



**Faculty of Language and Communication**

**Examining the Discursive Construction of Tolerance towards Lesbian,  
Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) in Malaysia**

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Examining the Discursive Construction of Tolerance towards Lesbian, Gay,  
Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) in Malaysia

Ling Hsin Nie

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In fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts

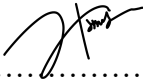
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## DECLARATION

I declare that the work in this thesis was carried out in accordance with the regulations of Universiti Malaysia Sarawak. Except where due acknowledgements have been made, the work is that of the author alone. The thesis has not been accepted for any degree and is not concurrently submitted in candidature of any other degree.



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## ABSTRACT

This study examined tolerance towards Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) individuals among Malaysians through self-reports and analysis of LGBT representation via a discourse historical approach. Questionnaire data were collected from 413 participants living in Malaysia while interviews were conducted with 20 participants (14 heterosexuals and 6 LGBT). The questionnaire results showed that the younger generation in their twenties with higher education and have personal connection with LGBT tend to report greater tolerance towards LGBT individuals. The discursive analysis of interviews revealed that most of the heterosexual participants are able to accept it if their friends and colleagues are LGBT but not if their religious leader and own children are LGBT. The heterosexual participants agreed that LGBT individuals should deserve to have the same rights in society but they neither openly support legalisation of same-sex marriage nor oppose it. On the other hand, the LGBT participants stated that they chose to come out to their friends or siblings rather than their parents who are less tolerant towards the idea of LGBT. The interviews produced a more in-depth understanding of the participants' thoughts, beliefs and experiences that underlie their attitudes towards LGBT, but the results were similar to the questionnaire results, indicating that the data collection technique does not substantially influence results on LGBT.

**Keywords:** LGBT, heterosexual, tolerance, discursive

*Penyelidikan Pembinaan Toleransi Terhadap LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, dan Transgender) di Malaysia*

**ABSTRAK**

*Kajian ini mengaji toleransi terhadap individu Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, dan Transgender (LGBT) di kalangan rakyat Malaysia melalui laporan diri dan analisis pembinaan toleransi terhadap LGBT melalui data diskursif. Data soal selidik dikumpulkan dari 413 peserta yang tinggal di Malaysia sementara temu ramah dilakukan dengan 20 peserta (14 heteroseksual dan 6 LGBT). Hasil soal selidik menunjukkan bahawa generasi muda berusia dua puluhan dengan pendidikan tinggi dan mempunyai hubungan peribadi dengan LGBT melaporkan toleransi yang lebih tinggi terhadap individu LGBT. Analisis diskursif menunjukkan bahawa kebanyakan peserta heteroseksual dapat menerimanya jika rakan dan rakan sekerja mereka adalah LGBT tetapi tidak dapat menerimanya jika pemimpin agama dan anak mereka sendiri adalah LGBT. Peserta heteroseksual bersetuju bahawa individu LGBT harus memiliki hak yang sama dalam masyarakat tetapi mereka tidak secara terbuka menyokong pengesahan perkahwinan sesama jenis atau menentanginya. Sebaliknya, peserta LGBT menyatakan bahawa mereka memilih untuk mengaku identiti LGBT mereka kepada rakan atau adik beradik mereka daripada ibu bapa mereka yang kurang bertoleransi terhadap ideologi LGBT. Temu ramah menghasilkan pemahaman yang lebih mendalam mengenai pemikiran, kepercayaan dan pengalaman peserta yang mendasari sikap mereka terhadap LGBT, tetapi hasilnya serupa dengan hasil soal selidik, menunjukkan bahawa teknik pengumpulan data tidak banyak mempengaruhi hasil pada kajian LGBT.*

**Kata kunci:** *Kesimpulan, format, saiz fon, abstrak, kata kunci*

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ATH	Attitudes Towards Homosexuality
CDA	Critical Discourse Analysis
DHA	Discourse-historical Approach
GSA	Gay-Straight Alliance
HATH	Attitudes of heterosexual toward homosexuality
JAKIM	Malaysian Islamic Development Department
KSOG	Klein Sexual Orientation Grid
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender
LGBTQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer
LGBTI	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Intersex
MSM	Men who have sex with men
NGO	Non-governmental Organisations
SOGI	Council of Europe Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity
SPSS	Statistical Package for Social Sciences



# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes the research problem, aim and objectives of the study, operational definition of terms, and significance of the study.

