New Media in the Margins

Lived Realities and Experiences from
the Malaysian Peripheries

Edited by
Benjamin YH Loh · James Chin

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About this book

This book consists of nine chapters, each an in-depth case study into a specific non-mainstream or marginalized online community in Malaysia. The authors come from diverse backgrounds to talk about how new media can both assist and hinder maligned minorities, ignored ethnicities or the often attacked migrants in their day to day lives. The book makes a strong contribution to Malaysian studies which highlights the other and represents minority viewpoints to challenge the belief that Malaysia's online space is monolithic and limited to several mainstream discourses in Malaysian scholarship.

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'Our Online-Ness Matters': The Construction of Social Media Presences by Malaysian LGBTQ Communities

Collin anak Jerome

INTRODUCTION

> Our online-ness matters, and that is the fact of the matter. So long as there is Internet, so long as there is social media, we will stick around for a long time. (Respondent 55, Chinese lesbian, early 30s)

"Online-ness", in its most basic sense, refers to the following similarly associated actions of being online, being on the internet or being in the internet-enabled world. Such actions can be achieved by creating a sense of self and self-presence within online platforms through internet-enabled communication technologies. But being online, however, is not as easy as

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we might assume. It involves far more than creating an online presence if one considers the evolving issues and challenges—in addition to the opportunities—presented by internet usage.

Such challenges are even more daunting for marginalised users who create their sense of online-ness by identifying, or beginning to identify, as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer/questioning (LGBTQ) in terms of sexual orientation. Online platforms and the sense of online-ness that they help create play important roles in the lives of LGBTQ communities. The extant literature shows that online platforms, or more specifically for our discussion, social media platforms, are mostly used by members of these communities for the development of their wellbeing, given the unique challenges that they face in their everyday lives for living outside of society's gender and sexual norms (Hatchel et al. 2017). It also shows that social media enhances their healthy development and wellbeing (for the youth in particular) by providing the support needed to accomplish developmental tasks of constructing identity, coming to terms with sexuality and pursuing intimate relationships.

But such tasks are not necessarily risk-free, since LGBTQ communities continue to experience issues related to social support, stigmatisation, victimisation, uncertainties regarding their identities and so on and so forth (ibid.). Hence, this chapter corroborates the central argument of this book, i.e., interrogating the *myth* that access to new media can miraculously elevate or emancipate marginalised groups. One explanation is that new media can potentially shore up and bolster existing structures within the dominant society, often leading to the further subjugation of marginalised communities. Hence, our broader need for a deeper discussion about how new media affects real-life, day-to-day issues faced by marginalised groups—a discussion that remains under-researched because the focus of the extant literature has primarily been on new media's transformative and emancipatory impacts instead.

In this vein, the chapter examines the nuances and complexities of online-ness and discusses ways of encouraging and facilitating open, supportive discussions between members of LGBTQ communities and the mainstream Malaysian public, not just regarding online-ness but also related issues affecting people with nonnormative sexual and gender identities. It is guided by the broader theoretical framework that supports and informs this book, which draws on more recent digital divide studies, and ultimately provides a more comprehensive approach to examining the

interactions between new media and various marginalised and/or disenfranchised peoples. This includes micro-level examinations of the role of media technologies on certain segments of society because their unique circumstances and contexts have a profound impact on their usage of media technologies.

The first section provides some background and contextual information about LGBTQ communities in Malaysia, which will guide our discussion of their online-ness and social media experiences. The second examines individual views, particularly regarding their sense of online-ness and drawing from a range of real-life examples to illustrate their situations. Three points merit particular attention: (1) what online-ness means to them; (2) its key purpose(s) or function(s); and (3) the ways in which members of these marginalised communities manage their online-ness on social media platforms. The third section discusses the benefits and drawbacks of online-ness, with implications for their future use of social media. The chapter concludes with a summary of the ways in which open, supportive discussions of online-ness and related issues concerning LGBTQ communities can be raised with the mainstream Malaysian public.

