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THAILAND'S CULTURAL DIPLOMACY: ATTRACTING GENDER REASSIGNMENT SURGERIES (GRS) PATIENTS THROUGH SOFT POWER

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People with sexual orientation deviations are certainly difficult to be accepted in the wider community, both in daily activities, in school or workplace environments, even when deciding to undergo transgender surgery. Most of them experience social discrimination that has fatal consequences, such as decreased self-confidence, depression, and even suicide. Therefore, a supportive environment will make them feel comfortable. Thailand, a country that is friendly to LGBT, provides hospitals with sex change surgery facilities. Thailand's image as the "Mecca" of transsexual body modification offers an inclusive environment that makes transgender patients feel comfortable. This study focuses on the culture that strengthens Thailand's image, so that it is able to promote sex change surgery hospitals on the international stage. Through cultural diplomacy, researchers found several cultures that are the basis for Thailand being friendly to LGBT, namely the cultural approach through Theravada Buddhism which recognizes four gender categories, the existence of art through drag and cabaret festivals and Thai music, also LGBT-friendly tourism that makes patients feel comfortable. With a strong cultural base, government, and business actors in Thailand in creating an inclusive LGBT environment, Thailand has succeeded in attracting patients for sex change surgery for both local and international communities. This is proven by the large number of foreign patients from Europe, the US and Asia who undergo surgery and medical travel in Thailand.

Keywords: *culture diplomacy, Thailand, GRS, LGBT, Gender*

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Introduction

Thailand is known as a country with a very open to human rights freedom, especially in terms of feminism. This is evidenced by the many hospitals in Thailand that offer Sex Change Surgery, and many Thai surgeons who advertise Bangkok as the “Mecca” of transsexual body modification (Aizura, 2010). Demand for sex change operations in Thai hospitals is dominated by services for transgender women, someone who is biologically male and transforms into a woman (Chaovanalikit et al., 2022). The transgender phenomenon is particularly interesting in Thailand because Thai transgender women are an increasingly visible group, performing in world-famous cabarets and nationally televised beauty pageants, with images of their highly feminine appearance circulating across borders. However, the idea of a third-gender womanhood in Thailand is still considered *taboo* as a manifestation of bad karma from the past. It is written about in Buddhist texts thousands of years ago, known as «kathoe» or ladyboys (Farber, 2024).

The increasing number of patients undergoing sex reassignment surgery has led to the proliferation of clinics in Thailand that provide such services. Clinics in Thailand that provide sex reassignment surgery services are not only friendly to local people (the population of Thai citizens with gender variants is very large in metropolitan cities such as Bangkok, Pattaya, and Chiang Mai—), but also friendly to foreign patients. One strategy used by Thai cosmetic hospitals is to improve their digital websites by using multilingual languages so that foreign patients can more easily obtain complete information regarding hospital facilities. From the hospital's perspective, multilingual websites also help hospitals to understand patient reviews and desires, so that hospitals are able to improve their hospital facilities and quality (Biswas et al., 2024).

There are several Thai hospitals that have optimized their websites with multilingual websites, such as Bumrungrad International Hospital (Bumrungrad International Hospital, 2024), Samitivej Hospital (Samitivej Hospitals, 2024) and several other hospitals. In the digital world, Search Engine Optimization (SEO) strategies ensure that hospitals are easily found by people searching for specific types of treatment, as well as increasing the hospital's visibility online and attracting more visits to its website. Suporn Clinic, near Pattaya, treats around 220 trans women each year, who undergo facial feminization, breast augmentation, and genital surgery. Suporn Clinic offers its patients a treatment package, starting with airport pick-up; four-star hotel accommodation; attentive and constant care by nursing and administrative staff; and cosmetic and cooking classes, tours, and activities during recovery (The Suporn Clinic, 2024). The completeness of the facilities is a special attraction (Lunt & Carrera, 2010) for tourists to undergo sex change operations in Thailand.

Another reason why foreign patients undergo gender reassignment surgery in Thailand is because they feel safe in an environment that supports their decisions. Thailand is known as a «*gay paradise*» and the «*gay capital of Asia*» (Liu et al., 2024) which this nickname is usually given to cities that offer an inclusive environment for the LGBTQ+ community, have a bustling nightlife culture, and are the center of LGBTQ+ rights movements and advocacy. Besides Bangkok Thailand, there are Taipei (Taiwan), Tokyo (Japan) and several other cities that are famous with this name (Laurent, 2005). There are many entertainments to be found in Bangkok, Thailand with an LGBTQ+ friendly concept, such as Nightlife Culture in the Silom area, LGBTQ+ Tourism, Events and Festivals: such as the *Bangkok Pride Parade* (Phanat Subyubon et al., 2022).

