gay men who had traveled to Thailand at least once. Participants were between 18 and 45 years old, covering both Generation Z and Millennials, who are generally more engaged with LGBTQ+ travel and issues. They were selected based on their experiences with LGBTQ+-related activities in Thailand, such as visiting gay bars or attending LGBTQ+ events (see Table 1). Recruitment took place through LGBTQ+ communities and online platforms where they felt safe such as Instagram and X (previously known as Twitter).

Table 1: Respondents' Demographic Profile

Respondent (Initial)	Age	Occupation	City	Religion	Activity
1	26	Master's Student	Jogjakarta	Muslim	Played gay dating apps
2	22	Content Creator	Jakarta	Christian	Played gay dating apps, visited gay bars
3	23	Bachelor's Student	Jakarta	Muslim	Played gay dating apps, met up with other gay individuals
4	24	Private Employee	Manado	Christian	Played gay dating apps
5	22	Architect	Manado	Christian	Attended Gay Songkran
6	24	Hotelier	Bali	Christian	Played gay dating apps, visited gay bars
7	29	Art Performer	Medan	Muslim	Visited gay bars, attended BL Series events
8	29	Entrepreneur	Jakarta	Christian	Visited gay bars, experienced gay sauna
9	32	Tech Manager	Jakarta	Muslim	Played gay dating apps, visited gay bars
10	24	Master's Student	Surabaya	Confucius	Played gay dating apps, attended Pride Parade
11	24	Doctoral Student	Semarang	Muslim	Visited gay bars
12	23	Hotelier	Bali	Hindu	Played gay dating apps
13	21	Bachelor's Student	Makassar	Muslim	Visited gay bars, attended Songkran and Pride Parade
14	30	Private Employee	Jakarta	Muslim	Visited gay bars, watched drag queen shows
15	23	Bachelor's Student	Bogor	Muslim	Attended BL Series events

To gain deeper insights, the study used in-depth interviews to understand their perceptions of Thailand as a gay-friendly destination. The study focused on how Thailand's LGBTQ+ media, government policy, and rainbow marketing influenced their views. Interviews were conducted online or in person, ensuring that participants' identities remained anonymous. A comfortable and supportive environment was provided to encourage open discussions. With consent, interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to identify common themes, such as feelings of safety, acceptance, and motivations for visiting Thailand. The results were compared with previous research to better understand the topic.

Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to established ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Prior to data collection, all participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Informed consent was obtained from all participants before the interviews were conducted. To ensure confidentiality and protect participants' identities, all personal information was anonymized, and any identifying details were removed during the data

analysis and reporting process. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, particular care was taken to create a safe and respectful environment during the interviews.

Results

Thailand provides a socio-cultural environment that facilitates the expression of identity among gay individuals. The availability of dedicated gay hubs and a broader gay-friendly atmosphere cultivates a sense of belonging, acceptance, and personal fulfillment. These spaces not only serve as entertainment venues but also function as social arenas where individuals can engage in community interactions without fear of discrimination. In contrast to the societal constraints and stigmatization often encountered in their home countries, Thailand's inclusive policies and visibly active LGBTQ+ community contribute to its reputation as a safe and affirming destination.

This environment allows Indonesian gay individuals to navigate their identities freely, reinforcing Thailand's position as a key destination for gay travelers seeking both social validation and opportunities for self-expression (see Table 2). Society plays important role for gay men to express themselves. It appears that many gay men

have fears to show their identity due to societal judgment and discrimination. As a result, many Indonesian gay men choose to conceal their identity and preferences. However, all the interview respondents consistently highlighted that

society in Thailand seems to not have an issue with how they express themselves. Regardless of how they dress or speak, they believe that Thai people do not judge their identity.