### 1.1 Research Problem

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) community is a group of people who are identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. They are usually known as sexual minorities because the majority of people still do not perceive lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender as a norm. Throughout the years, the LGBT community has been facing discrimination and negative stigma due to their sexual orientation and gender identity (United Nations, 2011). Back in 1776, Thomas Jefferson stated that “all men are created equal” in United States Declaration of Independence. However, the LGBT community still struggles for equality until today.

There were many past studies documenting the discrimination, harassment and other negative consequences experienced by LGBT individuals in different countries (Almeida et al., 2009; Baider, 2018; Buyantueva, 2018; Mallory et al., 2021; Woodford et al., 2013). For instance, Gocmen and Yilmaz (2016) found that the discrimination experienced by LGBT individuals in Turkey has led to several negative consequences to LGBT individuals such as dropping out of school, inability to perform in their own profession, and trauma due to “conversion therapy”. Similarly, in Asia LGBT individuals are not recognised legally (Badgett, 2014; Manalastas et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2020), and face discrimination. In the Philippines, despite considered as a gay-friendly country, LGBT individuals still constantly

face discrimination and harassment in the society, and it is mainly due to the lack of legal protection and prohibitive religious teachings (mainly Roman Catholic) against LGBT practice (Tang & Poudel, 2018). Discrimination arising from a religious stance (Gibbs & Goldbach, 2015; Roggemans et al., 2015) is expected, but other people discriminate against LGBT individuals due to phobia (Logie, Bridge, & Bridge, 2007; Moskowitz et al., 2010) and lack of knowledge (Buyantueva, 2018; Woodford et al., 2013).

The review of literature shows that many past research on attitudes towards LGBT individuals were largely focused on certain settings such as school or college (Copp & Koehler, 2017; Woodford et al., 2012), workplace (Brewster et al., 2012; Resnick & Galupo, 2019), and also health care providers (Boch, 2012; Naal et al., 2019). There is limited research on the overall population apart from Reyes et al.'s (2019) study which examined whether religiosity and gender role beliefs influence attitudes toward lesbians and gay men among 633 heterosexual Filipinos. By using a correlational design, Reyes et al. (2019) found out that there was a significant relationship between religiosity, gender role beliefs and attitudes toward lesbians and gay men where Filipinos participants with higher religiosity and more traditional gender role beliefs hold more negative attitudes toward lesbians and gay men. Attitudes towards LGBT individuals held by other segments of the population have not been studied to understand the attitudes of people who are not students and working adults.

In Malaysia, due to the conservative ideology, general observations show that many do not accept unconventional sexuality but the number of studies on LGBT is rather low. From 1998 to 2020, Tan et al. (2021) found 44 studies on LGBTQ in Malaysia, and these included both quantitative analyses and qualitative interviews. This is a small number of

publications in a span of almost two and a half decades. From their review, Tan et al. (2021) found that most of the existing Malaysian LGBTQ research focused on men who have sex with men (MSM) (Burch et al., 2018; Bourne & Weatherburn, 2017; Kanter et al., 2011), trans women (Galka et al., 2020; Rutledge et al., 2018), and gay men (Brown et al., 2016; Felix, 2014; Liow et al., 2017). However, the generalisation of results is not applicable to the LGBT group as a whole because each of them has their distinctive way of living based on their sexuality and gender identity (Higgins et al., 2016). Individuals of different sexual orientations face struggles to disclose their identities but the particular challenges could be different. Therefore, it is important to study the sub-groups of the LGBT community as the engagement with LGBT individuals can better provide significant findings which would be more relevant to wider LGBT communities (Adams et al., 2017).

