

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Deviants or “Normal” Citizens?: Framing of LGBTQ in Malaysian Newspapers

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**Abstract:** The study examined the framing of LGBTQ in four newspapers in Malaysia. The search uncovered 60 articles on LGBTQ published from January 1 to December 31, 2019 in four online newspapers, namely, *MalaysiaKini*, *The Star Online*, *Free Malaysia Today*, and *Astro Awani Online*. *MalaysiaKini* attributed the greatest salience to LGBTQ both in article number and length. LGBTQ was mostly covered using episodic framing (72.73%–91.67%). There were significant differences among the four newspapers on the dominant frames used for representing LGBTQ. The most-used frame was morality in the articles published by the alternative newspapers, but the constitution and jurisprudence frame dominated in the mainstream newspaper, *The Star*. The four newspapers were similar in their reliance on human rights groups and politicians as information sources. The voices of LGBTQ are muted, implying that they have been sidelined as members of society who cannot assert their rights to speak. Some articles were written in a positive tone in *The Star*, *Free Malaysia Today*, and *MalaysiaKini*, but there were no articles with positive valence in *Astro Awani*. Negative valence dominated in LGBTQ coverage, reflecting the disapproval of LGBTQ in Malaysia where Islam is the official religion and homosexuality is banned. The findings suggest that dominant frames and valence are constructed through a selective choice of information sources in the context of cultural factors that are at play.

**Keywords:** LGBTQ, framing, episodic framing, morality, valence, information sources

LGBTQ is an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer. The Q generally stands for queer when LGBTQ organizations, leaders, and media use the acronym, but in settings offering support for youth, Q can also stand for questioning (GLADD Media Reference Guide, 2022). LGBTQ is a controversial issue in regions where civil law discriminates against LGBTQ-related activities. On September 26, 2013, countries attending the United Nations ministerial meeting on the rights of LGBTQ individuals reaffirmed their commitment to work

together to combat discrimination and protect the rights of all human beings regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Asian countries have different legal positions on LGBTQ. Malaysia, like Singapore, Hong Kong, and Indonesia, has anti-sodomy laws, but Japan does not (Lee, 2016). In comparison, Taiwan has made faster progress toward the legalization of same-sex marriage in 2017 because of women’s rights movements. Lee (2016, p. 980) noted that in Taiwan, LGBTQ rights have been introduced in school textbooks since

2011, but same-sex couples are not eligible for the legal protections given to heterosexual couples. In Indonesia, although “homosexuality is not punishable by Indonesia’s national law,” provinces can have their own laws against homosexuality and cross-dressing, such as Aceh, which has a Syariah-based anti-homosexuality law that imposes a punishment of 100 lashes on individuals caught having gay sex (The ASEAN Post Team, 2021, para. 5).

In Malaysia, “cisheterosexism/cisheteronormativity” is the pervasive norm that expects all Malaysians to conform to cisgender and heterosexual manners. The official sanction against LGBTQ identity and expression grew after Malaysia achieved independence from Britain in 1957, and Islam became the official religion in 1963. Subsequently, religious (Syariah) laws were implemented for Muslims. “In Islam, only *khunsa*, or hermaphrodites, are allowed to undergo sex-change operations ... Islam does not recognize the western category of transsexual, therefore, transsexuals are regarded as nonentities” (Teh, 2008, p. 85). By and large, the public is not clear on the religious and civil laws on LGBTQ-linked activities. It is the media that transmits the religious ideology and views of homosexuality as either *halal* or *haram* (Shah, 2017), that is, permissible or not permissible for Muslims. Malaysian states have their respective laws that criminalize gender identity and expression (see Justice for Sisters, n.d.), but the laws of Negeri Sembilan seem to receive more media attention. For example, cross-dressing is punishable under Section 66 of the Syariah Criminal Enactment of the Negeri Sembilan state and the Minor Offences Act 1955 (Percetakan Nasional Malaysia Berhad-LawNet, n.d.). Same-sex relations are punishable under Syariah Criminal Offences (Federal Territories) Act 1997 (Section 25 and Section 26) (Percetakan Nasional Malaysia Berhad-LawNet, n.d.), and Malaysian Penal Code, Section 377A, 377B, and 377C (International Labour Organization, n.d.).

News coverage on LGBTQ shapes the level of acceptance towards LGBTQ, depending on the dominant frames in the news articles (Zawawi et al., 2020). Research shows that newspapers tend to portray

LGBTQ negatively. For example, Brown et al. (2018) found that a majority of newspapers in the United States are negative in their coverage of the House 1523 Bill of Mississippi State, which is seen as discriminating against LGBTQ individuals. The findings also showed that conflict is the most-used news frame, and anger is the main emotional appeal. Indonesia is the country with the largest Muslim population, and most printed and online newspapers frame LGBTQ events and issues negatively, regardless of whether they are mainstream or alternative newspapers. In Indonesia, the reporting of LGBTQ is governed by the 1999 Press Law No. 44. LGBTQ has been framed as a “sexual orientation deviation” (Maulina & Bowo, 2016), a wild culture (Zuhra, 2013), and as a social disease and an offense (Utaminingsiyas, 2017). A select number of Indonesian newspapers are sympathetic to the LGBTQ community, namely, *Media Detik*, which adopts the humanism ideology extolling readers not to judge LGBTQ individuals (Wahid & Yakut, 2018), and *The Jakarta Post* which reports the voice of activists (Sari, 2019).

Studies on LGBTQ in Malaysia have shown the difficulties and rejections encountered in their coming out experiences (Cheah & Singaravelu, 2017; Felix, 2014, 2017; Goh & Kananatu, 2019; Jerome, 2019, 2020; Jerome et al., 2021; Lim, 2015; Mokhtar et al., 2019; Singaravelu & Cheah, 2020) and the advocacy for LGBTQ rights (J. Lee, 2012; P. Lee, 2016; Pang, 2014). The focus of research in Malaysia on LGBTQ in the past decade has expanded beyond activism to include health, healthcare access, and family (see Tan et al., 2021). For example, Jerome et al. (2021) interviewed 29 Malaysians (14 heterosexuals and 15 LGBT individuals), and found that religion, gender roles, cultural practices, and values of ethnic groups influenced their acceptance or rejection of LGBT individuals. Little is known about how LGBTQ is represented in Malaysian newspapers because of the sensitivity of the issue, with the exception of Ramli et al. (2017), who found that LGBTQ is framed more negatively in *Utusan Malaysia* (published in Malay) than in *MalaysiaKini*, an alternative newspaper that publishes articles in Malay, English, and Chinese. Lee (2012, p. 178) noted that “the conservative Malay-language media would react negatively” to engaging in “discussions about homosexuality in Islamic terms.” In another framing study, Ting et al. (2021) focused on the top 30 words in articles on LGBT to identify the aspects