Table 2: Perception on Social Acceptance

Exposure	Attention	Interpretation	Perception
Thai society allows open self-expression and PDA	Respondents notice less judgement in public behavior	Freedom is interpreted as social acceptance	Thailand is perceived as socially accepting destination
Open discussion of LGBTQ+ and Boys Love	Respondents pay attention to absence of taboo	Openness is interpreted as normalization of LGBTQ+	Thailand is perceived as socially open
Presence of like-minded individuals (Boys Love fandoms)	Respondents focused on shared identity and interests	Social interaction is interpreted as belonging	Thailand is perceived as a place of community

Indonesia holds a traditional view of relationships, often considering only heterosexual pairings as normative (see Table 3). Due to the value of heteronormativity, gay individuals are often perceived as deviating from what is considered morally correct. Many of the respondents expressed an interest in dressing more femininely, even though

they still identify as men. In line with this, there are numerous instances where gay individuals face discrimination and even persecution simply for being themselves, due to many Indonesians still hold traditional views and oppose the expression of femininity in anyone other than women.

Table 3: Perception on Safety and Security

Exposure	Attention	Interpretation	Perception
In Indonesia, LGBTQ+ visibility is limited and often framed negatively, with many activities kept private.	Public attention tends to focus on non-normative expressions, such as femininity in men.	LGBTQ+ identities are often seen as conflicting with social and moral norms.	Indonesia is generally perceived as less safe for open self-expression.
In Thailand, LGBTQ+ visibility is relatively high through public events and media, especially in urban and tourist areas.	Public attention is generally neutral to positive, though not entirely free from bias.	LGBTQ+ identities are often viewed as acceptable and part of social diversity, particularly in certain contexts.	Thailand is perceived as more accepting and relatively safe, although this may vary across settings and experiences.

Beyond its famous gay scenes, Thailand offers much more to travelers. The country's rich culture serves as a form of soft power, making it one of the most popular travel destinations globally. Thai cuisine is celebrated worldwide for its bold and authentic flavors, while the nation's temples and historical landmarks continue to draw tourists from across the globe, including those from the gay community. Within the gay context, Songkran Festival did attract many gay tourists to Thailand (see Table 4).

One of the respondents admitted that he traveled to Thailand with his partner to experience the lively atmosphere during the festival. He mentioned that many Indonesian gay men are always excited when the Songkran Festival approaches because they look forward to going to Bangkok to meet other gay men and celebrate by playing with water together. On the other hand, Respondent 8 shared that all forms of gay entertainment in Indonesia must be conducted in secrecy. He recounted an instance where a group of gay individuals gathered in a private space on

someone's property, only for the neighbors to report them to the authorities. This is one of the reasons why Indonesian gay men view Thailand as

a more favorable destination to meet with their community without interference.

Table 4: Perception on Tourism and Entertainment

Exposure	Attention	Interpretation	Perception
Cultural attractions such as food, temples, and festivals (e.g., Songkran Festival), alongside LGBTQ+ entertainment like drag and cabaret shows	Interest in places that offer both cultural experiences and entertainment	A mix of culture and LGBTQ+ visibility is seen as making the trip more enjoyable	Thailand is seen as appealing and inclusive
Spaces and events where LGBTQ+ individuals can meet and socialize	Interest in shared experiences and meeting others with similar identities	Social interaction is linked to a sense of comfort and belonging	Thailand is seen as a place to connect with the community
LGBTQ+ activities that are hidden or limited to private settings	Awareness of restricted visibility and possible social risks	Limitations are seen as barriers to expression and interaction	Indonesia is seen as less open to LGBTQ+ experiences

Media plays a significant role in shaping how destinations are perceived, particularly in contexts where LGBTQ+ issues remain sensitive or restricted (see Table 5). However, these perceptions are largely constructed through selective and often idealized representations. International media, social media, and LGBTQ+-focused platforms tend to highlight visible expressions of acceptance, which can create an

impression of openness that may not fully reflect everyday realities. The popularity of BL (Boys' Love) series, for instance, normalizes same-sex relationships in entertainment, yet this form of representation is often commercialized and does not necessarily indicate broader structural acceptance.