LGBTQ Communities in Malaysia

Malaysia is one of the most rapidly developing countries in Southeast Asia. Widely known for its diverse society, it is currently home to an estimated 32.7 million people, the breakdown of which is as follows: 69.6% Bumiputera (i.e., predominantly ethnic Malays, who are constitutionally Muslim, and smaller indigenous groups), 22.6% Chinese, 6.8% Indian and one per cent "Other" (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2020). While Islam is the official and majority religion, other religions (e.g., Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity) are constitutionally permitted, as are other languages besides the national language, Malay (e.g., Mandarin, Tamil, Iban, Kadazandusun). Regardless, Islam and the Malay language, both of which are official and important markers of Malay identity, remain constitutionally paramount.

Unfortunately, there are no actual data on the LGBTQ population in the national and administrative data records. This is explained by the Department of Statistics' population estimates by normative sexual categories (i.e., 16.8 million males; 15.9 million females) and other demographic characteristics—Malaysian society at large continues to uphold

normative ideas concerning sex and gender (Joseph 2014). Regardless, LGBTQ communities have long been part of the demographic landscape as well as Malaysia's history and culture. Evidence of their existence takes the form of "transgendered courtiers" and "village performers who were transpersons" in the old royal courts (Goh 2014), cross-dressing, same-sex attraction and sexual ambiguity in classical Malay texts (Noor 2009), male homosexual relations during colonial rule in Malaya (Aldrich 2008), the role of *pondan* (effeminate men) as *mak andam* (bridal beauticians) in Malay villages (Peletz 1996, 2009), gay and lesbian couples (Baba 2001) and *mak nyah* (male transsexuals) (Slamah 2005; Teh 2008).

While the "LGBTQ" abbreviation is the most commonly used one today, it remains an imported Western terminology (with that being said, this *does not* mean that LGBTQ realities are also imported) with no exact equivalent in the local vernaculars. Some local terms for nonnormative gender and sexual identities do exist, such as *lelaki lembut* (soft men), *songsang* (inverted), *bapuk, ah kua, mak nyah, pak nyah* (specific forms of transgenderism) and *wanita keras* (lit. "hard women") (Pang 2015). There are also individuals (e.g., heterosexual men in particular) who do not use any specific terms to describe their sexual attraction towards transsexuals and/or feminised gay men (Lim 2015), thus revealing "the vague, fluid and unbounded ways many Malaysians view the myriad manifestations of nonnormative gender and sexual expression" (Pang 2015, p. 362). Despite such a broad variety of local terms, the abbreviation continues to be used for numerous purposes (e.g., self-identification, self-representation, self-liberation) in various contexts and settings. However, in doing so, communities often face difficulties and obstacles resulting from religious, sociocultural and legal sanctions.

On another a related note, if a "classical Islamic law" interpretation is followed, the existence of four human genders is acknowledged—i.e., heterosexual male, heterosexual female, *khunsa* (intersex) and *mukhannath* (effeminate men)—but the fourth is forbidden locally because of the tendency or disposition towards homosexuality (Zainuddin and Mahdy 2017; Hashim and Mat Nor 2018; Abdul Rahman 2018). As Hashim and Mat Nor (2018) argue, *mukhannath* are normally sexually attracted to men, but because they are physically and naturally male, such attractions are forbidden in Islam, regardless of their gender self-identification (i.e., as female).

Islam forbids homosexuality on the grounds that it is an abominable crime and the most heinous of human sins (Shamsudin and Ghazali

2011). The divine punishment of the Prophet Lut's (peace be upon him) people because of their homosexual conduct has sunk deep into Malaysia's Muslim psyche, to the extent that homosexuality in particular and nonnormative sexuality and gender in general are already equated with punishment and condemnation.

