



# IMPACTS OF MASS MEDIA ON THE LGBT COMMUNITY IN HO CHI MINH CITY

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**Abstract.** The images of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people (LGBT) in Vietnam are mostly primarily transmitted to people through the largest information channel that is the mass media. This research article focuses on the two-sided interpersonal impact on the LGBT community by analyzing a case study focusing on a group of people from this community. The research results show that the most positive impact of the media is to help them identify the gender form, repel social prejudice and become important allies in advanced activities of LGBT rights. On the other hand, the media also has negative impacts such as transmitting inappropriate information and images of homosexuals to viewers. Since then, the article also pointed out several measures to limit the positive impact of the media on this community.

**Keywords:** LGBT community, mass media, positive impacts, negative impacts

## 1. Introduction

The LGBT is a community of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and other homosexual individuals agreed by a common culture and social movements. This community often honors pride, diversity, personality, and sex [1]. In Vietnam, there are no accurate statistics on the number of members of this community. Still, according to the estimates of scientists, the percentage of homosexuals and bisexual people is 3% of the population, which is about 1.6 million [6]. Previously, the LGBT community was closed because of the misconceptions of the society that considered homosexuals a disease. These psychological deviations made them be discriminated and even isolated. These imposition concepts have made LGBT people also give themselves different from the heterosexual people, they tend to not accept or hide their gender identity [2, p. 70-79].

Chicago socialism claims that it is the role of mass media to create and maintain culture. It has a strong power in providing daily news, legal information as well as global knowledge to entire people. Accordingly, mass media can dramatically affect the way people perceive a social

phenomenon or issue. In recent years, the LGBT community has become an issue that attracts the attention of society, so it is also a popular topic for the mass media to explore. Karl Marx said that "*the mass media's product is social opinion*" [7]. Hence, it can be said that people's evaluation and attitude toward the LGBT community were also a product of the mass media. The development of media, especially digital communications such as television, electronic newspapers, and social networks, they have strengthened to raise Vietnamese social awareness about discrimination against LGBT people. According to Mr. Le Quang Binh, former Institute for Social Research, Economy and Environment - ISEE: "*The media plays an important and pioneering role in eliminating prejudices of society for homosexuals. The true, accurate, and objective information about homosexuals in the press will help the community to know, understand more about homosexuals, help them feel secure to live, study, and work positively to build the community development*" [5].

The article aims to clarify two main objectives including the positive and negative impacts of the mass media on the lives of the LGBT community through an analysis of cases of homosexual, bisexual, and transgender people living in Ho Chi Minh City. The findings drawn from the opinions of the LGBT community will be evidence to assess the impact of mass media on their lives.

## **2. Methods**

### **2.1 Sampling method**

This study is written based on the findings of a research conducted in 2018 titled "*Advocacy for homosexual marriage: a case study of the LGBT community in Vietnam*" [4]. The objects of the LGBT community- are vulnerable objects and are suffering from many prejudices of the society the author chooses the qualitative research method to ensure the anonymous and deep information when analyzing each case related to the research topic. In the LGBT community, there are people who have not come out with their families, they live scattered and do not participate in the common activities of the community, finding the interview object will be very difficult, therefore, the method is snowball sampling is suitable to approach this sensitive subject. Snowball sampling is a nonprobability sampling method whereby each person interviewed maybe asked to suggest additional people for interviewing. The researcher will use private relationships with LGBT people to interview them, then they will suggest each other for the interviews.

About research subjects, using 10 in-depth interviews for LGBTQ people to collect data on about the LGBT community's advocacy process. Sample selection conditions are who are

living in Ho Chi Minh City and who around 18-30 years of age. Subjects of this age have a clear awareness of the gender form as well as have great access to the mass media.

All collected interviews will be set up as a list of participants: coding interviewee, sexual orientation, occupation and interview date

**Table 1: Interview listing**

Case	Coding Interviewee	Age	Sexual Orientation	Occupation	Date Of Interview
1	D1	26	Gay	Receptionist	12/8/2018
2	R1	29	Gay	Business	1/9/2018
3	A1	28	Bisexual	Working at ICS	23/8/2018
4	L1	26	Lesbian	Business	27/8/2018
5	K1	28	Lesbian	Working at ICS, ISEE collaborator	15/8/2018
6	T1	25	Gay	Master Student	10/9/2018
7	M1	29	Lesbian	Business	5/9/2018
8	M2	27	Gay	Business, ISEE collaborator	19/8/2018
9	N1	21	Lesbian	Student	19/9/2018
10	T2	24	Transgender	Stylist, ICS collaborator	15/8/2018

## 2.2. Data Analysis

To collect information the author uses in-depth interview guidelines for the following information: an overview of communication access (channels such as television, press, social

networks, etc.); the positive and negative impact that the media brings to their lives and people in the community.