The rise of beauty clinics (sex change) and LGBTQ+ friendly tourism in Thailand cannot be separated from the strong cultural influence in Thailand. This culture is a tool for the country's image so that it can attract the attention of the international community and lead to the use of culture as a tool for building international relations (diplomacy). Cultural diplomacy consists of activities to exchange art, education, traditions, and cultural values to encourage mutual understanding, cooperation, and peaceful relations between countries. According to Milton C. Cummings, cultural diplomacy is «*the exchange of ideas, information, art, and other aspects of culture among nations and their peoples to foster mutual understanding*» (El Derbas, 2023). Natalia Grincheva also added that cultural diplomacy has improved over time, incorporating new thematic areas for exploration as well as encompassing broader cultural and political geographies (Grincheva, 2024). Therefore, researcher interested in observing Thailand's activities in carrying out cultural diplomacy activities by using the image of LGBTQ+ Tourism as a bridge of cross-cultural communication through art, education, and of course to attract transgender patients to undergo transgender surgery in Thailand.

Literature review

Gender Reassignment Surgeries (GRS)

Feminine Transformations: Gender Reassignment Surgical Tourism in Thailand oleh Aren Z. Aizura, terbit tahun 2010

This journal article examines medical tourism related to sex reassignment surgery (GRS) in Thailand. Aizura combines approaches from various disciplines, including sociology, anthropology, economics, and gender studies, to provide a comprehensive analysis of this phenomenon. In her findings, Thailand portrays itself as a leading destination for sex reassignment surgery through a combination of medical expertise, affordable costs, and a relatively gender-friendly cultural environment. From Thailand's history of gender diversity phenomena, such as the presence of *kathoe* (transgender) in Thai society to the large number of international patients who use

GRS services in Thailand. Aizura also documents patients' experiences including their expectations, challenges, and views on Thai medical and social culture. Foreign patients felt safe undergoing GRS in Thailand, where previously they had difficulty obtaining permission to undergo this surgery. In Thailand, they found the Thai people friendly and open to their decisions. This is supported by comments from Thai surgeons that, «*transwomen are more beautiful than indigenous women,*» where they are used to transgender patients always feeling interrogated, exposed, and humiliated by medical personnel. In sum, Thailand is very friendly to transgenders and is able to attract foreign tourists to visit Thailand. This journal article has been published for a long time, but the researcher wants to include it as a basis that gender reassignment surgery (GRS) in Thailand has an impact on LGBT tourism and cultural diplomacy in Thailand (Aizura, 2010).

Review Artikel Jurnal: «Trans Depathologisation and Gender Identity Disorder in Japan: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Medical Literature, 2010–2022», terbit tahun 2024

This article explores how medical discourse in Japan, specifically regarding gender identity disorder (GID) and efforts to depathologize trans, has evolved between 2010 and 2022. The authors employ critical discourse analysis (CDA) and uncover the dynamics of power, culture, and medical institutions in shaping and maintaining understandings of gender identity in the Japanese context. The article begins with a discussion of global depathologization movements, including the 2019 revision by the WHO, which removed GID from the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11) as a mental disorder. The authors highlight how Japan, despite being part of the global community, continues to maintain a pathologized approach through its legal system and medical practices. The findings suggest that Japan views trans identity as a requirement for a medical diagnosis (*seishin byōshō* or mental disorder) as a condition for access to gender-affirming services, such as hormone therapy or surgery, thus addressing a health need rather than a social abnormality to be excluded or eradicated. Furthermore, this use is supported by legal and social reforms, access to health services, and alignment with global categories, while the authority of the medical profession remains unchecked. The goal of the Depathologization Movement in Japan against the LGBTQ movement is to advocate for transdepathologization, although cultural and institutional resistance has made progress slow. The article also notes that resistance to depathologization often stems from a lack of public awareness and the dominance of medical authorities (Konishi, 2024).

The researchers used this article to illustrate the openness of transgender in international circles, as evidenced by the removal of gender identity disorder (GID) from the International Classification of Diseases

(ICD-11) as a mental disorder. And this has also been passed down to domestic law in Japan. This article will be used as a basis that transgender is no longer a taboo so that people have the right to determine their identity.