This has real-world repercussions, as seen in many reports and research of nonnormative individuals being subject to criminalisation, police harassment and public prosecution under both religious and civil laws (see, e.g., ARROW 2020; Luhur et al. 2020; SUHAKAM 2019), revealing that members of LGBTQ communities often face abuse, stigma and discrimination for supposedly contravening religious beliefs, moral codes and the norms regulating masculinity and femininity.

Thus, laws and norms have a profound impact on their existence and daily lives, as evidenced by, among others, the tensions and conflicts between: (1) religion and sexuality (Shamsudin and Ghazali 2011); (2) individual and collective needs (e.g., ethnic, religious groups) (Jerome 2013); (3) individuals and institutions (e.g., the authorities and other governmental bodies) (Pang 2015); as well as (4) within, among and between LGBTQ individuals (Felix 2016).

However, the abovementioned laws and norms are constantly challenged by many members of the LGBTQ communities, who are attempting to continue living life on their own terms through the adoption of various methods and strategies, including: (1) reconciling the tensions between religion and sexuality (Bong 2020); (2) implementing diverse self-adaptations/adjustments in navigating everyday lives (Mohd Sidik 2015); (3) employing various communicative strategies for self-expression (Cheah and Singaravelu 2017); and (4) speaking out against abuses of LGBTQ rights and advocating for sexuality-related rights (Lee 2013). They have been further facilitated by the proliferation of social media, to which many LGBTQ individuals turn for various reasons, including but not limited to: (1) self-disclosure (Mohammad Tuah and Mazlan 2020); overcoming (mostly offline) stigma and discrimination (Jerome 2019); (3) building resilience (Muhammad Ali and Mothar 2020); and (4) spreading LGBTQ movements (Mokhtar et al. 2019). The recent resurgence of LGBTQ public figures (e.g., entrepreneurs, social media influencers, rights activists) reveals an increasingly receptive trend among some segments of the Malaysian public, including supporters, followers and/or fans who support their causes and, most importantly, acknowledge their nonnormative gender and sexual identities. Such a

resurgence, however, has not been well-received by the authorities and mainstream heteronormative society.

A well-known incident involves Nur Sajat, a famous Malay-Muslim transgender cosmetics entrepreneur, who caused a huge commotion among local Muslims by posting social media images of her wearing a *telekung* (female prayer garment) in Mecca and Medina, Islam's two holiest cities (Rodzi 2020). Then Islamic Affairs Minister Mujawid Yusof Rawa requested that the Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission ban Nur Sajat's social media accounts due to public uproar. A grassroots campaign, Justice for Sisters,[1] was quick to argue that the real concern was Nur Sajat's personal safety and security due to the breach of her privacy, as well the lack of a rights- and evidence-based response by the authorities. Nur Sajat was later detained by the Thai authorities for illegal entry, having left Malaysia after being charged for insulting Islam by cross-dressing at a religious function. The Royal Malaysian Police applied for an extradition order, which the Thai authorities mulled over (Bernama 2021), but Nur Sajat has since been granted asylum in Australia at the time of writing.

This is just one of several cases, and more are probably unreported for many reasons (e.g., victims being afraid of the repercussions or just not wanting to report such cases to the authorities). Thus, it is more urgent than ever to examine the centrality of online-ness in the lives of many LGBTQ individuals in Malaysia, given their unique challenges living outside societal norms—a point to which we shall now turn.

MEANINGS, FUNCTIONS AND MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

Members of LGBTQ communities, particularly those who participated in this study ($n = 15$), generally held the same views on online-ness but had slightly different perspectives.[2] For the ease of discussion, the findings

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[1] Organised by members of the public, Justice raises public awareness about issues surrounding violence against and persecution of the *Mak Nyah* community. Notable figures in this initiative are renowned transgender activists Nisha Ayub, Thilaga Sulathireh and Sulastri Ariffin. See https://justiceforsisters.wordpress.com/about/.