Table 5: Perception on Media and Its Influences

Exposure	Attention	Interpretation	Perception
International media, social media, and LGBTQ+ platforms showing open expressions of gay identity	Focus on differences in visibility and openness	Media portrayals are seen as reflecting social attitudes toward LGBTQ+ individuals	Thailand has visible representations and is seen as more open and accepting
BL series (Y Series) and LGBTQ+ representation in entertainment and online platforms	Focus on how same-sex relationships are portrayed in mainstream media	Visibility in media is seen as a sign of social acceptance	Thailand is seen as more inclusive and normalized toward LGBTQ+ individuals

Table 5: Continued.

Exposure	Attention	Interpretation	Perception
Availability of dating apps for connecting with other gay individuals	Focus on ease of access, anonymity, and ability to meet others	Digital platforms are seen as enabling social and romantic interaction	Thailand is seen as more accessible for connection
Pride campaigns, branding, and public displays of support (e.g., rainbow symbols, inclusive messaging)	Focus on the visibility of support in public spaces	Public and brand support are seen as indicators of broader acceptance	Thailand is seen as supportive and LGBTQ+-friendly

Similarly, the accessibility of dating apps may suggest ease of social and romantic connection, while overlooking potential risks and inequalities that persist in offline settings. Public displays of support, such as Pride campaigns and inclusive branding, further reinforce perceptions of acceptance, but these are frequently tied to market interests rather than genuine social change. Taken together, media exposure shapes perceptions of destinations as open and inclusive, while also simplifying and, at times, overstating the extent of LGBTQ+ acceptance.

In Indonesia, culture and religion are central to an individual's life. According to the first principle of Pancasila, the nation's foundation,

which states "*Ketuhanan yang Maha Esa*" or "Belief in the one and only God," every Indonesian citizen is required to register with a religion to be recognized as a citizen. Therefore, respondents of this research have varying perspective on their identity as a gay individual related to their religions. While exposure to more open environments may provide a sense of freedom, this does not necessarily resolve the internalized values carried from more conservative contexts. Instead, self-expression can remain accompanied by feelings of guilt, anxiety, or moral conflict, suggesting that acceptance is not only socially constructed but also deeply internalized (see Table 6).

Table 6: Perception on Culture and Religious Conflict

Exposure	Attention	Interpretation	Perception
Strong cultural and religious values emphasizing heteronormativity	Awareness of conflict between personal identity and societal expectations	Sexual identity is seen as conflicting with moral and religious beliefs	Self-expression is accompanied by feelings of guilt, anxiety, or fear
Experiences of freedom in more open environments	Awareness of contrast between personal feelings and internalized values	Freedom is seen as temporary or situational rather than fully accepted	Destinations are perceived as spaces for expression, but not free from internal conflict
Personal reflection and evolving relationship with religion and identity	Focus on individual agency and self-definition	Identity and belief systems are reinterpreted as separate or flexible	Self-acceptance leads to greater comfort in self-expression
Reduced internal conflict over time through personal acceptance	Focus on confidence and authenticity	Sexual identity is seen as a natural part of the self-broader acceptance	Destinations are perceived positively as spaces that support authenticity and comfort

At the same time, some respondents begin to renegotiate this tension by redefining their relationship with religion and identity on more

personal terms. This shift reflects a move from externally imposed norms toward individual agency, where identity and belief are no longer

seen as mutually exclusive. However, this process is uneven and ongoing, highlighting that perceptions of “acceptance” in a destination may coexist with unresolved internal conflicts. As such, the idea of a gay-friendly environment should not be understood as absolute, but rather as a context that enables expression while still intersecting with personal, cultural, and religious complexities.