LGBT tourism

Review Jurnal: «Trans Women in Tourism: Motivations, Constraints and Experiences» oleh Melissa M. G. Lawton, tahun terbit 2020

This article explores how Mexican transgender women travel, does itinerary, challenges, and the impact of social and cultural uncertainty on the travel experience. It begins with the notion that transgender people are often the target of stigma, discrimination, and violence, but everyone has the right to travel where tourism can provide potential benefits for everyone (Monterrubio et al., 2020).

The findings of this article are transwomen's motivation to travel is to seek opportunities to live a more authentic life and feel free to express their gender identity. Tourism becomes a solution from the social stigma they experience in everyday life. While the chosen tourist destinations are *Inclusive Destinations*, destinations known as places that accept gender diversity and have strong LGBT communities. They are more interested in visiting cities or countries that have inclusive policies towards transgender rights, such as Thailand or more progressive European countries. In addition, transgender women also experience travel barriers, such as discrimination and social uncertainty. Fear of discrimination, both in personal interactions and in tourism services, is a significant inhibiting factor. Transgender women often report they have to hide their gender identity to avoid unpleasant treatment. Especially when the administrative process where they have to report travel document, such as passports or tickets that do not match their gender identity, which cause confusion or discrimination at the airport or accommodation. The last challenge is the lack of access to tourism infrastructure that supports the needs of transgender women, such as facilities that do not match their gender identity in bathrooms or changing rooms, which is a major obstacle. This experience often causes anxiety or discomfort.

This article will be used by researchers to look at how the tourism sector in Thailand is LGBT-friendly, such as gender-sensitive services, including transgender-friendly hotels, staff trained to handle different gender identities, and facilities that allow them to feel comfortable and accepted. As well as engagement with the local LGBT community that can provide a sense of safety and comfort, and opportunities to connect with individuals who understand their experiences.

Review Artikel Jurnal: «Gender, Health, and Labor in Thailand's Medical Hub» oleh Ara Wilson, terbit tahun 2022

This article examines the complex relationships between gender, health, and labor in Thailand's medical

sector. As one of Southeast Asia's major medical center, Thailand attracts international patients for high-quality medical services, including cosmetic surgery, gender reassignment surgery, and other health care services. As a "medical hub" Thailand offers high-quality medical services and competitive prices, thus influencing government policies, private investment, and Thailand's international image.

The findings of this article are (1) a critique of medical capitalism on how it creates inequality in access to health, especially for local Thai communities. This is relevant to the study of globalization and health. (2) a gender and labor perspective where the medical workforce is dominated by women. This relates to Thailand's gender culture, which often views women as workers in care roles. However, this article also critiques how this work is often undervalued and underpaid despite being the backbone of the medical sector. (3) global-local relations, namely about global trends (medical tourism) with local contexts (Thai policies and culture), this article enriches the understanding of how globalization impacts the health sector. This article discusses the media sector, gender and globalization where these topics are very relevant to the issues that will be used by researchers (Farber, 2022).

Culture diplomacy

Review Artikel Jurnal: The Past and Future of Cultural Diplomacy oleh Natalia Grincheva, terbit tahun 2024

Natalia Grincheva in her journal article analyzes the development of cultural diplomacy from the past to the future. This article discusses historical aspects, contemporary challenges, and future opportunities by highlighting the influence of digital technology on the practice of cultural diplomacy. Grincheva starts from the roots of cultural diplomacy to the formation of nation-states, where culture is used as a tool to promote soft power. During the Cold War, the use of art and culture became an important instrument in winning the hearts and minds of the world community. In the post-Cold War era, cultural diplomacy has evolved into a more collaborative and inclusive approach. The era of globalization, there has been an increase in the complexity of cross-cultural interactions and the impact of digital technology. There has been a shift from a state-centered diplomacy model to the involvement of non-state actors, such as NGOs, cultural institutions, and the private sector. Until finally the era of digitalization was born where digital platforms are considered to open new opportunities for cultural exchange and the spread of soft power, but also pose challenges related to accessibility, authenticity, and control of information.

Another finding of this article identifies that there is a new hybrid transnational diplomacy emerging that not only operates through cultural practices or artistic expressions across countries, but also increasingly

embraces globally significant social and political issues. Such as LGBT or feminist movements, climate change or disability activism are becoming an important part of 184 contemporary cultures shared across countries and societies that offer interesting avenues for implementing CD activities. Therefore, the researcher wants to see how Thailand's development or strategy towards LGBT issues especially in the implementation of cultural diplomacy (Grincheva, 2024).

