

***Discourse on LGBT in the Gameshow “Who Is Single” in
Vietnam’s Multi-platform TV Landscape***

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Abstract

Communication on sexual issues in Vietnam was still cautious in the past due to the influence of deep social prejudices about homosexual people. However, in recent years, movies and gameshows about LGBT have been represented quite openly in the media. There are number of studies on the LGBT community in Vietnam, but from a media and cultural perspective, there is still a gap. Using the method of case study, indepth-interview and discourse analysis, this article explains the attraction of the dating show "Who is single" on multi-platform television in the journey to overcome social prejudices of the LGBT community in Vietnam. The research results show that constructing discourse by positioning homosexuals as equal to other sexual orientations through a symbolic system and program structure has brought a different view of LGBT in a such society witnessing a lot of stigmas against them as Vietnam.

Keywords: LGBT, Dating Show, Who Is Single, Multi-platform Television, Discourse

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Introduction

It is difficult to determine the exact number of homosexual people (Nguyen Minh Tri, 2022) in any country, especially a country with quite special culture like Vietnam. In 2020, there are about more than 2,900,000 LGBT people (GSO, 2021) in Vietnam (out of more than 97,5 million total population), with about 0,5 percent of transgender people. However, the uncounted number of LGBT people may be even larger than that, which also reveals many implications about the social conception for a minority group. They all go through ups and downs of emotions, experiences of personal expression and life events to come to conclusion about their sexual orientation. However, whether they come out as their true gender after that depends on many factors from themselves, context, family, friends, society ... Currently, many people still confuse concepts such as: *biological sex* (gender based on external genitalia), *gender identity* (APA, 2012) (subjective feeling about one's own gender), *sexual orientation* (APA, 2008), *gender expression* (expressing one's gender through clothing, behavior, job choices, personal relationships, and other factors). Among them, *sexual orientation* is an enduring personal pattern of romantic attraction or sexual attraction (or a combination of these) to the opposite sex or gender (heterosexual), the same sex or gender (homosexual), or to both sexes, more than one gender (bisexual), no sexual attraction/desire/need (asexual) (Do Van Tuan, 2020). The modest number of non-heterosexual people has become a minority group in society, abbreviated as LGBT+ (Les, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and more).

As mentioned above, the number of LGBT people come out as their sexual orientation is few. In 2009, among gay men surveyed, only 2.5% came out completely about their sexual orientation, and 5% almost came out. Meanwhile, 32.5% are completely secret about their sexual orientation and 35% are almost secret. The remaining 25% is "sometimes secret, sometimes public" depending on the environment. Various studies conducted by iSEE from 2009 to 2012 all showed similar results about gay people's reticence in expressing their sexual orientation (Pham Quynh Phuong, 2013), even with their family and closed friends. Coming out is very important for non-homosexual people. Sharing their sexual orientation with others impacts the mental health of LGBT people. There is scientific evidence that the process of recognizing and disclosing sexual orientation is closely related to their psychological changes. The more favorable and positive that process is, the more their mental health and self-esteem will improve. On the contrary, people who try to hide their sexual orientation often experience psychological problems such as negativity, depression or even suicide (Ko et al., 2020).

The root of Vietnamese LGBT's reluctance to come out is society's attitude. Vietnamese homosexual people still have to face the stigma of monopoly heterosexual ideology (Pham Quynh Phuong, 2013). This is influenced by Chinese culture from the past, with the responsibility towards family and lineage to continue each individual's family line. On 17 May 1990, the World Health Organisation removed homosexuality from the list of mental illnesses. Following this, in 2001, the third edition of the Classification and Diagnostic Criteria of Mental Disorders in China formally deleted homosexuality from the psychosis category. However, two decades later, it is still common to regard people with same-sex orientation as abnormal. An alarming example was a recent publication by Jinan University Press which published a textbook titled Mental Health Education for Chinese University Students in 2016. It classified homosexuality as one of four psychosexual disorders, together with transvestism, fetishism, and voyeurism (Shixuan Fu, 2023). In Vietnam, homosexual people living in rural areas tend to move to big cities, which have a more friendly and open-minded towards LGBT people. When asked about the reason for not disclosing their gender,

the answers were fears: social discrimination, family disapproval, being teased, bullied and losing their jobs (iSEE, 2009). Marrying a heterosexual person is also a choice for many homosexual people, which helps them hide their gender identity on the one hand, and on the other hand, still ensures responsibilities to the family and lineage. This creates tragic marriages for heterosexual people who did not know real sexual orientation of their spouse, in which their children are also victims. Another reason may be religion, when homosexuality is considered as an abomination and a sin like Christianity (Prakoso, Arifianto, & Suseno, 2020).