The topic of same-sex marriage legislation is significant news for many Indonesian gay men. Given Indonesia's lack of recognition or support for LGBTQ+ rights, this development brings hope and excitement to the LGBTQ+ community in Indonesia, especially for gay couples who have been longing for legal recognition and acknowledgment. Nonetheless, respondents have different opinions toward the legalization (see Table 7). The positive responses toward marriage equality indicate that legal recognition is widely perceived as a key marker of social progress, particularly among individuals from contexts where such rights are absent. The legalization of same-sex marriage is understood not only as the extension of legal protection, but also

as symbolic validation of same-sex relationships within society. This contributes to favorable perceptions of destinations that adopt such policies, where legal reform is often associated with inclusivity and equality. Nevertheless, this interpretation may overstate the extent to which legal change translates into everyday social acceptance, as structural and cultural barriers may persist despite formal recognition.

At the same time, the presence of more cautious perspectives suggests a more nuanced understanding of legalization as a complex and ongoing process. Concerns related to societal readiness, regional dynamics, and potential unintended consequences reflect an awareness that legal reforms are embedded within broader socio-cultural contexts. While marriage equality is viewed as a significant step forward, it is not perceived as a comprehensive resolution to issues of discrimination or exclusion. Therefore, perceptions of inclusivity remain contingent, shaped by both the symbolic significance of legal recognition and the realities of its implementation within society.

Table 7: Perception on Marriage Equality Law

Exposure	Attention	Interpretation	Perception
Legal recognition of same-sex marriage and related media narratives (e.g., films, public discourse)	Focus on rights, legal protection, and recognition of same-sex relationships	Legalization is seen as a sign of progress and institutional support	Thailand is perceived as progressive and supportive of LGBTQ+ rights
Public discourse surrounding the social and economic impact of legalization	Focus on potential consequences, including societal readiness and regional context	Legalization is seen as beneficial but complex, with possible challenges	Thailand is perceived with cautious optimism
Regional differences in LGBTQ+ acceptance and legal frameworks	Awareness of contrast between more and less conservative societies	Legal change is seen as uneven and influenced by broader cultural contexts	Acceptance is perceived as relative rather than absolute

Discussion

Acceptance or Tolerance?

The respondents regardless of their ages, occupations, where they are from, and religions, consistently perceived Thai society as broadly accepting of gay men, attributing this perception to the high level of social acceptance present in the country. They mentioned that the freedom of self-expression plays a significant in enhancing Thailand's reputation as a gay-friendly destination, especially since such freedom is restricted in Indonesia. Men who present feminine traits are commonly referred to as “*bencong*,” a derogatory term used against transgender women. Given

Thailand's openness to gender diversity, many Indonesian gay men believe that Thai society will accept them for who they truly are. Despite this progress, challenges still persist. According to Equaldex (2024), Thailand still lacks comprehensive anti-discrimination laws and legal gender recognition (LGR). Srikummoon et al. (2022) found that Thai transgender women (TGWs) with intersectional identities experience discrimination across multiple domains, including education, employment, daily life, and healthcare. Specifically, 63.0% reported harsh speech or physical abuse, 79.0% faced occupational and social inequality, 58.0% encountered legal inequality, and 68.0% experienced disparities in healthcare access.

Opinions within the LGBTQ+ community within Thailand vary. Some people believe that societal acceptance matters to them, perceiving the heterosexual-dominant society as superior to some degree. Others believe that acceptance is not essential, as long as there is tolerance, coexistence, and mutual respect. In many societies, social tolerance often paves the way for further progress, such as the legalization of same-sex marriage. However, some argue that achieving social acceptance can be risky, as it might lead to complacency and diminish the drive to push for additional changes.

In recent years, Thai society's stance has shifted. Initially, the older generation was content with merely "accepting" LGBTQ+ individuals and often discouraged further advocacy. They believed that being accepted as gay was enough, emphasizing gratitude for living in a country where homosexuality is not criminalized, and urging people to stop demanding additional rights such as same-sex marriage. Decades ago, gay individuals typically avoided showing affection in public, such as holding hands, or expressing themselves openly through fashion. They preferred to blend in with the crowd, avoiding behaviors that could attract attention or place them in the spotlight. Society often believed that being gay was acceptable as long as you were considered a "good person." However, the definition of a "good person" varied, with some associating it with having good manners, a solid education, and a successful career. As long as you met these standards, being gay was deemed acceptable by society back then.