Review Jurnal: «Thailand's New Soft Power Focus and the Makings of a Paradox» oleh Surachart Bamrungsuk, terbit tahun 2024

This article analyzes Thailand's foreign policy in using soft power as a tool to strengthen its international position. Bamrungsuk explores how Thailand seeks to leverage its culture, diplomacy, and international image to build global influence. And navigate the gap between its global ambitions and its complex internal political conditions. In his findings, Thailand develops soft power as a new diplomatic strategy, namely focusing on utilizing culture, tourism, and international relations to build a positive image in the international world. This strategy certainly also supports regional peace and stability. This effort has been declared successful, as evidenced by the many international tourists who are interested in its cultural heritage, cuisine, and festivals. This cultural diplomacy plays an important role in strengthening Thailand's image as an attractive global destination (Cogan, 2024).

However, this article identifies a paradox that emerges in Thailand's new approach to soft power, especially when the policy is confronted with domestic political realities and external challenges. Although the country seeks to project a positive image in the eyes of the world, domestic realities often conflict with the values promoted abroad. For example, issues related to human rights, political freedoms, and domestic political instability often contradict Thailand's image as a democratic and stable country. Thailand has received international criticism for human rights violations, especially in the context of freedom of expression and politics. This is evidenced by Thailand's domestic political instability, such as military coups and restrictions on civil liberties. Of course, these phenomena damage the positive image built through soft power policies. Reflecting on the article, the researcher wants to see further how Thailand attempts to improve its image, especially in terms of culture, through the concepts of «gay heaven» and «gay capital of Asia» that are already very attached to Thailand.

Research method

This article arises from the rise of K-pop beauty and plastic surgery, how South Korean culture (or known as the *Hallyu wave*) can influence the interest of the international community, especially on the existence of medical and global issues (Li et al., 2020). So, the

researcher found similarities with Thailand in the nation branding efforts through culture. In this case, Thailand is very active in the human rights movement, more specifically about LGBT rights. Thailand offers many LGBT-friendly tours, starting from a social environment that is anti-discriminatory towards transgenders, then expanding to the proliferation of Sex Change Surgery or Gender Reassignment Surgeries hospitals.

Hospitals with sex change surgery facilities in Thailand are already widely known in the global community. This is evident from the many foreign patients who use their services. According to Aizura (Aizura, 2010) there are many foreign patients undergo transgender surgery in Thailand because they get convenience in the surgery process, especially without intimidation from the social environment. This experience is also interesting to discuss because the patients who underwent this surgery did not come from Thailand, but came from developed countries such as Europe, the United States, Australia, and Canada.

This research will focus on how cross-cultural roles will affect globalization, especially in the realm of cultural diplomacy. The research data will focus on the list of Thai hospitals that provide transgender surgery, marketing strategies from hospitals, hospital facilities that support medical tourism (because in the process of surgery, patients will need a recovery period), and also a list of patients who have undergone transgender surgery (Thai and non-Thai citizens). The next data, the researcher will record LGBT-friendly tourism in Thailand. This data will strengthen the researcher's argument that patients will feel safe without intimidation when undergoing transgender surgery. After the data is collected, the researcher will process the data according to the perspective of cultural

diplomacy in Thailand. In the process, the researcher will involve many actors, both government and non-government. The role of actors is very important in cross-cultural activities, considering that LGBT has not been widely accepted by many groups.

Finding and discussion

Thailand, Belief, Transgender & LGBT

Latar Belakang LGBT di Thailand dan Potensi Diplomasi: Studi Literatur

Today, the global community agrees that the inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, and other groups outside of heteronormative and cisgender identities (i.e., LGBT+) is an important human rights issue that is fundamental to human health and well-being (Newman et al., 2021). A group of international LGBT+ academics and legal activists have proposed the Yogyakarta Principles as a guide for advocacy, policy and law in countries to improve the protection of LGBTQ+ individuals from discrimination and human rights violations. In this regard, Thailand is one of the countries in Southeast Asia that is open and friendly to the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) community (Aksornarn, 2024).

Thai society is diverse in terms of gender, sexual orientation, and gender identity/expression: heterosexual men and women, gay men, lesbian women, bisexual women, *sao praphet song* (transgender men assigned at birth), *tom* (transgender women assigned at birth), and *dee* (assigned women at birth who are attracted to tom men) (Skorska et al., 2021). As a complement, Thai society states that there are 18 sexual orientations that apply in the Thai social environment, although not all of them are recognized by society (Sepulang Sekolah, 2021). Eighteen genders are:

1	Straight male	Sex and sexual orientation (gender) are the same (male)
2	Straight female	Sex and sexual orientation (gender) are the same (female)
3	Lesbian	Lovers of women
4	Bi	Bisexuals can love both men and women
5	Gay king	A man who loves men
6	Gay queen	A man who dresses and behaves like a woman, but loves men
7	Boat	Men who love women, <i>gay queen</i> and <i>gay king</i>
8	Tom	A woman who dresses up as a man and loves women who dress up as women
9	Dee	Girls who love <i>tom</i>
10	Tom gay	Women who love women, can be <i>Tom</i> or <i>Dee</i>
11	Tom gay king	<i>Tom</i> who loves <i>tom</i>
12	Tom gay queen	<i>Tom</i> dresses femininely, but loves <i>Tom</i>
13	Tom gay two way	<i>Tom</i> who can be the <i>tom gay king</i> or <i>tom gay queen</i> , so he loves the same sex but is flexible
14	Kathoe	Transgender men who wish to become women, and vice versa, through sex change surgery
15	Adam	Boys who love <i>tom</i> = (boys who love girls who dress up like boys)
16	Angee	Kathoe who loves <i>Tom</i> = (a transgender who loves girls and dresses like a boy)
17	Samyaan	Women who love <i>Tom</i> or lesbians (should just put this in lesbian but it's flexible)
18	Cherry	A woman who loves gay men and <i>ladyboys</i>

Based on the above data, Thailand stands out as a country with a higher level of acceptance of transgender issues, both in social policies and in everyday culture. However, Thai society still often experiences discrimination about their gender (Srikummoon et al., 2022). This discrimination is often experienced by transgender women (TGW) who are also members of a minority related to the identity of individuals with intersectional identities in the social context of family, school, workplace, and community. Discrimination and experiences of mistreatment in educational institutions can be a particular challenge for LGBTQ students, and this discrimination takes the form of hate speech and sexual harassment from teachers and other students (Srikummoon et al., 2022). There are no Thai laws that adequately support the existence of transgender people, nor are there any inclusive policies that address the legality of same-sex marriage (Aksorngrarn, 2024).

Despite discrimination against the queer community in Thailand, the community continues to maintain its identity. This is reinforced by the beliefs that exist in Thailand, namely the involvement of Buddhism, gender identity, and sexuality in Thailand. *Theravada Buddhism* is highly respected and influential in Thai tradition and is practiced by 95% of the population. *Theravada Buddhism* is the main branch of Buddhism that is most dominant in Thailand. Theravada, meaning «Teachings of the Elders», is a form of Buddhism that emphasizes the understanding and practice of the original teachings of the Buddha as recorded in the ancient Pali texts (Tipitaka). In Thailand, Theravada Buddhism is the spiritual, cultural, and social foundation of the community. One of the beliefs taught in this religion is the existence of a third gender or what is known as kathoey (third gender: transgender women or feminine men). This religion explains the attachment to the indigenous gender system, namely «supernatural beliefs» such as animism, sacred objects, and spirits that live in nature provide space for cultural expressions of the third gender. These beliefs play an important role in connecting humans with spirits. So it can be concluded that this religious teaching is the cause of the large number of transgender people in Thailand and is practiced in the daily lives of transgender sex workers who are involved in direct and indirect work in sex tourism in Pattaya and Bangkok (Ocha, 2023).

Thailand's Gender Reassignment Surgical & LGBT tourism

History of genital surgery in Thailand

Thailand began its sex reassignment surgery industry in the 1970s, but only one surgeon had a reputation for technical skill in the procedure before the mid-1990s, Dr. Preecha Tiewtranon. He developed his own genital vaginoplasty technique and trained the group of surgeons who practice vaginoplasty in Thailand today. In the mid-1990s, non-Thais began traveling to

Thailand in greater numbers to undergo GRS. This was influenced by the large number of kathoey (gender-variant Thai individuals) who had undergone GRS and migrated overseas to Europe and North America, helping to “promote” the surgery. It can be said that the medium for promotion was *word of mouth* (Pauli et al., 2023) and successfully pushed for the first non-Thai trans woman to obtain GRS in Thailand, followed by internet media in the mid-1990s. Thai surgeons are known to be cheaper and more technically advanced than surgeons working in Europe and North America. In 1996, Dr. Suporn Watanyasakul, a protégé of Dr. Preecha, was one of the most skilled GRS surgeons in Thailand, performing 20 to 30 GRS procedures per year, mostly on Thai patients. By 2006, he was operating on about 220 patients per year, almost exclusively on vaginoplasties, breast augmentation, and facial feminization. His patients came from abroad, including Europe, North America, and other locations in Asia (Aizura, 2010).