In recent years, Malaysian studies on public tolerance towards LGBT has shown mixed responses towards LGBT individuals, and religious beliefs seemed to play a key role. For instance, Abdullah and Amat (2019) examined undergraduate students' (heterosexuals) understanding about LGBT individuals and their perceptions on LGBT individuals. The results showed mixed responses as there were students who disagreed with LGBT individuals' behaviour due to religious beliefs (e.g., Islam and Christianity) which view homosexual acts as going against human nature and Eastern cultural values; other students were open-minded enough to accept LGBT individuals but the proportion was small in comparison (Abdullah & Amat, 2019). In the medical field, Foong et al. (2020) found that ethnicity and religion can also heavily influence the attitudes of future doctors in treating LGBT patients. In addition, Jerome et al.'s (2021) interview with 15 LGBT individuals from Malaysia revealed the key role of religious factors in influencing public acceptance of LGBT figures on social media, but they also identified cultural norms about gender and sexuality

as another strong factor. In another study, Yeo et al. (2021) found that the attitudes towards LGBT individuals were heavily influenced by their religion. In the study, most of the heterosexual Malaysians interviewed were Muslims and Christians and they reported negative attitudes towards LGBT individuals while the sole Buddhist participant showed total acceptance of LGBT individuals. Specifically, the participants in Yeo et al. (2021) rejected LGBT individuals due to moral and biological reasons, and one said that being LGBT is just physically wrong. However, the participants who were positive towards LGBT rationalised that LGBT individuals should be treated with respect and should not be discriminated (Yeo et al., 2021). This is a small study involving 12 Malaysians and a majority of the participants were Muslims and Christians. Less is studied and known about the views of other religious groups and whether other religions play a role in influencing Malaysians' attitudes towards LGBT individuals.

In view of the past studies on receptivity towards LGBT in Malaysia and other countries, besides religion, other demographic factors such as educational background, age groups, and ethnic groups should be taken into consideration to examine Malaysians' tolerance towards LGBT individuals. Also, there is a need to understand how psychological, biological, and moral issues on LGBT are viewed on a larger scale among the Malaysian population. The need for breadth in the study of receptivity towards LGBT among Malaysians is important.

However, it is also important to achieve depth in understanding receptivity towards LGBT individuals. The depth can be attained by examining the discursive strategies used by individuals when they talk about their attitudes towards LGBT individuals as it can portray how heterosexuals view themselves in relation to LGBT individuals as "Us" and "Them". A

similar focus on LGBT individuals on themselves in relation to heterosexuals will add to understanding of the representations of the ingroup. The analysis of references, self-representation and other-representation will further reveal the depths of public tolerance towards LGBT. A study of public tolerance towards LGBT using questionnaires is a direct study of attitudes and may elicit socially desirable responses but analysis of discursive strategies is an indirect study of tolerance towards LGBT. Analysis of discursive strategies of how people talk about LGBT individuals will reveal whether or not Malaysians use these strategies to differentiate themselves from LGBT and will reveal whether Malaysians may be keeping particular less socially desirable views directly in questionnaires.

## **1.2 Aim and Objectives of the Study**

The study aimed to examine tolerance towards LGBT individuals among Malaysians through self-reports and analysis of LGBT representation via a discourse historical approach.

The specific objectives of the study were:

- 1) to determine Malaysian participants' self-reported tolerance towards LGBT individuals and social interactions with them;
- 2) to identify the factors that influence the Malaysian participants' self-reported tolerance towards LGBT individuals and social interactions with them;
- 3) to determine the influence of intergroup contact on Malaysian participants' self-reported tolerance towards LGBT individuals and social interactions with them;
- 4) to determine the influence of social knowledge on Malaysian participants' self-reported tolerance towards LGBT individuals and social interactions with them; and
- 5) to analyse the discursive strategies used by Malaysian participants when talking about their tolerance towards LGBT individuals; and

- 6) to examine whether discursive strategies used by participants to talk about LGBT individuals reflect their self-reported tolerance towards LGBT individuals in questionnaires.