In that social context, mass media and its content which played a significant role in shaping knowledge in society, including the knowledge about sexuality, now have more opportunities to prove their strengths on various platforms. In the past, the method and content of press coverage created misunderstandings about the LGBT community, portraying one-sided and deviant descriptions of homosexual people. That further highlights the "endless stigma" (Dina and Irene, 2022) in society. That stigma is so scary that it can make LGBT people to stigmatize against themselves. The point is not to internalize self-stigma (Trinh Dinh Minh Viet et al., 2022), but the incredible impact on a person of many stratified discrimination in society. When a transgender person feels different from friends, family, colleagues, teachers, religion, media, and government agencies, it is difficult for them to accept themselves. And they hate that they are LGBTIQ+. And then they live in a complicated loop includes self-stigma with themselves, discomfort with anyone who is non-heterosexual, and at the same time social discrimination collides around them and other LGBTIQ+ people. In Vietnam, according to the research on self-stigma scale by Trinh Dinh Minh Viet mentioned above, three common behaviors of self-stigma LGBTIQ+ people are denying, hiding and changing themselves to feel "normal" to fit in social stereotypes.

Along with the world's general trend of fighting for the rights of LGBT minorities, in recent years, Vietnam has been recognized for its openness and great progress in the rights of homosexual, bisexual and transgender people (Pham Quynh Phuong, 2013). It also shows the positive moving and openness of mainstream media in changing social attitudes towards a group of people who must be recognized to have the same fundamental human rights as others. This paper attempts to explain the influence of the reality show *Who is Single* in the process of changing the perception of the LGBT community through the discursive system inserted in the program in the context of multi-platform television coverage which is more widespread and accessible than ever. Through in-depth interviews with 10 LGBT people and 10 straight people who have watched the above gameshow combined with discursive analysis, this research will point out the elements that create discourse about LGBT people in the journey to bring about the image of LGBT people to come closed to heterosexual people, which is one of the factors that makes the show attractive.

The Dating Show “*Who Is Single?*” Vietnam

“*Who is single?*” *Vietnam* is a reality gameshow jointly produced by Ho Chi Minh City Television and Vie Channel company (part of DatViet VAC Group Holdings). This is a dating show with original copyright from Thailand (Roo Mai Krai Sod – รู้ไหมใครโสด, English name: *Who is Single?*). The first episode was broadcasted on HTV2 - Vie Channel, Vie ENTERTAINMENT - VTVcab 1 on November 2nd 2018. The show has aired 5 seasons with 12 to 16 episodes each on different platforms.

In each episode, a beautiful and single girl finds the right guy to fall in love with. She must eliminate those who are married or in a romantic relationship, LGBT people and find out who is single and suitable for her. Each episode has an advisory board to help players choose the right guy from 5 guys that the show provided.

In round 1, each candidate will appear and introduce themselves through a short clip. The advisory board and the audiences in the studio will make their predictions about each person's gender and marital status to advise the girl. With those analysis and observations, the girl will decide to eliminate a guy, and that person will reveal his gender and marital status through a scene. In round 2, the remaining 4 guys will overcome a simple challenge with support from the advisory board, in which they are forced to reveal themselves more. Similar to round 1, the girl will continue to eliminate an unsuitable guy. The remaining three candidates will enter round 3 with their own hashtag. For each hashtag that each guy provides, the advisory board and players will have time to ask and answer that person on the topic corresponding to the hashtag. Only at this point in the round can each person answer the question posed by the advisory panel. At the end of the Q&A sessions with the characters, the advisory board will advise the main character so that she can choose the right single guy. The girl will decide to give the bouquet to the last person she chooses, and each guy in turn will appear with a pre-prepared performance. The lights in the stage will also change based on the person's final identity, specifically the lights will change to:

- green, if the guy is single;
- red, if that person already has an “owner” (wife/husband/lover);
- purple, if that person is LGBT.