This sex change operation takes quite a long time, at least there is a health check before and after, starting from the patient's medical and psychological examination, hormone therapy, to post-operative recovery. Even in this sex change operation there are still various kinds of operations, starting from facial, chest, and genital surgery. All of these operations will be clarified and adjusted again to the patient's innate sex (Akhavan et al., 2021). In sum, that patients will undergo many surgical processes to achieve perfection, and it is not surprising if patients experience doubts in the process. Therefore, many hospitals that have sex reassignment surgery services will offer other non-medical facilities. So that patients can make medical trips. This medical tourism includes costs, accessibility, and broader factors related to the tourist attractions of the destination country. In addition, medical tourism is believed to be able to save costs (due to long waiting periods), guarantee the quality of health services; diversity of facilities and choices; insurance; the ability to maintain anonymity and privacy; cultural proximity in terms of language, norms, religion, food; access to the latest technology and care; procedures that are not available or affordable in the home country; distrust and ignorance of the health care system in the host country; and the added benefit of a vacation (Taheri et al., 2021).

Thailand's image as a “gay paradise” date back to 1980, when the western magazine *Spartacus International Gay Guide for Gay Men* stated that «*Thailand is a gay and tourist paradise... offering the best tourism in Asia, and with warm, friendly, happy people and handsome young men, Thailand is a gay Mecca.*» Much of Thailand's gay life takes place in the capital, Bangkok. The city's openness to diversity, gay-friendly bars and restaurants, popular saunas, numerous *drag shows* and vibrant nightlife have made Bangkok the ‘*gay capital of Asia*’. The city is ranked among the most gay-friendly cities for LGBTQ travelers by rankings

such as HostelWorld, CultureTrip, Nomadic Boys, Hotel.com, and GayTravel. There are over 100 gay and gay-friendly businesses for LGBTQ travelers such as bars, restaurants, saunas, etc. Most of the gay venues are located in the Silom district, adjacent to Rama IV Road.

Besides Bangkok, the gay tourism hub is Patong, on Phuket Island, with the top 20 LGBT Destinations for 2020 according to Gay Travel guide. It is no surprise that Phuket has been named the '*Gay Travel Oasis*'. Next up are the cities of Pattaya and Chiang Mai, with Pattaya renowned for its nightlife and sex industry. The city is known for its gay nightlife with go-go bars and cabarets, as well as the gay beach of Dongtan. While Chiang Mai offers a more relaxed gay scene with gay-friendly bars and several gay accommodations as well as gay saunas (Alexandre Veilleux, 2021).

Based on previous research, foreign tourists feel comfortable when enjoying gay tourism in Thailand. New experiences that they have never had before, such as when entering a bar that provides gay massage (Xiang & Cheah, 2023). In addition, the LGBT-friendly tourist environment also supports non-heteronormative lives that are socially sustainable and geographically located. Although they are commoditized as sexual products, Kathoey and gay people feel greater tolerance, freedom, and belonging in the area. For non-heteronormative lives, this environment provides access to peer networks for emotional and financial support, role models, and knowledge (social capital) on how to survive (Statham & Scuzzarello, 2023).

Culture Diplomacy

Gender discrimination often occurs anywhere and anytime, and the forms of violence received are diverse, ranging from sexual harassment, career dissatisfaction, to social law (being excluded in the social environment). Many studies have stated that gender discrimination can have fatal consequences, such as decreased self-confidence, depression, and even suicide (Schlick et al., 2021). Likewise, someone who wants to undergo transgender surgery. Every day, transgender people face psychological, practical, political, and physical challenges (Chan et al., 2024). Although transgender people are not always included in the LGBT community, in general, transgender people are often included in the community because the LGBT community includes various sexual and gender identities outside of heterosexual and cisgender norms. Seeing this, Thailand strives to create an inclusive environment for people with gender issues. In Thailand, there are many tourist attractions and environments that are friendly to LGBT people so that people with different sexual orientations feel comfortable when they are in Thailand. In addition, Thailand has great potential in cultural diplomacy through its role in supporting and celebrating gender diversity. The existence of Bangkok Pride which has emerged since 2005, as well as LGBT-

themed film and art festivals, further emphasizes Thailand's role as a country that is close to LGBT people. Festivals and cultural events like these are a means of diplomacy that not only promotes inclusivity in society, but also improves the country's image in the eyes of the international world as a country that is progressive towards LGBT rights.

