

“I am who I am”

Mitigating LGBTQ identities in heteronormative society

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The study examined how LGBTQ individuals negotiate their identities in the Malaysian heteronormative society using the Discourse-Historical Approach. In-depth interviews were carried out with 13 LGBTQ individuals to find out the discursive strategies they used in describing the triggers for coming out, their experiences, and the reasons for their struggles. The analysis of the interview data showed that the participants used the “destiny” and “rights” arguments to counter the “legal”, “religious” and “traditional values” arguments used by heterosexuals to reject them. Referents and personal pronouns were selectively used by LGBTQ participants to present different perspectives, “us” versus “them” (heterosexuals), “I” and other LGBTQ individuals, and “I” versus “they” or “you” (other sexual orientations). The findings have implications that are relevant to mitigation of LGBTQ identities in contexts which have strong heteronormative norms due to legal, religion and traditional values.

Keywords: LGBTQ, discursive construction, heteronormative, mitigation, self-representation, Malaysia

Introduction

Despite their presence in the larger Malaysian society, many Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) individuals have and continue to be differentially treated on the basis of gender and sexual diversity. LGBTQ individuals are often represented in the public discourse as a mental illness, a Western influence, and a result of childhood sexual abuse (Subir, 2019; Tan, 2022). The media continues to reinforce these images, along with the misconceptions

that LGBTQ people are “perverted” and “moral vices” who must be punished and rehabilitated so that they can “return to the right path” (ARROW, 2020). To exacerbate matters, several programmes have been conducted to “reform” and “fix” LGBTQ people (especially Muslim Malays) with the goal to “change their attitude and their wayward lifestyle” (PROHAM, 2020). As a consequence, LGBTQ people in Malaysia continue to experience discrimination and stigmatization throughout their lives and this affects their coming-out and disclosures (Goh, 2020; Singaravelu & Cheah, 2020; SUHAKAM, 2019).

Although coming-out process is difficult for many LGBTQ people across the globe, the challenges of self-disclosures are greater in countries like Malaysia where there are civil and religious (Syariah) laws that ban crossdressing and same-sex relations. Cross-dressing is punishable under Section 66 of the Syariah Criminal Enactment of the Negeri Sembilan state and the Minor Offences Act 1955. The target is *mak nyah*, a Malaysian term for pre-operative and post-operative male-to-female transsexuals (Teh, 1998). Awareness of the *mak nyah*'s grievances was created when lawyers used the strategy of framing of transgender men as males with an incurable medical or psychological condition (Gender Identity Disorder) to gain the sympathy of the judges, “amplify the unconditional rights and dignity for all human beings, argue for constitutional protection as citizens of Malaysia and legally override the Syariah provision” (Goh & Kananatu, 2019, p. 11). Medicalizing and pathologizing the Gender Identity Disorder, in fact, exacerbates “othering” LGBT persons but it is the only foundation for LGBTQ activists to advance their cause.

In addition to religious laws, same-sex relations are punishable under Syariah Criminal Offences (Federal Territories) Act 1997 (Section 25 and Section 26), and Malaysian Penal Code, Section 377A, 377B and 377C. There are reported incidents of individuals who were sent to conversion therapy, caned, and charged for sodomy (e.g., former deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim).

In Malaysia, there are also religious sanctions against LGBTQ. In Islam, same-sex relations are described as lewd in the Quran (Surah 26:165 and Surah 7:80–81). In Christianity, the Bible describes how God created human beings male and female (Genesis 5:2), and punished homosexual men in Sodom and Gomorrah (Leviticus 18:22; Leviticus 20: 13; and Romans 1:26–27). The Sikh religious texts do not explicitly mention homosexuality. In Buddhism, there is no record of Buddha making statements on homosexuality (Coleman, 2002) but in later years, non-vaginal sex was considered sexual misconduct in the Abhidharma (Chodron, 2008). LGBTQ practices has been attributed to an erosion of moral values brought about by the influence of the West (Ramlan, 2019).

In Malaysia, the legal, religious, and moral axes intersect. The Chinese LGBTQ individuals are usually Christian or Buddhist while the Muslim LGBTQ