Who is single? Vietnam caught the attention of the audiences from the first episode. Beside always on high rating in many years (according to indepth-interview with the leader of HTV2), the show affirms its enduring appeal with the Top One trending YouTube in season 5. On Internet television service of Vie Channel it is the hot show and there are some episodes reached 17 million views on Youtube. In 2019 and 2021, *Who is single?* nominated in WeChoice Awards for *The show of the year*. After each episode, online newspapers and social networks report on successful or failed pairings, and on emotional stories in the show. When conducting in-depth interviews with both LGBT and straight people who have watched the show, despite their different assessments, they all said that one of the factors that makes the show resound is its humanity. For some LGBT people, the image of the “purple” community is not only reflected, but also constructed through the program, contributing to changing society's view of minority sexual orientation. Therefore, a number of the program's audiences are people from the LGBT+ community.

In the context of multi-platform television spreading but not taking root like today, hot TV shows easily become viral videos on social networks. New technologies allow viewers to watch TV content anytime, anywhere, on a variety of devices, no longer depending on the fixed broadcast times of broadcasters. Social media platforms give audiences the ability to easily interact with each other, engage, and share content with strangers, which is a new and exciting experience compared to watching traditional television. In addition, new TV channels provide audiences with more diverse, richer content and topics, and are easily searchable to suit their interests and needs. This, on the one hand, helps diffuse the popularity of the show in the social television ecosystem as a new monetization model, and on the other hand, disperses and even divides audience into groups. Therefore, audience researches play a crucial role in producing, distributing television products and customer accessing. In Vietnam, media companies that produce soap operas and reality shows and sell them to

television stations are increasingly popular. Hence, understanding the audiences will be even more meaningful when they have become customers with the power to choose the products they want to see and buy from many television service providers.

“Reality TV is a catch-all category that includes a wide range of entertainment programmes about real people. Sometimes called popular factual television, reality TV is located in border territories, between information and entertainment, documentary and drama. Originally used as a category for law and order popular factual programmes containing ‘on-scene’ footage of cops on the job, reality TV has become the success story of television in the 1990s and 2000s” (Annette Hill, 2005).

Discourse on LGBT in the Show

The discourse theory is strongly influenced by Michel Foucault with explanation on the distribution of power and knowledge. Where there is an imbalance of power, a type of dependent knowledge is produced. Discourse is different from speech, writing or ordinary language in its dynamism, which closely connects the elements: speaker, target audience, and context of existence (Nguyen Hong Tra 2022: 7). According to Foucault, every statement or text that has effect or contains meaning is considered discourse (Sara Mills 2004: 6), a group of individualized statements, or a normative activity that creates a set of statements. Besides creating meaning, discourse also intervenes in reality. The influence of discourse on reality and the influence of reality on discourse are two parallel processes. Discourse is not created randomly, but is created and authorized by institutions of power (Vu Hoang Long 2022 : 26). Discourse analysis therefore includes analysis of social practices focusing on the relationship between power and ideology where texts are produced and received. With reality shows, discourses can be inserted in the program format, symbols, stories, guests and interactions between program participants. But in a long-running show with many seasons and episodes, maintaining the content of discourse requires certain strategies and censorship.

By indepth-interviews with 10 LGBT and 10 heterosexual people both in person and via Internet chatting, they all stated that *Who is single* contributed to change the concept on LGBT people, especially homosexual around them in real life. With interesting format inserting symbols and authentic stories, how has the show conquered the public when the LGBT people participate in?

Celebrity Involvement As Symbolic Representatives

One of the elements that made the show successful was the host Tran Thanh and the mentor throughout the first 3 seasons of *Huong Giang Idol*. Originally a contestant in *Vietnam Idol* 2012, *Huong Giang* came out as a transgender-woman under the spotlight of the eliminating round as an inevitable choice. Born in a Northern family (which is considered a less opened-minded area than the South), *Huong Giang* (real name *Nguyen Ngoc Hieu*) is the only son of the family with an older sister. *Hieu* secretly went to Thailand to have surgery for transgender before going to the competition, and until she appeared in *Vietnam Idol* as a woman that her father really knew about it. In response to the judge's question whether she had competed in the previous season under a different name, she came out in front of millions of television audiences. She said that the transformation helped her to live as herself and to stand on the stage. She reached the top 4 of *Vietnam Idol* that year thanks to audience votes.