The existence of LGBT tourism and environment is certainly a cultural attraction in itself for Thailand. Although this LGBT character still gets discrimination from outsiders, Thailand has succeeded in creating this environment and collaborating it with Thai culture. The existence of kathoey (third gender: transgender women or feminine men) is also inseparable from the teachings of Theravada Buddhism. Theravada Buddhism recognizes four gender categories, namely male, female, *ubhatobyanjanaka* (individuals with characteristics of both sexes), and *pandaka* (individuals whose sexual behavior is considered inappropriate). To be more detailed, *Ubhatobyanjanaka* is interpreted as a combination of male and female biological characteristics, and *pandaka* is explained as a man who performs oral sex with other men and gets sexual arousal and satisfaction from it. Both of these terms can be understood in part to refer to homosexual behavior, showing that gender is not limited to binary categories but is diverse, such as *Phet tee saam*. Meaning 'third gender', this broad and diverse term in Thai culture is used to summarize being gay, kathoey, lesbian (*tom & dee*), bisexual, or transgender (Rodríguez-Dorans & Holmes, 2021). It is not surprising that these religious and cultural values certainly play a role in creating an inclusive environment for transgender people in Thailand. In addition, Buddhism is one of the media of cultural diplomacy and advancing national goals in Thailand. It can be concluded that cultural diplomacy is able to improve relations between countries by facilitating the exchange of cultural values and practices (Zheng & Liu, 2024).

Another cultural factor is reflected in the series of dances offered by Thailand, where dance diplomacy has been carried out in its international relations activities for more than 150 years. Dance culture is believed to be able to increase creativity, cultural familiarity, and similarities between Thailand and other countries, by utilizing the meaning of the event when the performance is performed (Praditsilp & Pongsakornrungrungsilp, 2024). This strategy is also used by tourism to attract tourists using dance, especially LGBT tourists. Inspired by the US show RuPaul's Drag Race, a drag show featuring "men dressing and performing as women" and sometimes "women dressing and performing as men". The popularity of RuPaul's Drag Race and the two seasons of Drag Race Thailand have contributed to the increasing presence of drag shows in Thailand. However, if the mainstream conceptualization of drag is associated with Western gender binaries (even when

drag attempts to challenge those binaries), then Thai drag shows not only negotiate Western gender binaries but also local transgender systems. One such show is Thai drag and cabaret in Chiang Mai (Shuttleworth, 2023). Even Thai drag shows have ventured into digital media (WOWPresents, 2024), so people can enjoy the online shows.

The next cultural performance is through the media of music because it is considered an easy medium to attract and persuade other countries through a positive national image. There is a relationship between music, power, international relations, and diplomacy because it is believed that a number of voices are able to participate in diversifying channels for cultural diplomacy (Rijo Lopes Da Cunha, 2024). One of the studies that discusses Thai music and transgender is about the social life of queer men in Thai classical string music, namely a study that discusses how a transgender musician is able to survive (Wisuttipat, 2024). While researchers did not find many academics discussing Thai song lyrics and LGBT. This is interesting because researchers found a non-Thai song that has unique lyrics. The song titled «*Bang Bang Bangkok*» sung by Devi Sri Prasad from the soundtrack of the film *Kumari 21 F* released in 2015, has a lyrical musical arrangement and visuals that depict the energetic nuances of the glamorous and vibrant nightlife of Bangkok, Thailand (Sukumar Writings, 2016). There are several interesting things about this music, (1) this musician comes from outside Thailand, namely India, but makes lyrics about tourism in Thailand, complete with visuals of culture (traditional and modern) that exist in Thailand. (2) the lyrics of the song that read:

*"Same same but different
No money no honey
Good boy goes to heaven, bad boy goes to Bangkok"*

Although the songwriter did not explain the lyrics in detail, the researcher saw that the lyrics were related to LGBT and tourism sectors. The researcher translated the lyrics using critical discourse analysis (CDA) proposed by Fairclough (1995) as a conceptual framework (Ruanglertsilp, 2022). According to the researcher, the diction *same-same but different* refers to men who are not men (biologically), but those who have different sexual orientations. The next lyrics, *good boy goes to heaven bad boy goes to Bangkok*: *good boy* means men with the same gender and sexual orientation are advised to go straight to heaven. Meanwhile, for *bad boys* (namely men with deviant sexual orientations), their place is not in heaven. Then, the musician advises bad boys to travel and visit Bangkok to enjoy the rest of their lives. In sum, the researcher found a combination of context and gender stereotypes in the lyrics that point to Thailand with its image as a gay paradise.

