

Deconstructing Stigmatisation by Heterosexuals of LGBT Against the Backdrop of Religion in Malaysia

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Abstract

The study focussed on deconstructing heterosexuals' stigmatisation of LGBT in the context of religion in Malaysia. The qualitative study involved semi-structured interviews with 21 heterosexuals (Buddhist, Christian, Muslim). The interview questions focussed on societal and personal views of LGBT. Thematic analysis of interview transcripts totalling 30,488 words showed the lay perspective on the construction of homosexuality in terms of personal choice, situational factors, and ideologies of stigma. The participants were able to empathize with personal choice only because they perceived the LGBT individuals had no chance of reverting to a so-called normal identity. The participants re-animated, rehearsed and re-presented the ideological defence of heterosexuality through repeated stigmatisation of difference and non-conformity in the context of the normative religious beliefs. They also perceived homosexuals as a potential threat to the morality of the norm-compliant population, prone to emotional and psychological instability, and a threat to the veneer of normalcy. The study showed that such popular theorising is not a neutral instrument of knowledge but one that carries ideological power in normalizing stigma towards LGBT.

Keywords: *LGBT, homosexual, heterosexual, stigma, social construction, ideologies*

Introduction

In Malaysia, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people experience state-backed discrimination which threatens their rights (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Research indicates that LGBT individuals in Malaysia face discrimination from both the legal and religious quarters, not to mention social rejection by heterosexuals. Zainon et al.'s (2018) interviews showed that the LGBT participants struggled between complying with the dominant heterosexual ideology and their desire to come out as homosexuals. The four Muslim LGBT participants interviewed by Shamsudin and Ghazali (2011) constructed themselves ("us") versus heterosexuals ("them") who considered them as having gone astray from their religion. Similarly, the four LGBT participants in Zulkffli and Ab Rashid's (2019) study tried to undermine the mainstream interpretation that the homosexual sexual act is sinful in Islam.

LGBT activity is criminalized in Malaysia because of religious and civil laws that ban crossdressing and same-sex relations (Human Rights Watch, 2022). The Syariah (Shariah) law is an Islamic religious law that can be used to apprehend LGBT individuals: Section 25 and Section 26 of Syariah Criminal Offences (Federal Territories) Act 1997 covers sexual intercourse between a man and a woman out of wedlock and same-sex relations (Lee, 2012, p. 172). Section 28 can be used to charge transvestites who are caught wearing women's attire or posing as a woman for "immoral purposes" in public. The caning sentence has been meted two times in Malaysia, once by the Terengganu State in 2018 and the second time by the Selangor Sharia (Syariah) Court in 2019 (Human Rights Watch, 2021). In view of the religious sanctions of the dominant religion in Malaysia against LGBT, it is important to study how heterosexuals bring in the religious argument to stigmatize LGBT individuals.

Malaysian civil law does not mention LGBT, although homosexual practice "is codified under the heading of Unnatural Offence of the Penal Code Act 574" (Mallow & Yeoh, 2019, p. 83). In fact, same-sex relations are punishable under Penal Code Section 377A, 377B and 377C and cross-dressing is punishable under the Minor Offences Act 1955. "In Islam, only khunsa, or hermaphrodites, are allowed

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