In 2018, Huong Giang was crowned as Miss International Queen in Pattaya, Thailand, which honored her as the queen of the LGBT community in Vietnam (as she mentioned several times in *Who is single*). It was an event that promoted a more opened view of society towards the LGBT community. After that, she has continued to perform as a singer but became better known to the public through several reality TV shows.

The fact that Huong Giang became a mentor in the show *Who is Single* is one of the crucial elements that make the program attractive. The evidence is when the show changed the role to model Minh Tu from season 4, many viewers have responded expressing their regret that Huong Giang is no longer a mentor throughout the show. They commented via social network platforms that she was a representative of "purple" in the show, understanding the issues of homosexual people and inspiring people through their stories, with sensitivity, intelligence, humor that creates laughter and the attractiveness of the program.

Besides, appearance in several episodes of celebrities who have come out such as BB Tran, Lam Khanh Chi, Vu Cat Tuong has also created positive effects for the show. They are all living examples of overcoming social prejudices, living with their true self, contributing to art and being accepted by the public.

Equal Role of LGBT People in the Diverse-Sexual-Orientation Show

Who is single is not the first show with LGBT participation. Those who has ever lived in a Vietnamese village knows about the "Loto" shows of mobile LGBT performance groups in many provinces throughout the country. The documentary film "Madam Phung's last journey" has resonated and opened new perspectives on homosexual people in Vietnam. Recently, some reality shows about LGBT are also produced and broadcasted on Internet platforms such as: The Tiffanys Viet Nam, Just Love, Come out... but they have not attracted much attention from the audience amid the flourishing social television landscape. Those are programs that only have the participation of LGBT people with their own stories in their own world. That format seems not to be friendly with heterosexual (most of the audience), marginalizing, even isolating the people and stories in a "subculture" that has suffered many social stigmas.

In that context, *Who is single* became the first reality show for LGBT people broadcasted on television. What is worth mentioning here is that they appear in every broadcasting episode, with completely equal roles with heterosexual people in the competitions. This itself is an implicit statement about the position of homosexual people in society. Besides, the way the advisory board (including LGBT celebrities) in the show discusses signs of "purple" guys in behavior, lifestyle, and attitude in normal and free words similar to that for heterosexual people further confirms that. In some episodes, the leading woman mistakenly chose the homosexual guy as final one (the winner to date with). Through many challenges of the program and the advisory board, their true sexual orientation was not revealed. It is further evidence to the fact that they are completely "normal" people.

Moreover, the show uses a color-coded system to categorize participants: green for single, red for taken, and purple for LGBT individuals. This visual representation helps normalize the presence of LGBT participants by integrating them into the show's format seamlessly. It subtly reinforces the idea that LGBT individuals are just as normal and valid as anyone else, challenging viewers to see beyond traditional norms.

Generally, the show actively includes participants from different segments of the LGBT community, such as gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender individuals. This diversity ensures that a wide range of experiences and identities are showcased, helping to dispel the notion that LGBT identities are monolithic. For example, participants have included transgender women and gay men who share their unique stories and perspectives, thereby educating viewers on the diversity within the LGBT community. By showcasing LGBT individuals as complex and multifaceted people rather than stereotypes, the show challenges existing prejudices and misconceptions. This helps in normalizing LGBT identities and relationships in a society where traditional norms have often overshadowed inclusivity.

High-Profile of LGBT Contestants in the Show Challenge Stereotypes

Like the other contestants in the show, the "purple" guys and girls are all good-looking people, with their own careers and certain positions in society. The show's format allows high-profile LGBT contestants to confront and challenge stereotypes directly. By showcasing their successes, talents, and authentic selves, these contestants counteract negative perceptions and highlight the diversity within the LGBT community. The "come out" performances of successful homosexual couples such as designer Huy Phan – CEO Quach Thai Cong in season 3 or Anh Thu - Minh Minh in season 4 created more attraction for the show. This representation is crucial in a society where traditional gender roles and norms are deeply entrenched.

High-profile contestants often use their platform to advocate for LGBT rights and representation. Their participation in *Who is single* goes beyond entertainment; it serves as a form of activism. These contestants advocate for equal treatment and respect, influencing public discourse and policy indirectly. Huong Giang, for instance, has been vocal about the need for greater acceptance and has used her influence to promote understanding and inclusivity.