After collecting the data, the author conducted the data analysis. The first step was to transcribe all interviews from mentions and recording the interview process to avoid missing information. Then, transcripts interview would be classified into LGBT community to easily analyze the interview data. The second step, the author read each transcription, and highlighted useful and important information by reviewing the purpose of the study and research questions. After identifying the substantive statements, the author conducted thematic analysis; that is the process of deriving themes out of the substantive statements. Themes can be of two categories: preset themes and emergent themes. Next step, the researcher developed a codebook for being able to refer to certain respondents' words in transcription. In the process, the researcher defined codes for each interviewee, category, subcategory, question, and substantive statement.

### 3. Results

#### 3.1 Positive impacts of the mass media on the LGBT community

The findings show that the majority of interviewees admitted that mass media has affected their lives positively.

##### *3.1.1 The mass media help LGBT people recognize the gender form and more confident in their life*

Previously, there was little information about LGBT people in Vietnam, including knowledge about gender and the community's images, so the public rarely knew about these people's existence. The participants in the interviews said that they lacked information about their gender and the LGBT because they had limited access to mass media.

*Previously, few people knew about LGBT members, they often remembered gays as 'bede'. (R1, Gay)*

*In the past, I had no interest in girls, I just fell in love with boys, and I thought I was abnormal in some ways but did not know clearly who I was. (M2, Gay)*

*Previously, when I had limited access to the Internet, online newspapers, or mass media, I didn't have any information about what homosexual means. What the LGBT community is. I was very scared because I didn't know who I am, what kind of gender I belong to. (D1, Gay)*

Nowadays, because of technological advancement, the images of LGBT people have appeared more popular, especially on online newspapers, television, social network, etc. In the case of M1, she is a lesbian who has her own business with a chain of clothes shops. In other people's eyes, she is good at business, but she has hidden her gender for 10 years. It is because she does not know about the LGBT community because of limited access to mass media. She said that she has become more aware of her gender and more confident in herself when she sees the images of the LGBT community on mass media such as Facebook.

*It took me nearly 10 years to have enough bravery to reveal my real gender to my family. My friends know me clearly because they can access the information about genders more quickly than my parents. I only dare to come out with them when they have the chance to watch films and activities about the LGBT community. However, it is still difficult for them to accept the truth because they always think I am outstanding. (M1, Lesbian)*

According to the statistics of the ISEE institute, up to 90% of the public know about the homosexual phenomenon through various channels such as from mass media, from other people, or homosexual people [5]. Indeed, many participants used mass media sites so that most of the interviewed cases were able to recognize their gender as well as know the LGBT community mainly through communication channels such as Facebook, online newspapers.

Three of our participants (R1, M2, K1) specifically mentioned that they have realized their gender from mass media like Facebook, films, newspapers etc. Thanks to the mass media, they have the opportunity to discover the counter from which to reduce the self-deprecating and bewildered themselves before. This is a huge impact on the growth of this community.

*Now, everyone has access to the mass media such as online newspapers, films, or Facebook, so they heard more about our community, they may or may not understand as well, but at least they know that we are gays, and what the LGBT community is. (R1, Gay)*

*When the Internet became more popular, I started searching for more information about my gender in the Internet shop because I did not dare to do that at home. Then, I realized that I am gay. (M2, Gay)*

*One of my friends send me the gender identity of the Institute of Society, Economy and Environment (ISEE) through which I knew that I am a lesbian. I have always thought that I am homosexual without knowing that there are many other kinds of gender identities. (K1, Lesbian)*

In addition, 7 out of 10 case studies in the interviews said that they have known about the LGBT community through media channels. Take the case of T1 as an example, he is a gay who used to be often bullied at school because of his girlish appearance. He was not brave enough to tell his parents and teachers about the bullies because he thought they would not understand

and felt unsupported. However, when he started his study at university, he had more information about the LGBT community's activities and decided to join. Since then, he has found his mental support because he can integrate with people like him.