Based on the objectives of the study, the alternative hypotheses tested in this study are listed here. The null hypotheses of no difference are not stated.

- 1) Age has a significant effect on tolerance towards LGBT individuals.
- 2) Age has a significant effect on tolerance towards social interaction with LGBT individuals.
- 3) Ethnic group has a significant effect on tolerance towards LGBT individuals.
- 4) Ethnic group has a significant effect on tolerance towards social interaction with LGBT individuals.
- 5) Educational background has a significant effect on tolerance towards LGBT individuals.
- 6) Educational background has a significant effect on tolerance towards social interaction with LGBT individuals.
- 7) Monthly income has a significant effect on tolerance towards LGBT individuals.
- 8) Monthly income has a significant effect on tolerance towards social interaction with LGBT individuals.
- 9) Religion has a significant effect on tolerance towards LGBT individuals.
- 10) Religion has a significant effect on tolerance towards social interaction with LGBT individuals.
- 11) Gender identity has a significant effect on tolerance towards LGBT individuals.

- 12) Gender identity has a significant effect on tolerance towards social interaction with LGBT individuals.
- 13) Sexual orientation has a significant effect on tolerance towards LGBT individuals.
- 14) Sexual orientation has a significant effect on tolerance towards social interaction with LGBT individuals.
- 15) Intergroup contact has a significant effect on tolerance towards LGBT individuals.
- 16) Intergroup contact has a significant effect on tolerance towards social interaction with LGBT individuals.
- 17) Social knowledge has a significant correlation with tolerance towards LGBT individuals.
- 18) Social knowledge has a significant correlation with tolerance towards social interaction with LGBT individuals.

### **1.3 Operational Definition of Terms**

This section will explain several important terms that will be used in this study.

#### **1.3.1 Sexual Orientation**

Klein et al. (1985) defined sexual orientation as a multidimensional, multivariable, and dynamic process. He then developed the Klein Sexual Orientation Grid (KSOG) to examine sexual orientation, which specifically measured one's sexual behaviour, sexual attraction and preference, self-identification as heterosexual or homosexual along with their lifestyles. Later Bogaert (2000) categorised sexual orientation into three types of attraction which were towards the opposite sex (heterosexuality), the same sex (homosexuality), and both sexes (bisexuality). Bogaert (2000) developed an untitled scale with one item each for attraction and behaviour dimensions in measuring one's sexual orientation.

In this study, the definition of sexual orientation is based on that used by the Council of Europe Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity (SOGI) set up in 2014 to address human rights of every individual including lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) persons. Based on their glossary, sexual orientation is known as a person's capacity to develop attraction, including intimate and sexual feelings towards another person. It can be towards a different-sex person (heterosexual), same-sex person (homosexual), or either female or male persons (bisexual). This present study assesses sexual orientation as a sexual preference and to examine how different sexual preferences can influence one's tolerance towards LGBT individuals.

### **1.3.2 Heterosexuals**

According to Bohan (1996, p. 14), heterosexuals can be defined as “an affectional and sexual orientation toward members of the other sex”. Similarly, Haizlip (2009) stated that heterosexuals are persons who have a predominant sexual attraction towards individuals of the opposite gender. Following Haizlip (2009), a heterosexual is defined as a person who has a sexual preference towards opposite sex and indicate themselves as “heterosexual” in the demographic section of the questionnaire used in the present study.

### **1.3.3 LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender)**

LGBT is the acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender, and this term is used broadly in this study to include these four sexual orientations. According to the definition provided by Choudhuri et al. (2012), lesbians are women whose is sexually attracted to the same sex. Gay is a man who is sexually attracted to men. Lesbian and gay are commonly known as having a homosexual sexual orientation. Bisexuals are people who have sexual response to both female and male. Lastly, transgender is the term used to refer