Social Media Roles in Spreading LGBT Movements in Malaysia

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Abstract

This study examines how social media play roles in spreading LGBT movements in Malaysia, as well as how their potential in influencing Malaysian minds on the LGBT movements. In this study, the uses and gratifications theory applied to understand how the LGBT communities use social media as way to communicate and disseminate information in order to achieve their needs and gratifications. This study has applied qualitative approach, especially using in-depth interview and observation to the social media contents of the LGBT communities. This study finds that LGBT movements are significantly growing in Malaysia. However, due to the fact of conservative Malaysian society, the LGBT communities have optimized social media for spreading the information, sharing experiences, also communicating and engaging with another LGBT movements and communities. The use of social media comes from the nature of social media itself, namely free, open, easy and cheap access, as well as no regulatory body controls their contents. In this social media movement, the use of hashtags is very important to classify their movements, to easily communicate under certain topics, to gain new followers, as well as to maintain the current members. This study also finds that social media have played important roles in disseminating LGBT information in Malaysia, as well as in shaping the minds of Malaysians along with the spreading of LGBT movements in Malaysia.

Keywords: *LGBT movement; social media; uses and gratification; conservative society; social media hashtags.*

1. Introduction

LGBT is a major issue which has been discussed all over the world including Malaysia. Some have argued that it has been raised from the human rights concept, freedom to live and practice sexual preference, even though it is perceived unconventional by the religious society (Sani, Owoyemi & Mangsor, 2014).

In this age of new media, LGBT culture has been disseminated globally. Social media, such as Twitter, have been the epicenter of spreading the LGBT culture and movements. Social media are becoming the tool to encourage the LGBT community to come out and join the movement in order to make their voices heard and wanting other people to accept their choices. In LGBT movement's context, the movement is represented as the union of gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people (Elliott, 2015). The movements are a part of the agenda that LGBT community emphasizes on, such as the freedom to love and acceptance of their choices. They aim to increase the people's rights to identify themselves as lesbian or gay, includes to admit the entitlements, such as marriage (Armstrong & Bernstein, 2008).

In Malaysia, LGBT is considered to be a taboo subject, due to strict Islamic practices and laws. In this country, LGBT people gain no support whatsoever and become target of social bullying. Due to such condition, the LGBT community turns to social media in spreading information about their movements. They rely on social media to establish the connection to the people about their lifestyle and movements. This study aims to see how social media are used to spread the LGBT movements in Malaysia, an Islamic majority country that views LGBT as social taboo. This begs to the following questions, how do social media play roles in spreading LGBT movements in Malaysia, and how are social media's potential in influencing Malaysian minds on the LGBT movements?

2. Theoretical perspective

A substantial body of research has found out that LGBT individuals use social media to issue challenges that they faced in their daily lives, such as isolated from society and difficulties in finding partners (Blackwell, et al., 2016). Social media allow space for fit in and acceptance, for information circulation, demonstration mobilization, along with romantic partner search (Vickery, 2016). Calzo & Ward (2009) study towards the attitudes of homosexuality in all media platforms found that greatest influence came from many media platforms, not just one. Social media become tools to fast-track the change processes, especially related to the social awareness promotion (Chauhan & Shukla, 2016).

This study applied uses and gratification theory. This theory believes that users are having certain needs through using the social media, such as information sources, observing events, yearning status, and connectivity functions (Bonds-Raacke, 2008). Many media platforms strive for users' attention, and the choice is in the audience side, based on the fulfillment of their needs (Chen, 2011). In the tradition of mass communication field, this theory is used to observe and examine the issue on how people choose certain types of media, based on their needs and the benefits or gratifications they receive from the media (Musa, Azmi & Ismail, 2015). Primary concern of the theory is with the individuals' media usage, and hence accentuates the individual importance (Bonds-Raacke, 2008).

In this study, the uses and gratifications theory suits the purposes of this study as the LGBT communities use social media as way to communicate and disseminate information for another LGBT communities in Malaysia in order to achieve their needs and gratifications.