[2] The survey was conducted online for 12 weeks from May to July 2019. A total of 132 LGTBQ individuals took the survey, primarily recruited through snowballing referrals, with the survey link sent directly to their distribution lists. The majority were Malay (43.1%, $n = 57$), followed by Chinese (31%, $n = 41$), Sabahan and Sarawakian Bumiputera (19.6%, $n = 26$), Indian (4.5%, $n = 6$) and Others (1.5%, $n = 2$). Informal talks and open interviews with 15 informants (six Chinese, five Malays, three Sabah and Sarawak Bumiputera, one Indian) were also conducted to further validate the survey findings. Most

can be classified into three types of online "personas" presented by the participants.

The 'Being Out Online' Persona

All participants indicated that their sense of online-ness involved more than being merely online. For a first group, it was about "being out online" and "creating a sense of self and presence based on LGBTQ identities", particularly on social media platforms. This was further reinforced by the fact that many had already self-identified as LGBTQ and bolstered their identities by being out on mainstream platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. Meanwhile, the second group, who were only beginning to self-identify, viewed their sense of online-ness as "a trial step" or "an initial step" prior to full self-disclosure. Such views echo those reported by LGBTQ individuals in Dzurick's (2018) study, who claimed that coming out online was a first, low-risk step towards being fully out, and therefore functioned as a sort of replacement for the stressful, nerve-wrecking in-person equivalent. See for instance the following excerpt from our study.

> I describe my online presence as a trial attempt to come out on social media. It is a better, safer option for me rather than getting bashed for coming out in person. (Respondent 79, Chinese gay man, late 20s)

The various meanings of online-ness expressed by the participants were intricately linked to their beliefs about the function(s) or purpose(s) of online-ness, and the ways in which they managed this online presence on social media platforms. The participants who fell into the first group described the main functions of their online presence variously—some of which are: (1) "to come to terms with sexuality" and "gender identity"; (2) "to explore their identity", especially "the various aspects of their identities"; and (3) "to develop sexual and non-sexual intimate relationships"—in addition to carrying out the tasks ensuing from these functions such as accessing and exchanging sexual-, gender-, health- and

of the findings and quotes presented in this chapter come from these informants and are lightly copyedited if needed.

relationship-related information, utilising these to enhance their knowledge, skills and experiences in dealing with themselves and other LGBTQ individuals, both online and offline.

For participants in the second group, they generally described the main functions of their online presence as follows: "to get support for coming and being out online in the form of acceptance, empathy and understanding from both outside and within the LGBTQ communities".

For their online presence to work or serve its function, these groups employed some methods to manage their online-ness on social media platforms. These included but were not limited to "practising openness" (i.e., disclosing oneself openly by posting actual photos of oneself and/or partner), "practising anonymity or pseudonymity" (e.g., disclosing oneself discreetly by using avatars and/or other people's photos), "providing selective details of themselves online", "befriending and following those who accepted and acknowledged their identities or self-disclosure online" and "unfriending and unfollowing those who did otherwise".

> I use my real photos on IG (Instagram) and FB (Facebook). There's nothing to be ashamed of because you must be true to yourself and let people know who you really are. (Respondent 9, transgender Malay woman, late 20s)

> I'm not fully out yet so I still use avatars, sometimes headless or faceless photos in my profiles. Same goes for my personal details. I only share these with those who I really trust. (Respondent 67, Bumiputera bisexual woman, late 20s)

Such strategies resound with those employed by many LGBTQ users in other studies, who have turned to various social media platforms to create their online presence—or more specifically, their sense of online-ness. Such platforms include but are not limited to mainstream social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube (Johnson 2020), as well as niche, LGBTQ-specific social media sites such as Grindr, Scruff, Jack'D and Her, to name a few (Hatfield et al. 2020).

There are various reasons why and ways in which these social media sites are used, both at the individual and community levels. A recent Australian study revealed that Facebook and other mainstream social media sites were used by LGBTQ youths to explore their identities, find support and manage boundaries—i.e., what is "for them", such as family

and friends, and "not for them" such as trans/bi/homophobic content in their social media feeds (Hanckel et al. 2019).This was achieved through a range of strategies such as pseudonymity, providing only selective details of themselves online, unfriending, unfollowing and curating friend lists to determine who could actually see the content that they posted (ibid.).