*At that time, I was quite feminine, so I had school violence, mainly in terms of spiritual. I could not be as strong as other boyfriends, so I accepted, later when I read in newspapers and social networks, I would confirm that I was a female living in a male body and if I could do it, I would conduct transgender. (T1, Gay)*

The mass media has spread both international and domestic news to many people anywhere and at any time [7]. It is the positive news that helps lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and trans-genders feel that they are not alone because not only the LGBT community but also many people around the world are supporting them. Hence, they become more confident, stronger, and easier to integrate with society, according to case of M1:

*Recently, the topic of homosexual people and homosexual marriage has become more popular, which is quite surprising to me. Thanks to online newspapers, I have known that homosexual marriage law has been approved in many countries, that's why it is attracting more attention in Vietnam. I am happy because, thanks to that, when I come out with my real gender, others treat me as an ordinary person. It might be because they read news about people like me frequently and know that we are not scary. (M1, Lesbian)*

*However, since I had better access to online newspapers, TV, mass media sites like Facebook, I have got to know the community and joined it. The community members are very united. Seeing the community appear more frequently on news reports, on TV, and receive more compliments from everyone makes me proud of the LGBT community. (D1, Gay)*

### **3.1.2 LGBT people recognize that the mass media can help them repel social prejudices**

One of the primary responsibilities of the mass media is to build the public's trust, outlook, and awareness. Therefore, the mass media are paying more attention to build an outlook about the LGBT community by providing people with sufficient knowledge about gender; thereby, consolidating society's trust that lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and trans-genders deserve to be respected and treated equally.

To confirm the "mission" of mass media, the researcher asked the interviewees whether they think mass media helps to eradicate social biases about the community, and the finding is that most of the participants agreed with this idea. For example, in the case of A1, when we asked about people's perception of homosexuality as a disease, she said that the media is an ally helps them clarify this issue when delivering news and information to help people know that

homosexuality is not a disease. Correct understanding of homosexuality helps to reduce the problem of social stigma for this community.

*Ah, I think LGBT people are stigmatized, alienated because they do not think that the "different" people like us are ordinary people who think we are sick, so how can that be? Through the call for support and protect the rights of other organizations to organize activities to propagate, provide knowledge to others in social or use media such as newspapers, radio or Facebook to provide knowledge that LGBT is normal, also human, WHO has recognized that homosexuality is not a disease. (A1, Bisexual)*

Moreover, the interviewees also said that promoting positive images of LGBT people on mass media and online newspapers has greatly affected the community and changed society's previous biases about LGBT people. It has become a great source of motivation and inspiration which contributes to the community's pride. In addition, more and more films and documentaries about homosexual and transgender people have been produced, which also helps the public understand these people's lives clearly. This helps them sympathize with the grief and complexity that homosexual people have to suffer because of social discrimination and isolation. According to a transgender person, T2, transgender male to female, she shared that the life of a transgender person is not easy because people do not recognize her new gender, her life is filled with disparaging words because men not be male and female not be female, but she shared that after more and more shows about transgender people as well as movies about transgender people, society's view of her also improved more discriminating than before.

*There used to be not as many shows or films about homosexual and trans-genders as today. In a few films, the image of these people used to be described as womanish and disgusting, but now the film producers are more sympathetic and their films have more insightful content which clearly describes homosexual and transgender people's lives. Such films as 'Loto', 'Rebellious hot boy', "The Danish Girl" make people feel more empathetic and less distant. We are also human, though, we also feel sad, happy, we also love. (T2, Transgender)*

People who dare to reveal their real gender usually live in Ho Chi Minh City where the mass media strongly develop. Inhabitants in this city also have an "open-minded" view towards the LGBT community, so LGBT people can live in harmony with others and feel more comfortable with their real gender without fear of discrimination or criticism.

### ***3.1.3 The mass media is considered an important ally of the LGBT community in action strategies.***

The mass media is a channel to help the LGBT community transmit their messages, share information about events related to their integration strategy, and attract more support from

society. According to research: *"Advocacy for homosexual marriage: a case study of LGBT community in Vietnam"* (2018), the media was recorded as one of the most important allies for the LGBT community and homosexual marriage. Research cases have copper opinion that communication is a strategic partner for their equal rights collection activities. The power of mass media is that it spreads information to people rapidly and attracts great attention to many events of the LGBT community such as VietPride, Queen Festival, etc. The number of advocates for the LGBT community is growing from hundreds of participants in events organized by the community to millions of supporters nationwide. In the case of A1, who is a bisexual and the leader of the LGBT community shared about the process of using mass media to achieve the present success. A1 said that media is a tool that helps them approach society, organize such events as Vietpride, or the "I agree" campaign on Facebook, and spread the news about these events, making them popular not only in the domestic press but also in the international press.