In the past years, there has been a noticeable shift from seeking social acceptance to prioritizing tolerance. People are no longer as concerned about being fully accepted by society; instead, they value a level of tolerance that allows them to live freely. Many have started expressing themselves more boldly to stand out and be recognized as unique individuals. They embrace their freedom of expression, refusing to hide who they are. Their statement is clear: *"I exist, and you must tolerate my presence and treat me with respect."*

The Development of Y-Series (Boys' Love Series)

The results also show that BL Series (also known as Y series) play a significant role in shaping Indonesian gay men's perception of Thailand as a gay-friendly destination. McInroy and Craig (2016) suggest that such media can provide LGBTQ+ youth with validation, a sense of community, and positive identity affirmation. While locals argue that BL series are not particularly popular among gay men, it is evident that Indonesian gay men do pay attention to them. This is likely due to the limited media options available for the community in Indonesia. Moreover,

having an official BL series in Indonesia seems unlikely due to the conservative stance of society, where LGBTQ+ issues are often viewed negatively.

Some respondents mentioned that the BL series in Thailand gives the impression of a society that is accepting of gay people. They believed that Thai society is accepting of gay individuals, as reflected in the representation of gay characters in the series and the supportive environment around them. However, it is important to note that The Y series became popular a decade ago, and much time has passed since then. Zhang (2023) argues that Y series have reshaped the urban imagination and tourism landscape of Bangkok by cultivating a form of "fantasized homoromanticism" that spatializes the city's urbanity and attracts international audiences. However, these representations tend to construct a sanitized and idealized image of Thai urban life while obscuring underlying social tensions and inequalities. The author further highlights a spatial bifurcation between spaces oriented toward international fans and tourists and those inhabited by marginalized local populations.

The year of 2020 was a turning point of Y series. Thailand's political instability, youth activism, and the COVID-19 pandemic have had a notable influence on the portrayals in these shows. In response to these societal changes, Y series started to adapt by featuring a more diverse range of characters, including more occupations and older individuals, to reflect the evolving demographics of Thai society. The focus also expanded beyond just teenage romance to provide a more diverse range of relationships and life experiences.

To enhance viewer engagement and generate additional revenue, producers began to market Y series as an experience. This strategy involved selling merchandise, organizing fan events, and creating exclusive experiences. By extending the lifespan of a series beyond its original broadcast, producers could continue to capitalize on its popularity. Y series have also emerged as a cultural soft power, gaining international recognition. Their expansion into Southeast Asia, Asia, and Latin America demonstrates their growing influence on global audiences.

Dating Apps Culture

Regarding gay dating apps, many respondents mentioned using them primarily for conversations or casual encounters. Previous studies conducted by Boonchutima et al. (2017) explained that the reason that most respondents use dating applications to find partners may be because they cannot find partners as openly as heterosexuals in the offline environment. However, they avoided explicitly stating that such apps, not only in Thailand but globally, are often used for sexual encounters as well. This can be viewed from two different

perspectives. On one hand, dating apps are seen as platforms for sexual encounters, opening dialogue, networking, and creating opportunities. Given that many gay men worldwide face societal rejection, these apps serve as a space to connect with like-minded individuals. On the other hand, dating apps carry risks, as there have been cases where users encounter individuals with malicious intent. Reports of scams and criminal activities linked to dating apps highlight their potential dangers, contributing to a less favorable image.

Pride Parade: Supporting or Marketing?