The 'Profiting from Being Out Online' Persona

Four participants indicated that online-ness was more of "an online strategy"—it was not only about participating in online social networks, but also profiting from them by engaging in income-generating activities.

> Being out online is more of a strategy for generating income. Of course, we can do networking at the same time. There are so many social media for gay men out there where you can make money off them. *Dah lah* free, so *pandei-pandei la guna kalau nak idup* (It's free, so use it wisely if you want to survive). (Respondent 58, Bumiputera gay man, early 20s)

Such strategies resonate with those employed by LGBTQ individuals elsewhere. Gay men in the United States, particularly performers on social media platforms such as JustForFans and OnlyFans (which allow content creators to post content and receive payment directly from their followers through subscriptions or one-off tips), may earn up to USD100,000 monthly by *simply* sharing their private clips and photos with fans and supporters who subscribe to these platforms (Street 2019). Moreover, our participants indicated that their online presence primarily served such a function, either as a sole source of or "a little side income"—therefore, money might not necessarily be the main reason. In practice, they posted "Not Safe for Work (NSFW) and adult content" disclaimers on social media platforms such as OnlyFans or livestreamed videos to followers on LGBTQ-specific social networking applications such as Blued—if they received gifts from those who liked their videos, these could be converted into cash.

> I'm on OnlyFans where I earn regular income by posting my pics and vids. I work hard for this goddamned gym body! Why not share some of it with my devoted fans? Best thing is I get paid for it and I can hook up with other guys too. (Respondent 58, Bumiputera gay man, early 20s)

> I mainly use Blued to meet other gay men. But lately, I've been using it for livestreaming where I interact and have fun with other guys. Some send me gifts if they like what they see, and these gifts can be converted into cash which is kinda cool as a side income. (Respondent 103, Chinese gay man, early 20s)

Such strategies resemble those employed by many online gay performers and livestreamers, especially those on China's gay dating platform, Blued. Wang (2020) observes how livestreamers transform their activities into tradeable, sexually affective data flows, as evidenced by: (1) their sexual performances; and (2) virtual gifting, liking, commenting or sharing by viewers. Such performances enable Blued to function as a site for both social networking and monetary value creation.

The 'Promoting Activism by Being Out Online' Persona

Three participants viewed their online-ness from a community perspective—it was a particular "online strategy" not only for organising community members, but also mobilising support for and spreading awareness and acceptance, both outside and within the LGBTQ communities. These participants revealed themselves as members of local LGBTQ support groups.

> Online-ness is an important strategy for any LGBTQ support group or organisation. We need to put ourselves out there not just online but also offline, to carry out our goal and mission, to organise our members and non-members who are interested in our cause. Only by doing this the public can take people like us more seriously! (Respondent 88, Indian bisexual man, late 30s)

As seen elsewhere, gay support groups or organisations in Europe employ mainstream social media platforms to mobilise their members and non-LGBTQ supporters to participate in campaigns and projects. Thus, these platforms are not only used to organise events, protests and online petitions, but also to provide a quick tool for the quick and broad dissemination of information and maintain contact with members and interested non-members (Ayoub and Brzezińska 2016). Similarly, our participants explained that online-ness was a community-building strategy to create a solid network providing LGBTQ-related information and support, while spreading awareness among members and the general public. Hence, they

employed slightly different management strategies compared to the rest of our participants, including providing easy and free access to organisational information, their missions, programmes and campaigns, as well as posting and interacting with followers and non-followers through Twitter accounts and/or Instagram hashtags.

Such strategies mimic those employed by LGBTQ organisations elsewhere, where mainstream social media sites were used *in addition* to official websites to share knowledge, make claims and encourage participation by members and interested non-members (ibid.). This was done through several strategies including providing easy and free access to information about the organisation, articles explaining their mission and basic knowledge about these communities and their problems (ibid.).