*Everything we do should be connected with the media. Recently, we have firstly organized an event called "VietPride" in Saigon. We were afraid that there would be not many participants, so we asked the event organizer shared the information on the Internet, especially on Facebook. Thanks to that, the number of participants was very big. And the, as you know, this event has been successful in 20 provinces. (A1, Bisexual)*

*When organizing the campaign of changing Facebook avatar pictures, we connected with some famous singers through ICS and ISEE institute. They helped to share the information with their colleagues, so the event received more support from other celebrities, which made it successful beyond our expectations. At that time, I felt over the moon when seeing the rainbow flag with the slogan "I agree" everywhere. (M2, Gay)*

A typical example is a strategy to use mass media to appeal advocacy for homosexual marriage when Congress was discussing the approval of homosexual marriage law. In this event, the community ask Facebook users to change their profile picture with the statement 'I agree' to show the support for homosexual marriage, which attracted a great number of LGBT members and advocates to participate. Thanks to the media, the "I agree" campaign of the LGBT community was supported by celebrities and attracted exceptionally good social opinions for their events. shared the leader of the "I agree" campaign. Although the bill failed to pass, there was some amendment to the homosexual marriage law such as the change of the term "ban" into "disapprove". This means that instead of being banned to get married as before, homosexual people can still get married although their marriage is not approved. It can be said that this was an important success that motivated them to implement the next campaigns. All of these successful events have had the contribution of the media.



### 3.2 Negative impacts of the media on the LGBT community

Despite the aforementioned positive impacts, some interviewees also pointed out the negative effects of mass media. For example, some mass media has created a misleading image of the LGBT community, led to misunderstanding and discrimination, or used inappropriate expressions, which has increased biases towards the community.

#### 3.2.1 *The media stereotypes create an image of LGBT with negative aspects*

The media stereotypes are the systematic and repetitive descriptions through jokes, comics, news, films, and television, one of the biases is the stereotype that gays are feminine [8]. Stereotypes can have extremely negative impacts when they become how people of the powerful group generalize the underprivileged. The stereotypes of homosexual people built-in TV series or on mass media can lead to the fact that those who feel uncomfortable with these stereotypes will decide to isolate themselves from the community [3].

In case T1 and R1, they said the first templates that communicated construction should be portraits of gay people on dramas with men images that are entitled in feminine ways like makeup, wearing skirts and empties have a negative impact on viewers and it creates objectionable images for the LGBT community.

*A few years ago, I even did not dare to watch films about homosexual people because those films described them ironically and funnily: boys were womanish, and girls were manly. I think the main purpose was to attract a high view rate, but the film producers did not care how disgusting homosexual people like us look. Due to that, my parents have a homophobic attitude. (T1, Gay)*

*Watching films in which gays are dressed up like a dog's dinner and have womanish gestures is unbearable to me, let alone other people. There are many kinds of gays, some of whom are quite girlish, but none of them behave ridiculously as such. I am not womanish, but some of my friends are. They only act womanishly when they stay with their friends, but in front of other people, they always have to pretend to be strong. (R1, Gay)*

The second stereotype created by the media is about the lives of homosexual, bisexual, and transgender people in online newspapers and TV series.

M2 is the case who did not dare to watch films about homosexual people with his family because most of those films are about the tragic lives of LGBT people. He thought that those films only aimed at gaining the audience's empathy, not depicting other positive aspects of the real lives of LGBT people. In the case of K1, she said that films about homosexual people need to change their content, and should be more open and modern so that society can see their

beautiful lives when they can live with their real gender instead of making the audience feel afraid and empathetic toward the families who have homosexual children.

*Although now people empathize and less discriminate us, I feel that too much of everything is not good at all. Specifically, if films always focus on the aspect that homosexual and transgender people have to suffer from grief and then commit suicide, the audience will look at us as piteous people. We still live our lives and work like ordinary people. Our parents and friends do not hate us or beat us as depicted in those films. (M2, Gay)*

*I think film content should be more diverse. For example, it would be better to make films about LGBT people who succeed, who receive loving acceptance from their parents, or who live happily. (N1, Lesbian)*

*I would not watch those kinds of tragic films because parents of homosexual people might think that their children will have a devastating ending: being abandoned by society, becoming depressed, etc. (K1, Lesbian)*

Indeed, most of the previous TV series portrays homosexual people in a disgusting and ugly way. Some films which had more positive plots only explored their lives as those who live on the fringes of society and those who live full of the complex. This creates empathy among the audience but unintentionally makes LGBT people pitiful, underprivileged, and even useless in the audience's eyes.