Personal Narratives and Empathy Building

Open and meaningful dialogue is a key component of the show. Hosts and guests engage in conversations with LGBT participants about their experiences, struggles, and aspirations. These discussions help demystify LGBT identities and foster empathy among viewers. The unfinished love stories of gay couples in the show also caused a lot of emotion, such as the story of Trung Son's boyfriend in season 5 being swept away by the ocean wave or biosexual Nhat Hoang's boyfriend passing away from COVID-19.

The personal stories of high-profile LGBT contestants resonate deeply with audiences. These narratives often involve overcoming significant challenges, such as societal rejection, family issues, and personal struggles with identity, which opens up space for understanding and reduces prejudice by creating a sense of empathy among viewers. This humanizing approach helps to break down barriers and reduce stigma associated with LGBT identities, as George and Richard wrote "Personal stories are not merely a way of telling someone (or oneself) about one's life; they are the means by which identities may be fashioned". There are stories about wonderful mothers and sisters who have supported their homosexual children since they revealed their true sexual orientation. They have been a source of encouragement and motivation for their children to overcome prejudices and stigma to develop themselves and become useful people for society. "Your happiness is your choice" or "I am very honored to have given birth to you" are the sayings of inspirational mothers on the show stage.

Similarly, in one episode, Huong Giang shared her journey of self-acceptance and the difficulties she faced before becoming a celebrated figure with the help of her mother and sister. This story not only highlights her resilience but also encourages viewers to empathize with similar experiences faced by many LGBT individuals.

Besides, the show is careful to portray LGBT participants in a positive and respectful light. This is achieved through the language used by the hosts, the supportive environment created on set, and the respectful treatment of participants' stories. For instance, hosts like Tran Thanh are known for their empathetic and supportive demeanor, which helps create a safe space for LGBT individuals to share their experiences openly.

Discussion and Conclusions

In recent years, concepts about LGBT have been viewed more openly in Vietnam. On the one hand, that makes this topic easier to exploit in the media, on the other hand, communication about gender issues also contributes to shape public opinion and ideas. However, it does not mean that the stigma for a minority group who suffered from many prejudices from an exclusively heterosexual society was erased.

The discourse on LGBT issues in the Vietnamese reality show *Who is single* has made notable contributions to the visibility and acceptance of LGBT individuals in the country in multi-platform landscape. By featuring high-profile LGBT contestants, the show has leveraged their prominence to challenge societal stereotypes and promote a broader understanding of sexual and gender diversity.

The visibility of high-profile contestants normalizes LGBT identities in a culture where traditional gender roles are deeply ingrained. Their participation on the show helps to challenge and redefine societal norms by presenting LGBT individuals as relatable and respected figures. This visibility is crucial for fostering acceptance and inclusivity in a society where LGBT issues have often been marginalized.

Plus, the personal narratives shared by these contestants are instrumental in humanizing the LGBT community. Stories of overcoming personal and societal challenges, achieving professional success, and finding self-acceptance resonate deeply with audiences. By sharing these experiences, the show builds empathy among viewers, encouraging them to see LGBT individuals as multifaceted people rather than stereotypes. This approach is essential for reducing stigma and fostering a more inclusive society.

High-profile contestants also use their platforms for advocacy, promoting LGBT rights and representation. Their vocal support for acceptance and equality influences public discourse, helping to shift societal attitudes, contributing to the broader fight for LGBT rights in Vietnam. This advocacy is crucial for driving social change and promoting a more inclusive society.

The show's format allows LGBT contestants to directly challenge stereotypes, showcasing their authentic selves and highlighting the diversity within the LGBT community. This portrayal broadens societal understanding of gender and sexual diversity, countering negative perceptions and promoting a more nuanced view of the LGBT community.

In short, *Who is single* has played a significant role in advancing the discourse on LGBT issues in Vietnam. By providing a platform for high-profile LGBT contestants to share their stories and advocate for acceptance, the show has helped to reshape societal attitudes towards the LGBT community. The continued positive representation of LGBT individuals in popular media is essential for sustaining this progress and fostering a more inclusive and understanding society. This impact underscores the power of media in driving social change and promoting inclusivity.

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