Respondents also shared their impressions of Thailand's Pride Parade. They viewed it as a demonstration of support for the LGBTQ+ community, not only by the general public but also by companies and entrepreneurs who actively participate in the celebrations. This level of public expression is unlikely in Indonesia, where any visible representation of gay identity in public is subject to confiscation and reporting to authorities. In summary, the intended message of inclusivity and support was effectively delivered to the gay audience. However, Pride Parade was only a big hit in the last 2 years within the Thai society. At first when pride parade was initiated, during the first attempts, there were not very successful.

It is important to note that years ago, gay men in Thailand often participated in various forms of celebrations, not just pride parade. Pride parade emerged later. Before that, there were informal and unorganized gatherings where LGBTQ+ individuals actively took part and expressed themselves. It is believed that Songkran has become a thing in the last 10 years for gay men, particularly on Silom Road, Bangkok, where they gather to celebrate with their community. Since Pride Parade is an organized movement, they attract even more participants, especially as they coincide with the success of the same-sex marriage law. This creates a truly special occasion, encouraging people to come together and celebrate this significant milestone. Unlike before, when people had diverse preferences and could participate at will, today's movements are more organized.

Now, designated individuals oversee activities, and with this oversight comes a need for support. Fundraising has become essential, as these organized efforts rely on financial backing. In the past, such support was not a priority because people pursued their interests independently. At the same time, the companies discovered a platform that allows them to participate in the pride parade, showing their support for the LGBTQ+ community. By demonstrating tolerance and inclusivity, these companies position themselves as progressive and supportive organizations. They believe that being

visible and acknowledging gender identities through involvement in the pride parade sends a strong message. In return, they provide financial support to the event, creating a mutually beneficial arrangement where both the companies and the parade organizers achieve their objectives.

Religion and Cultural Influences

The findings also reveal that individuals from different religious backgrounds hold varying views on the concept of visiting Thailand as a gay-friendly destination. Some respondents, despite recognizing their own sexual orientation, express fear and guilt due to the potential societal backlash they might face if they were to come out. Among those from more conservative religious backgrounds, many report experiencing internal conflict. This may be attributed to the fact that certain religious teachings typically consider homosexuality to be in opposition to their values, viewing it as incompatible with the moral and social framework prescribed by the faith. Some individuals also noted that their religion views homosexuality as a condition that can be cured. As a result, many are urged to abandon this behavior, despite respondents understanding that being gay is not a choice.

Interestingly, other respondents tend to express that they have their own personal interpretation of their relationship with their faith. This suggests that they believe their religion is capable of accepting them, and they feel they still deserve love, even though they recognize that being gay may be considered sinful. Some groups emphasize the fundamental value of love, asserting that their religious teachings advocate for compassion and acceptance of everyone, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity. However, when contrasted with more traditional or conservative perspectives, these groups may not share the same viewpoint.

It also shows that respondents' location and background play a role in shaping their perceptions. Those living in central cities such as Jakarta and Bali may feel more at ease with their identity compared to those in more conservative areas. This could be attributed to the greater openness of the communities they are part of. One respondent shared that studying abroad helped boost his confidence, as the environment there did not pressure him to conceal his identity.

Marriage Equality

Regarding the same-sex marriage law, many respondents express excitement and good wishes for the Thai people. Thailand has a long history leading up to this moment. Some people argue that the LGBTQ+ community has fought tirelessly only for visibility and recognition. Beyond that, they are advocating for equal rights,

such as those experienced by heterosexual couples, including inheritance rights and the ability to adopt children. However, ancillary rights like full joint adoption and comprehensive regulations for LGBTQ+ families beyond spousal recognition may require further legislative attention under this new framework (Hasan, 2025). Although some respondents believe that Indonesia may eventually reach the same level as Thailand, this could take a long time due to Indonesia's status as a Muslim-majority country with little tolerance for homosexuality or gender diversity. Even if it were to happen, significant opposition would arise, making it unlikely that same-sex marriage would be legalized in the country. A respondent with a doctoral background also expressed concern about the potential decline in population growth, acknowledging that it could be a possibility. Nevertheless, no evidence indicates that the legalization of same-sex marriage negatively impacts population growth, and such developments can be regarded as a natural aspect of societal progress.