Benefits, Drawbacks and the Future

While differing views were expressed by participants regarding the meaning of online-ness, its functions and management strategies, many converged towards a mutual understanding of and agreement on benefits and drawbacks, and how these may shape their future use of social media.

Their sense of online-ness, as afforded by social media platforms, brought many advantages that could not be easily sought out in the real, offline world, including but not limited to connecting and communicating with other LGBTQ individuals (or "People Like Us") and receiving non-judgmental, accepting, positive and motivating support from both LBGTQ and non-LGBTQ friends and followers. Most importantly, it afforded seemingly endless possibilities for expressing various aspects of their identities (e.g., social class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, political affiliation, sexual positioning, behaviour, fantasies) and (re)claiming their freedom (i.e., power and rights) to act, speak and think as LGBTQ individuals—something quite impossible offline.

The main drawback of their online presence was cyberbullying and harassment, as many participants indicated, which brought about many negative impacts—not only for their sense of online-ness but also well-being. Cyberbullies, presumably non-LGBTQ site visitors, expressed disgust towards the participants for openly and unashamedly expressing their identities in their tweets, hashtags and/or posts, and resorted to insults, denigrating comments, derogatory words and even threats of violence and/or death. Respondents 48 (Chinese lesbian, early 20s) and 9 reported the following comments addressed to them, respectively:

Hoi, u r but wan become boi. *BáiChī!* (Hey, you are a girl, but want to be a boy.)

No penis but pretend have penis. How you *main ah*, use dildo is it? (You don't have a penis, but you pretend to have one. How do you make love, do you use a dildo?)

Cilake punya pondan! Baik ku bakar idup-idup, cicang lumat-lumat! (Damned *pondan*! I'd better burn you alive, cut you up into pieces!)

Species Lut niii … Allah laknat! Baik ko baca balik Surah al-A'raf, kasi insaf skit! (You belong the Lut species, damned by Allah. You'd better reread Surah al-A'raf and repent!)

Not all such comments were exclusively from non-LGBTQ individuals, of course. Some participants indicated that they were often derided or mocked by other LGBTQ individuals who visited their social media sites because of the prevalent stigmatisation and discrimination within LGBTQ communities. Respondent 108, a Chinese gay man in his early 50s, lamented that he was often ridiculed by younger gay men who visited his gay social media site because of his age and physical appearance, as shown on his online profile.

Some of these men, young ones like to call me "old *ah kua*" (gay), "ED" (erectile dysfunction), "taxi driver" and "pedo(phile)". They don't like old gay men like me. Some are racist, they don't like Chinese men because of our filthy *kulup* (foreskin).

Respondent 108s experiences resonate with those of older, aging gay men who experience stigmatisation and discrimination by younger gay men, due to the valourisation of youth by the gay community (Kimmel and Messner 2013). Many young men find older gay men repulsive as potential sexual partners (Van Wormer et al. 2000), with some using slang to show their repulsion—e.g., "aunties", "dogs", "toads" and "trolls", who congregate in "wrinkle rooms" (Dynes 2016, p. 25).

In general, many respondents were deeply affected, expressing hurt because of the offensive comments from bullies as well as feelings of sadness and demotivation. Others reported lower self-esteem and confidence, higher levels of stress and even an inability to find sexual partners due to intra-communal stigmatisation and discrimination. Some even went through periods of self-questioning or "why/why me?" moments, while others indicated the need to withdraw completely from social

media. According to Respondent 27, a transgender Malay woman in her late 20s,

> [t]he bullying affected me. Emotionally mostly. I never felt so down, so low in my life. Sometimes, I question why I should be the way I am, why am I born this way, why should I be born at all …

However, some participants did take such matters "positively", explaining that they did not care or feel anything about such comments. Others asserted that they would not change despite the negative comments on their sexuality or gender identities. Interestingly, the experiences of being bullied or harassed online on the basis of "abnormal sex/gender" made these LGBTQ individuals much wiser and stronger.

