

Social Media in Propagating Influence on Spreading LGBT Movements in Malaysia

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Abstract

LGBT is an acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender. The purpose of this study is to examine social media's role in propagating influence on spreading LGBT movements in Malaysia. Malaysia is a conservative country; therefore, LGBT is considered to be as a tabooed subject in which LGBT community has kept their community hidden among the citizens in Malaysia. LGBT movements are limited and small and they depend on social media to propagate the movements. The usage of hashtags in social media has been a way of promoting and communication among the LGBT community in Malaysia in hopes of spreading LGBT movements in Malaysia. Seksualiti Merdeka is one such LGBT movement in Malaysia along with #LoveWins movement to seek acceptance towards the ideology of LGBT among the society in Malaysia. A qualitative phenomenological study is done towards 10 respondents along with the observation within social media such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram for posts that is related to LGBT movements. Results are then recorded, transcribed and analyzed. The interview for the data was conducted on 1st January to 10th of January. An analysis of the findings suggests that social media does play a role in spreading LGBT movements in Malaysia therefore social media plays a role in disseminating information and influence for the LGBT movements in Malaysia.

Keywords: LGBT; Social Media; LGBT Movements in Malaysia;

1.0 INTRODUCTION

LGBT is the acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender. In this era of new media, LGBT culture has been disseminated in terms of products by the media itself whether it is movies, television, literature and social media. Therefore, a lot of people nowadays are more open in accepting the LGBT culture wholly and embracing it. This has led to the emergence of LGBT movements as such. The LGBT movement aims to increase the human's rights to identify themselves as lesbian or gay, including intensifying admittance to the entitlements to material which is marriage (Armstrong & Bernstein, 2008). Homosexuality is deemed to be illegal in Malaysia in which the country rejects unions of safe sex or laws on antidiscrimination for gender identity or sexual orientation (Alagappar & Kaur, 2009).

In the context of LGBT movement, it is represented as the union of gay men, lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people which is sometimes loose (Elliott, 2015). Social media, such as Twitter has been the epicenter of spreading the LGBT culture and movements. In Twitter, they employ the usage of hashtags to classify their movements in order to gain new followers and maintaining current ones by letting them know that people do follow these hashtags. #LoveWins and #GayPride are hashtags linking to popular movements such as the love wins movement and the gay pride. These movements are a part of the agenda that LGBT community wishes to

emphasize such as the freedom to love and acceptance of their sexual orientation. Seksualiti Merdeka is one of the LGBT movements in Malaysia. JAKIM discovered that there are now 310,000 LGBT people in Malaysia as compared to 173,000 in 2013 (Babulal, 2018). The numbers are relatively small in comparison to the entire population of Malaysia but it is growing steadily. Therefore, the movements in Malaysia are also growing in and they are assisted by social media.

In America, the mindset of the citizens has shifted in embracing the LGBT movements there, in contrast to Malaysia. In most Asian countries, homosexuality is something that is considered to be a tabooed subject and the activities are discrete and more closeted. Malaysian homosexuals were perceived as outcasts whereas lesbians and gays gain no support whatsoever and became targets of bullying in the society (Ting, Kwin, & Xinyi, 2016). Some would believe that Malaysia is not advocating on basic human rights.

Social media has become a shining beacon for the LGBT community to communicate with one another, with the use of hashtags, the LGBT community is able to assemble and march together according to the purpose of the movements. In Malaysia, LGBT is not welcomed and majority from the community lurks in the shadows in order to avoid persecution and public discrimination. Strict measures have been taken in Malaysia to prevent LGBT from spreading even though some have resisted the prohibition due it encroaching basic human rights principles (Ali Muhammed & Amuda, 2018)

1.1 Problem Statement

LGBT movements are growing in all parts of the world. Love Wins, Gay Pride and Seksualiti Merdeka movements are examples of the LGBT movements that are rapidly growing in influence across the social media in Malaysia. Social media is used as the tool to encourage the LGBT community to come out and join the movements in order to make their voices be heard in both the internet and on the outside world. The purpose of these movements is that they want to make their voices heard and wanting other people to accept their sexual orientation. Malaysia is a country that deemed homosexuality as a taboo subject due to the country following strict Islamic practices and laws.