Perception of Thailand as a Gay-friendly Destination

The findings suggest that Thailand is widely perceived as a gay-friendly destination, but this perception is largely shaped through indirect exposure rather than direct experience. In contexts where LGBTQ+ visibility is limited, individuals tend to rely on media, BL series, social platforms, and dating apps to form their understanding. These sources consistently highlight openness, visibility, and freedom of expression, which naturally draw attention and become key reference points in evaluating a place. As a result, visible elements such as Pride events, public self-expression, and marriage equality are often taken as clear signs of acceptance. However, this also means that perception is built on selected images and narratives, many of which are curated or commercially driven. What is seen and consumed does not always represent the full reality, but it still plays a strong role in shaping how Thailand is imagined.

At the same time, the findings show that this perception is not entirely uncritical. While Thailand is generally viewed as more open, there is also an awareness that some of these representations may be idealized. BL series, for example, help normalize same-sex relationships, but they are also understood as entertainment products rather than reflections of everyday life. Similarly, pride events and brand involvement are seen as supportive, yet they may also be driven by marketing interests. Dating apps create opportunities for connection and make the environment feel more accessible, but they also point to the continued need for mediated spaces. Even marriage equality, although widely celebrated, is not seen as a complete solution, as legal recognition does not always

guarantee social acceptance. These mixed responses show that perception is not simply formed, but negotiated where people are aware of both the appeal and the limitations.

Finally, the perception is also shaped by internal factors, particularly cultural and religious values. Even when individuals experience a sense of freedom in more open environments, they may still carry feelings of guilt, conflict, or hesitation. This suggests that being in a "gay-friendly" destination does not automatically remove internal struggles. At the same time, some individuals begin to redefine their relationship with their beliefs and identity, becoming more accepting of themselves over time. In this sense, perception is not only about what is seen externally, but also how it is processed internally. Following Solomon's framework, perception emerges from the interaction between exposure, attention, and interpretation, but it is also shaped by personal context. As a result, Thailand's image as a gay-friendly destination is not fixed, but depends on how individuals make sense of both what they encounter and what they bring with them.

Conclusion

This study examines how Indonesian gay men construct perceptions of Thailand as a gay-friendly destination through the lens of perception theory, particularly the processes of exposure, attention, and interpretation. The findings indicate that such perceptions are shaped through repeated exposure to mediated and lived representations of Thailand, including Y series, Pride parades, dating applications, and the broader visibility of LGBTQ+ expression. These forms of exposure introduce and circulate images of Thailand as a space characterized by inclusivity, freedom of self-expression, and social tolerance.

These exposures subsequently guide respondents' attention toward specific aspects of Thai society that contrast with their experiences in Indonesia, such as public acceptance, openness toward gender diversity, and legal recognition of same-sex relationships. The legalization of same-sex marriage further reinforces these perceptions by functioning as a salient institutional marker of progressiveness, thereby strengthening Thailand's positioning as a gay-friendly destination within the regional context.

At the level of interpretation, respondents actively negotiate these perceived meanings through their own socio-cultural and religious frameworks. While many interpret Thailand's openness as indicative of a more accepting and enabling environment, others experience ambivalence due to the tension between these perceptions and the normative constraints of their home context. This

variation underscores that perception is not merely a reflection of external reality but a socially and culturally mediated process.

Overall, the study demonstrates that the perception of Thailand as a gay-friendly destination is not fixed, but rather constructed through the dynamic interaction between exposure, selective attention, and contextual interpretation. By foregrounding these processes, this study contributes to the literature on LGBTQ+ tourism and destination image formation, highlighting the importance of understanding how mediated representations and socio-cultural contexts shape the ways in which destinations are perceived across different audiences.

ORCID ID

Jessada Salathong: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-1707-3669>

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