> The experience of being mocked at because of who I am makes me even stronger, wiser and prouder. I don't have to stoop that low to retaliate, just like I used to do back then. The experience made me reflect on my own words and actions. I am not always right you know, so I try my best to be the best version of myself. (Respondent 30, Chinese gay man, late 40s)

Such differing views echo those discussed elsewhere—in a review of studies from 2003 until 2017 examining social media usage among LGBTQ individuals in the United States, Escobar-Viera et al. (2018) found that it provided a "safe space" to disclose LGBTQ experiences and share ways of coping and getting support. However, cyberbullying was the most studied social media experience and was associated with depression and suicidality. McConnell et al. (2017) found that social media sites (Facebook in particular) not only provided LGBTQ youths with important social support for managing their social identities and relationships, but could also be a source of further victimisation and discrimination, as evidenced through experiences of being bullied online as a result of their Facebook "outness" and negative perceptions of posted content by their social network groups.

However, much has changed in the past 18 years—that is to say, since the publication of the first of the abovementioned studies surveyed. The *Social Media Safety Index* by the Gay and Lesbian Alliance against Defamation (GLAAD 2021), the first baseline evaluation of the LGBTQ safety experience across the social media landscape, reveals that the leading

social media platforms (e.g., Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, TikTok) are "effectively unsafe for LGBTQ users". Of particular concern is "the prevalence and intensity of hate speech and harassment, which stands out as the most significant problem in urgent need of improvement". This brings up the question of whether or not new media can "truly" have metamorphic and liberatory powers, as this book questions. Although the GLAAD study focusses on LGBTQ people in the West, a similar conundrum exists elsewhere, as the participants in this study can attest to.

Despite the barriers to their sense of online-ness on social media, all participants indicated that they would continue to curate their online presence well into the future. Social media and the internet have afforded them the ease and freedom to create such a presence, one that could not have been so easily achieved in the real, offline world. Furthermore, the participants remained positive because in today's digital world, social media and the internet are the way to go despite laws governing minority groups' engagement with communication technologies. The management strategies afforded by social media platforms (e.g., unfriending, unfollowing, deleting negative contents) and having basic digital literacy or knowledge (e.g., ensuring online privacy and security) were all they needed to let their online-ness flourish. More importantly, participants contended that tactfulness during online-ness could be used as a strategy to spread awareness and handle issues brought about by cyberbullies and vigilantes with care and maturity, an important skill considering how they represented the voices of LGBTQ individuals nationwide.

> As a member of a local LGBTQ group, I can safely say that the group or any other LGTBQ groups has a duty to represent people like us in Malaysia. That is why it is important to utilise our online presence wisely and strategically, whether to send our message across or to address hate comments. *Our online-ness matters*, and that is the fact of the matter. As long as there is internet, as long as there is social media, we will stick around for a long time. (Respondent 55, Chinese lesbian, early 30s, emphasis mine)

This powerful statement not only inspired the title of this chapter, but also encapsulates the sentiments expressed by the participants—that their online-ness matters, and that is the truth of the matter.

Towards Open and Supportive Dialogue

The fact that many participants were bullish about the future of social media is a strong indicator that their sense of online-ness is significant and that there would be no stopping them from actively (re)claiming their voices and agency online. However, such determination and the way forward are not risk-free, if we consider the Malaysian laws governing online (and offline) communication as well as the legal and sociocultural sanctions against LGBTQ individuals.

Therefore, there is no better time than now to have open, supportive dialogue with both the LGBTQ communities and the general Malaysian public, to discuss and deal with the issue at hand. Such dialogue is essential since members of the public need to understand why their support is required for the development and wellbeing of their LGBTQ compatriots, both online and offline. For these communities, supportive dialogue not only encourages them to better understand the concerns, biases and prejudices in the prejudgments of nonnormative sexualities and genders, but also allow them to be open and unafraid of voicing their own concerns, hopes and fears. Listed below are three ways of creating open, supportive dialogue regarding LGBTQ online-ness and related issues, as recommended by the participants.