In Malaysia, sexual behaviors and identities attract a large attention and sexually normative behavior is anticipated in a society that is conservative which befits the region of Asia (Felix, 2014). Thus, social media has become a place where the LGBT community connects with each other who share the same beliefs as them. Hence, LGBT movements are limited to small movements but ever present in the realm of social media.

This study is done to see how social media is utilized in spreading the LGBT movements in a country that is deep-rooted to religion that it is deemed forbidden for homosexuality to be practiced. This begs the questions of; how do social media play a role in spreading LGBT movements in Malaysia and to see what are the potential of social media in influencing the minds of Malaysians towards the LGBT movements. Along with that, the lack of studies about LGBT movements in Malaysia also inspires the need for this study.

One of the reasons why this study is conducted is to see how social media propagates LGBT movements in a country that is very conservative and have a different mindset than those in the western countries such as the United States that accepted the movements.

1.2 Research Objectives

1. To identify how social media plays a role in spreading LGBT movements in Malaysia
2. To recognize social media's potential in influencing Malaysian minds on the LGBT movements

1.3 Research Questions

1. How do social media play a role in spreading LGBT movements in Malaysia?
2. What are the social media's potential in influencing Malaysian minds on the LGBT movements?

1.4 Purpose of the study

The purpose of the study is to see how social media plays a role in propagating influence on spreading LGBT movements in Malaysia. Malaysians often disassociate themselves with such issue due to the conservative nature of the society. In order to spread the LGBT movements in Malaysia, the LGBT community turns to social media to spread information about their movements to the LGBT community in Malaysia.

This study is significant because homosexuality is a phenomenon that impacted worldwide and the communities are facing problems in the world due to the choices of being a part of the community. With the rise of social media, the LGBT community relies on the social media to establish a connection to the people about their lifestyle and movements. Hence, social media is used to propagate information about their community to a society that is conservative in nature which is Malaysia.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 LGBT in Malaysia

Malaysian homosexuals were perceived as outcasts where the lesbians and gays gain no support whatsoever and became target of bullying in the society (Ting, Kwin, & Xinyi, 2016). Due to the difference in sexuality and preference, the LGBT community in Malaysia often become a target of bullying and discriminated due to the conservative nature of Malaysia and Islamic practices. Strict actions have been taken in Malaysia in preventing LGBT even though some have resisted the prohibition due to it encroaching basic human rights principles (Ali Muhammed & Amuda, 2018) LGBT individuals are perceived as abnormal and sub-human, constantly occurring police raids, and immediate censorship of media to advocate for LGBT rights should there be an attempt (Rehman & Polymenopoulou, 2013).

In Malaysia, sexual behaviors and identities attract a large attention and sexually normative behavior is anticipated in a society that is conservative which befits the region of Asia (Felix, 2014). LGBT could be described as a major issue which has been discussed all over the world including Malaysia, some have argued that it is an issue that has been raised from the human rights concept, freedom to live and practice sexual preference even though it is unconventionally acknowledged by the society that is large and the religion that it practices (Ahmad Zaharuddin Sani, Owoyemi, & Mangsor, 2014). In Malaysia, individuals of LGBT are frequently indicted by religious authorities (Rehman & Polymenopoulou, 2013) and they are mainly strict with transvestites and cross-dressers. (Rehman & Polymenopoulou, 2013).

2.2 LGBT Movements in Malaysia

(Mohd & Radzuwan, 2016) notes that there are groups of pro-LGBT that champion for LGBT movement and cultures for legalization and promotion. Seksualiti Merdeka ('Sexuality Independence') is the most prominent LGBT event in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Chinese-Malaysian LGBT activist and artist, Pang Khee Teik, and his colleagues organized a set of LGBT-themed talks in English, LGBT workshops, screenings of films and performances based on sexuality rights (Ng, 2018). Seksualiti Merdeka aims to generate platforms to permit the voices of Malaysian LGBT community, to bid their narratives, their views, their own histories, and Seksualiti Merdeka future dreams (Independent Voices, 2018). (Sa'dan, Awang, & Nur Farhana, 2018) noted that protests from LGBT communities and their supporters in pressuring Malaysians to lift the ban on Seksualiti Merdeka and its events which leads to more tension in the social environment and aggravate counter protest and demonstrations by people of Malaysia who are against the LGBT movements. LGBT movements in Malaysia are limited due to the conservative culture of Malaysia and the LGBT community is forced to keep their movements small and discreet from the eyes of the society due to the fear of being condemned by the society. #LoveWins movement is also associated with the LGBT movement as it celebrates the freedom of people to love whoever they wish to. The #LoveWins movement has a worldwide participation from the LGBT community.