3. Method

The study was based on a qualitative approach. Qualitative research is an activity that is situated to which pinpoints the spectator in the world (Creswell, 2007). The interpretive paradigm is subjected with views the world as it is from individuals subjective experiences (Thomas, 2010). The researcher employed in-depth interview and observation into the social media sites, such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, in order to get the first-hand experience on how the LGBT communities communicate in social media, as well as how the LGBT movements being spread in social media.

The informants of this study were 10 people, purposively chosen as they have experience and knowledge on the issue of

LGBT movements and social media roles in propagating LGBT movements in Malaysia. It was a purposive sampling, applied when the researcher uses a widespread range of methods to discover all probable cases of a highly definite and tough to reach population (Neumann, 2011). The instrument of this research was in-depth interview. The questions were prepared by an interview protocol and questions were laid out in accordance to the research issues, namely LGBT in Malaysia, LGBT movements in Malaysia, and social media roles in propagating LGBT in Malaysia. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Afterwards, the interviews were then given back to the informants in order to avoid any misunderstandings, to get their approval, and to check whether they want to change their answers. In the data analysis step, this study employed NVivo software to classify the answers according to the themes of the study.

4.   LGBT movements in Malaysia

Malaysian homosexuals are perceived as outcast whereas lesbians and gays gain no support whatsoever and became target of bullying in the society (Ting, Kwin & Xinyi, 2016). LGBT individuals are perceived as abnormal and sub-human, constantly occurring police raids and immediate censorship of media contents (Rehman & Polymenopoulou, 2013).

Homosexuality is deemed to be illegal in Malaysia to which the country rejects unions of same-sex and has the laws that discriminate the gender identity and sexual orientation (Alagappar & Kaur, 2009). Sexual behaviors and identities attract large attention and sexually normative behavior is conservatively anticipated within the society (Felix, 2014). Strict measures are conducted in Malaysia disallowing LGBT, even though some have resisted that such prohibition has encroached basic human rights principles, because of which some would believe that Malaysia is not advocating on basic human rights (Muhammed & Amuda, 2018).

JAKIM discovered that there are now 310,000 of LGBT people in Malaysia as compared to 173,000 in 2013 (Babulal, 2018). The number is relatively small in comparison to the Malaysian population, but it is significantly growing. Mohd & Radzuwan (2016) noted that there are also pro-LGBT groups supporting for LGBT movement and cultures. Love Wins, Gay

Pride, and 'Seksualiti Merdeka' movements are such examples of the LGBT movement that is rapidly growing in Malaysia. The #LoveWins, a worldwide scale movement, is also associated with the LGBT as it celebrates the freedom of people to love whoever they wish to.

Seksualiti Merdeka (sexuality independence) is the most prominent LGBT movement in Malaysia. They work to generate platforms to voice Malaysian LGBT community, to bid their narratives, views, histories, and future dreams (Independent Voices, 2018). Chinese-Malaysian LGBT activist and artist, Pang Khee Teik, and his colleagues, organize a set of LGBT-themed talks in English, LGBT workshops, screenings of films and performances based on sexuality rights (Ng, 2018). Sa'dan, Awang & Farhana (2018) noted that protests from LGBT communities and their supporters to pushed Malaysian to stop the ban on Seksualiti Merdeka and its events have emerge more tension in the society and have aggravated protests and demonstrations from people who are against the LGBT movements. An informant has explained about Seksualiti Merdeka:

> Seksualiti Merdeka as I remembered from my experience is that they use social media to get their movements and their points across and also gathering up their community (Mus, 23).

5.   LGBT movements and social media in Malaysia

The study finds that LGBT movement in Malaysia has shown to have a strong relationship with social media. According to the interviews, the informants believe that social media have played roles in disseminating information about movements relating to the LGBT community in Malaysia. Social media have also played important part in shaping the minds of Malaysians along with the spreading of LGBT movements in Malaysia. It confirms Calzo & Ward (2009) who have stated that media can influence the perception of LGBT.