In the research process, the researcher found several academics discussing the potential of health diplomacy by providing quality health services, especially in the field of transgender surgery and gender identity-related care. Many people from abroad, especially from countries with strict policies against LGBT, come to Thailand to undergo gender transition procedures. However, the researcher will put this aside because the researcher will focus on Thailand's cultural diplomacy that is able to attract the interest of the transgender community to undergo transgender surgery in Thailand. Again, an environment that supports LGBT will make transgender patients more open when undergoing surgery.

Conclusion

Everyone has the right to determine their life path, one of which is determining what gender they want. This decision is certainly not easy, especially when deciding to undergo transgender surgery. There are many discriminatory behaviors that they get and have fatal consequences, such as decreased self-confidence, depression, and even suicide. So, an inclusive environment is needed to support their decision. Thailand comes with the best solution. Starting from providing the best hospitals with transgender surgery facilities and also an inclusive environment for the LGBT community. In its approach, Thailand carries out various cultural diplomacy activities to attract patients (both local and foreign) to undergo surgery in Thailand. The cultural diplomacy carried out starts from the domestic environment regarding the understanding of the values of *Theravāda Buddhism* which recognizes four gender categories: male, female, *ubhatobyanjanaka*, and *pandaka*. The diversity of religion and gender has given birth to various entertainment and festivals that support LGBT, namely dance arts represented by drag and Thai cabaret in Chiang Mai, as well as music from India that depicts the glitter of tourism in Thailand. With an LGBT-friendly environment, it is very supportive for local and foreign patients to undergo transgender surgery in Thailand. Patients will not feel gender discrimination during surgery, so Thailand can develop its international activities into health diplomacy through hospitals that provide transgender surgery facilities.

Limitations and recommendation

In this study, the focus is on cultural diplomacy which is the attraction of transgender patients both locally and internationally. So, the author only focuses on Thai culture, tourism and interesting things that are closely related to the LGBT image. Suggestions for further researchers are to focus on health diplomacy, where Thailand is able to portray itself with the quality of health, especially in sex change operations. Further researchers are advised to be able to display the competition in the quality of sex change hospitals

with hospitals outside Thailand. This will be interesting to study because there are so many countries that have these facilities and compete with each other in maintaining their quality.

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КУЛЬТУРНА ДИПЛОМАТІЯ ТАЙЛАНДУ: ЗАЛУЧЕННЯ ПАЦІЄНТІВ ДЛЯ ПРОВЕДЕННЯ ОПЕРАЦІЙ ІЗ ГЕНДЕРНОГО ПІДТВЕРДЖЕННЯ (GRS) ЗА ДОПОМОГОЮ «М'ЯКОЇ СИЛИ»

Особи з нетрадиційною гендерною ідентичністю та сексуальною орієнтацією часто стикаються з труднощами суспільного сприйняття у повсякденному житті, освітньому середовищі, на робочому місці, а також під час прийняття рішення щодо проходження операцій із гендерного переходу. Багато з них зазнають соціальної дискримінації, що може призводити до зниження самооцінки, депресивних станів і навіть суїцидальних проявів. У зв'язку з цим наявність безпечного та інклюзивного середовища є важливою умовою для забезпечення їхнього психологічного комфорту. Таїланд, який має репутацію країни з дружнім ставленням до ЛГБТ-спільноти, пропонує високоспеціалізовані медичні заклади, що надають послуги з операцій із гендерного переходу. Сформований міжнародний імідж Таїланду як світового центру гендерно-підтверджувальної хірургії сприяє створенню атмосфери відкритості та інклюзивності, що приваблює пацієнтів з різних країн світу. Дослідження зосереджується на аналізі культурних чинників, які зміцнюють міжнародний імідж Таїланду та сприяють просуванню його медичних закладів на світовому ринку медичного туризму. Встановлено, що важливими складовими культурної дипломатії країни є традиції буддизму Тхеравади, який історично визнає чотири гендерні категорії, розвиток мистецьких практик, зокрема драг-шоу, ка-баре та тайської музичної культури, а також формування ЛГБТ-дружньої туристичної інфраструктури, що забезпечує комфортне перебування пацієнтів. Поєднання потужної культурної основи, державної підтримки та діяльності бізнесу щодо формування інклюзивного середовища дозволило Таїланду стати одним із провідних світових центрів гендерно-підтверджувальної хірургії та медичного туризму. Це підтверджується значною кількістю іноземних пацієнтів з країн Європи, США та Азії, які обирають Таїланд для проходження лікування та медичних подорожей.

Ключові слова: культурна дипломатія, Таїланд, гендерно-підтверджувальна хірургія, медичний туризм, ЛГБТ, гендер.

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