2.3 Social Media's role in propagating LGBT influence

A substantial body of research has found out that LGBT individuals use social media to issue challenges that they face in their daily lives, such as isolation and discrimination from society and difficulty in finding partners (Blackwell, et al., 2016). Authentic reports on LGBT youths showcased their lives being shared to explain the dangers of immediate social media usage (Clementi, 2012). Social media allows space to fit in, acceptance, for information circulation, demonstration mobilization, along with romantic partner search (Vickery, 2016). Social media since then has become a voice for LGBT community to express themselves through the usage of hashtags in order to communicate with people with similar experience as them. Alongside that, social media has come this way in propagating LGBT influence in a way that is small but effective in shaping the minds of Malaysian citizens. Due to the conservative nature of Malaysia, the LGBT community is not as prominent as in the West where they have embraced the LGBT as part of their society whereas in Malaysia, LGBT stories are only shared within the confinement of social media. In (Calzo & Ward, 2009) study towards the attitudes of homosexuality all over the media, they learned that the greatest influence came from many platforms and not just one. Social Media becomes a tool to fast-track the change process which social awareness promotion and society advertising (Chauhan & Shukla, 2016).

2.4 Uses and Gratifications Theory

The main functions of uses and gratifications theory such as “observing events,” “posting functions that is social,” and “to have the feeling of connectivity” indicate that users are having the necessity of using social media websites as an information source (Bonds-Raacke, 2008). Moreover, Uses & Gratifications stated that numerous media strive for users’ attention, and medium of choice in the members that suits their requirements, such as a yearning for status, connection that reaches to emotions, and information (Chen, 2011). Researchers in Mass communication are appropriating the Uses and Gratifications Theory to observe, enlighten, and deliver answers to certain types of media has been used by people along with the benefits or gratifications they receive after (Musa, Azmi, & Ismail, 2015). Primary concerns of the uses and gratifications theory is with the individuals’ media usage (social networking sites), and hence accentuates the individual importance (Bonds-Raacke, 2008)

In terms of the theory usage for this study, the Uses and Gratifications theory suits this study as the LGBT community uses social media as way to communicate and disseminate information for the other LGBT community in Malaysia in order to suit their gratifications as they believe that social media is the way of communication due to the conservative culture of Malaysia that whoever is the part of the community will be ostracized due to the difference in sexual orientation and lifestyle.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design

The research is done in a qualitative phenomenology method. Qualitative research is an activity that is situated to pinpoint the spectator in the world (Creswell, 2007). (Creswell, 2007) notes that phenomenology delivers a better understanding of a phenomenon which has several individuals with similar experiences. The interpretive paradigm is subjected and views the world as it is from individual’s experience that is subjective (Thomas, 2010). The researcher will employ the in-depth interview method for the study. Also, the researcher will employ the usage of observation into the social media sites in order to get first-hand experience on how the LGBT community communicate in the social media along with how the LGBT movements being spread in social media.

3.2 Population and Sample of the study

The population of the study will be 10 respondents. These 10 respondents are carefully picked with the requirement of being part of LGBT society themselves. These respondents are also asked for their experience and the knowledge on how social media can propagate LGBT movements in Malaysia. It is a purposive sampling. Sample is described a small set of cases to which has been selected from a large pool and population that it generalizes to (Neumann, 2011). Purposive sampling is used 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).

3.3 Research Instrument

The instrument of this research is by in-depth interview. The questions are prepared using an interview protocol and questions are laid out in accordance to the variables in which the researcher employs for the research. The researcher will ask three questions in relation to the variables that are present in this research. The questions are based on the LGBT in Malaysia, LGBT movements in Malaysia and Social media propagating LGBT influence in Malaysia. The interview is recorded and transcribed for the respondents to review and reconfirm their answers in order to avoid any transcribing errors.