Only focusing on the sexual aspect of characters in TV series attaches the image of LGBT people to the LGBT label and blurs other aspects of their identity. Moreover, when the media only concentrate on creating negative images with a subliminal message about "a tragic, sorrowful, gloomy and inadvisable future", they contribute to hindering, slowing down, and disordering the process in which a person accepts himself as a transgender.

The exposure to LGBT characters created in TV series with simple and monotonous plots has limited young LGBT people's ability to shape and define their own identity.

### ***3.2.2 The content of printed and online newspapers discriminates against homosexual, bisexual and transgender people***

A report of the ISEE Institute shows that 45.7% of the participants in the survey said that they regularly see the images of LGBT people in both printed and online newspapers. Therefore, the influence of printed and online newspapers on the image of homosexual people is concerning. These days, there have been a total of 502 articles about homosexual people and related issues, 41% of which show discrimination, only 18% has positive attitudes and do not discriminate or debase the values of homosexual people due to their sexual tendency [5]. The

most worrying problem for homosexual people is the use of shocking headlines on printed and online newspapers to increase the number of viewers through exaggerating news. To verify this problem, we have questioned the images that the interviewee has seen on the mass media. The case of R1, T2 were very frustrated when reflected on this issue, they argued that images, content and words on movies are not correcting the image of the LGBT community and this directly makes the image of the LGBT community ugly, so the viewers and readers feel that they are disgusting, which increases the distance and discrimination with homosexual people in society

*I often read news on the Internet which often contains scary news such as homosexual people killing each other because of money or jealousy, and then assumes that homosexual people who are in love seem scarier than normal people. Some articles are about transgender women who have outrageous quotes. I wonder why those quotes are not considered shocking when being said by normal people, but when they come from homosexual people, they are often seen as something shocking. (R1, Gay)*

*In our community, many people have succeeded in their career, have a high position, and receive great respect from everyone, but because of social discrimination, they cannot live with their true identity and sexual tendency. People glare at us as if we were something "abnormal" in society. (T2, Transgender)*

Indeed, the reality shows that one of the causes of discrimination derived from the lack of knowledge about homosexual people because people only know about bad examples, but the fact is that there are many members of the community who are doing positive work and contribute silently to society.

Moreover, mass media use of inappropriate terminology increases biases about homosexual people. To find out more about the use of language to refer to homosexual, bisexual and transgender people on mass media, the researchers also asked questions about the way people often address the community. The finding shows that some of the participants were unhappy when being called "bêđê", "ô môi", "hai phai", "xăng pha nhót" (gasoline mixed with oil), "bóng lộ" (visible gay), "bóng kín" (invisible gays) which are common expressions to indicate homosexual people in TV series and on mass media. Most people in the interviews said that "bêđê" is the first expression that they know and is used for both gays and lesbians. Therefore, it can be seen that homosexuals have been previously affected by the expressions used in mass media. The lack of information about gender identity can limit people's knowledge about the LGBT community.

*I am always called bêđê, or this gay, that gay. I am accustomed to that as if it was a nickname that is automatically attached to a homosexual person. (M2, Gay)*

*It is less common now, but in the past, newspaper articles were weird because of their scary headlines such as "problems from homosexual games", "Is homosexual contagious?", etc. I do not understand why they could be so indifferent in writing so. (T2, Transgender)*

*Long time ago, everybody called me "bêđê" so I think I'm "bêđê", I don't know I'm a gay. (T1, Gay)*

From above cases, people can see the abuse of shocking expressions in newspapers to attract public attention is one of the factors which affect the images of the homosexual community, causing misunderstanding and even social biases. Although the use of inappropriate content and language has been reduced, it still exists on social networking sites, which greatly affects the image of this community.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Homosexuals have appeared more frequently on the mass media, especially on online newspapers, webpages, and social network. Whether those images are good or bad can have great impacts on LGBT people both in cyberspace and in real life.

Thanks to the development of the media, homosexuals, bisexuals, and trans-genders can come out and live in harmony with society like other ordinary people. The media has an important contribution to the elimination of social biases about the LGBT community because more articles and films are aiming to appreciate human values and the basic rights that LGBT people deserve to have. However, the media also have some negative influences such as the creation of one-sided views and stereotypes about the images of LGBT people, especially on TV series and online newspapers. Most TV series have not explored various aspects of this community, except for their suffering from miserable lives and discrimination to gain the audience's empathy.

In the future, the media will be still an important connection between the LGBT community and society; therefore, there will be both positive and negative impacts of the media on this community. However, there should be more improvements in terms of content, ways of communicating information, and serious censorship to promote the positive influences of the media and reduce their negative impacts on the LGBT community.

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