Create a safe and judgement-free space for dialogue. This includes holding a dialogue session that may take various forms such as consultations, meetings, workshops and exchange-of-experience sessions, which are either awareness-, problem solving-, policy- or advocacy-oriented, supported by LGBTQ peers, parents, families and/or communities. Attendees *must not* be coerced into taking part to allow for opportunities to discuss a variety of sensitive and controversial topics openly and respectfully. One such topic is the role of an online presence among many LGBTQ individuals in Malaysia, and the ways in which such a presence can be sustained in light of the legal and social sanctions against them.

Foster the ability and willingness to engage in dialogue. There are several ways of encouraging or affording such an ability and willingness among both LGBTQ communities and members of the public to engage in such dialogue. For instance, choosing neutral, skilled and nonjudgmental group facilitators or mediators as well as setting ground rules and procedures that must be agreed upon by all parties involved can allow for opportunities to express opinions and engage with one another in an honest and respectful manner. Appointing resourceful intermediaries

between the LBGTQ communities and the state governments may also help in this matter.

Consider the role and impact of dialogue. This must be established at the outset, whether to raise awareness, exchange experiences or solve issues and problems. Again, dialogue must ensure or allow emphatic and non-judgmental discussions and exchanges of ideas. Group facilitators or mediators must ensure that everyone benefits from such sessions, with follow-ups (rather than conducting one-off events) to ensure fruitful outcomes and implementations. This is true when it comes to drawing up policies that can help LGBTQ individuals sustain an online presence for their development and wellbeing, without necessarily infringing on other peoples' rights to develop their respective presence online.

These may or may not be similar to ways recommended and implemented by other LGBTQ individuals and/or communities elsewhere, given that there have been numerous programmes held to serve such purposes. Moreover, the views expressed were confined to our participants and thus, they are not representative of the broader queer population in Malaysia. Future research may include a larger number of participants from across wider geographic areas to determine the full scope and nature of social media usage, as well as to examine the "true" extent of such usage, its varied reasons and consequences (e.g., physical, psychological, financial) and what the future of social media holds for them as marginalised Malaysians.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined LGBTQ individuals' sense of online-ness, in relation to what such online-ness means to them—i.e., its main purposes or functions, the strategies employed in managing online-ness, its drawbacks and benefits as well as the future use of social media. It concluded with recommendations by members of the LGBTQ communities themselves to create open, supportive discussions with the Malaysian public on their online-ness and other issues that matter. A key novelty is the uncovering of valuable insights into lived social media realities and experiences of/from the metaphorical periphery and how these insights help address this book's central argument—i.e., how new media can *both* facilitate and complicate the lives of marginalised groups, given their lived circumstances and contexts.

Such online-ness is important and deserves further study due to the current situation affecting LGBTQ communities locally. Thilaga Sulathireh, co-founder of Justice for Sisters, argues that the situation is worsening and will most likely keep worsening because of "the rapidly shrinking spaces for LGBTQ people—offline, online, everywhere", exacerbated by "state-sponsored homophobia and transphobia" and "increased discrimination, harassment and violent hate crime against the LGBT community" (Ellis-Petersen 2018). Even more worrying is the fact that they remain potentially at risk of being prosecuted under the Communications and Multimedia Act 1998 (Act 588) if they are found guilty of circulating "indecent" or "obscene" content on social media.

Regardless, many of our participants were optimistic about their future use of social media and reiterated that there would be no stopping them from actively (re)claiming their voices and agency in this manner. Such optimism may inspire other marginalised communities to do likewise, by taking advantage of the unique affordances of new media and by working closely with digital communities despite their inability to subvert existing structures of inequalities and subordination within the dominant structures of society.

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