In a society to which LGBT is considered to be a taboo subject, the LGBT community relied on social media to communicate with other LGBT peers due to the fact that the society, such as Malaysian society, is deeply rooted to religious teachings, and the majority of people believe that being a part of the LGBT

community is sinful (Felix, 2014). This study has also confirmed Felix (2014) that the LGBT community in Malaysia should conform with the norm of society, in which any deviation of the norms would be considered to immoral. Along with that, the informants believe that the LGBT community is not suitable for the Malaysian society, therefore they have switched to the social media for spreading the information, sharing experiences, also engaging with another LGBT movement and community.

> Social media has becoming this place where anyone, including the LGBT community to communicate with and share their feelings and experiences more as they can find people like them (Ira, 28).

> In our country, LGBT people are not considered to be a part of them, so they go to social media to talk to the people who understand them and share their own stories (Tyra, 26).

> I think that due to the low response, the LGBT community go to social media to express themselves and their movements due to Malaysia's culture (Amirul, 26).

> I think that the LGBT community go to social media as they cannot speak up out loud about who they are (Arma, 26).

According to the informants, social media are very easy to access, due the fact that you only need to have an internet connection and an account to either Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. The informants believe that social media do play a part in spreading the LGBT movements due to their free and open access. Social media, unlike the traditional media, have no governing body to filter and control the post. Due to this nature, the LGBT communities have utilized social media to spread their messages across to their intended audience. Nowadays, more and more people are tweeting how proud they are to be gay, lesbian and transsexual, even they incorporate it into their social media account, posting pictures on Instagram about LGBT, or sharing about the LGBT movements in Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

> Social media in my opinion is free and anyone can use it (Khai, 26).

> I think that social media is a big thing as in your research, the LGBT people benefited in using social media because of there is no one stopping them to express themselves (Yai, 26).

Observation of this study showcases that LGBT movements are discussed by the usage of hashtags, as it provides a specific keyword to get into, by just one click people can get into the discussions, such as hashtag #LoveWins, #GayProde, or #SeksualitiMerdeka. All news, tweets and posts are compiled within one specific hashtag, people would find it easier to communicate and learn about the LGBT movements based on hashtags. The hashtags also function to classify their movements in order to gain new followers and to maintain current ones by letting them know that people follow these hashtags.

> LGBT community go to social media as it is, I think a safe place for them to express themselves and their movements as well that in example social media has hashtags for topics (Nazrin, 25).

Social media have become place where the LGBT community members communicate each others. Clementi (2012) said that social media have been used to showcase the LGBT community's personal experience and what the movement have experienced as well. Social media have become gathering places for all the LGBT communities to speak up about their experiences being a part of LGBT community in Malaysia, so that they believe that they are not alone in this country (Clementi, 2012). In social media, communicate with LGBT activists is easier, keep up to date with the news of the movement, and be a part of the LGBT movements as well.

6. Conclusion

In Malaysia, LGBT is perceived as a social illness, they gain no support whatsoever and became target of bullying in the society. In the level of regulation, Malaysia rejects unions of same-sex and has strong laws that discriminate the gender identity and sexual orientation. However, nowadays LGBT movements are

significantly growing in Malaysia.

Due to the fact of conservative Malaysian society, the LGBT communities have switched to the social media as main tools for spreading the information, sharing experiences, also communicating and engaging with another LGBT movements and communities. This study concludes that social media have played important roles in disseminating LGBT information in Malaysia, as well as in shaping the minds of Malaysians along with the spreading of LGBT movements in Malaysia.

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This study also concludes that social media have maintained the groups' self confidence and network, as they believe that they are not alone in such conservative country. Social media have become gathering places for all LGBT communities to speak up about their experiences being a part of LGBT community in Malaysia. The use of social media comes from the nature of social media itself, namely free and open access, easy and cheap access, and no regulatory body controls their contents. This study also finds that the use of hashtags is very important in the LGBT movements in social media. The hashtags function to classify their movements, to easily communicate under certain topics, to gain new followers, as well as to maintain the current members.

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