3.4 Method of Data Collection

The data collection is done by recording the interview and transcribing the interview. Afterwards, the interview is then given back to the respondents in order to get their approval and check whether that there are changes in the respondents' answers. The researcher employed the usage of NVivo software. The NVivo software is used to aid the researcher in classifying the answers according to the themes of the study. In which the data analysis process in accordance to the themes and check to see the responses of the respondents' tally with the themes of the study. Furthermore, the researcher also observed through the social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram in order to experience first hand on how the LGBT society communicates or spread information about their movements.

4.0 FINDINGS

The findings deducted from the interview and observation in the social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram have shown the LGBT movements in Malaysia to have a strong relationship with social media. According to the interviews that have been conducted, the respondents believe that social media do play a part in shaping the minds of Malaysians along with the spreading of LGBT movements in Malaysia. The respondents believe that social media do play a part in spreading the LGBT movements through the easy accessibility of social media and the convenience of social media. (Babulal, 2018) article notes that the number of LGBT community in Malaysia continues to rise from 173,000 to 310,000 showing that the LGBT community in Malaysia is growing and therefore aim to spread awareness on their movements in order to grab the attention of other homosexuals in Malaysia and also getting the LGBT movements across to the Malaysians.

Social media does display a reach in which it encompasses across the nation. In relation to the west, the LGBT movements often got into the trending page due to the sheer high numbers of people tweeting and posting about it in Facebook and Twitter. In comparison to Malaysian social media atmosphere, the response is relatively low. Due to the conservative nature of Malaysia, there are some presence of the LGBT community and movements in Malaysia but it is relatively small such as the Seksualiti Merdeka movement. In Malaysia, sexual behaviors and identities attracts a large attention and sexually normative behavior is anticipated in a society that is conservative which befits the region of Asia (Felix, 2014). As stated by (Felix, 2014), the LGBT community in Malaysia should conform with the norm of society and any deviation of the norms would be considered to immoral and that respondents of the study has stated it as well in supports (Felix, 2014) study. Along with that, the respondents believe that the LGBT community is not suitable for the society in Malaysia therefore, the social media is used as a medium for spreading the information, sharing experiences and also engage with the LGBT movement and community.

Social media is easy to access according to the respondents due the fact the social media accessibility is rather easy due to the fact that you only need to have an internet connection and an account for Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. Real reports show that youths of LGBT showcasing their own lives were shared to explain the dangers of immediate social media usage (Clementi, 2012). Evident to the response, what (Clementi, 2012) said that social media has been used to showcase the LGBT community's personal experience and what the movement have experienced as well. In Malaysia, despite the conservative culture to which LGBT is a tabooed subject, the LGBT community has used social media as way to spread movements such as Seksualiti Merdeka, Love Wins and Gay Pride movement in an easier a way as compared to the traditional way which marching in areas of the city.

Social media in the respondents' eyes and minds can be described as free and uncontrolled in terms of the gatekeeping. Social media unlike the traditional media has no one governing body to filter and control the posting. Due to the nature of the internet being free and without having a body to control it fully, the LGBT community and the movements utilize the social media as a way to spread their messages across to their intended audience. In social media landscape, the nature of the social media being free allows LGBT movements to spread even easier.

5.0 DISCUSSION

Based on the findings and the previous studies, the LGBT movements in Malaysia is relatively small but it is present. Social media is the tool that the LGBT community fully utilizes in order to gain attention from others in the same community in Malaysia. Therefore, the social media plays a role in disseminating information about movements relating to the LGBT community in Malaysia. LGBT movements such as Seksualiti Merdeka, #LoveWins and Gay Pride movement has often been brought up in the social media landscape. Social media in a way has become a gathering place for the LGBT community in Malaysia. The results prove (Calzo & Ward, 2009) study on media influence on the perception of LGBT which is applied in today's new technology, the social media. (Babulal, 2018) JAKIM discovered that there were now 310,000 of LGBT people in Malaysia as compared to 173,000 in 2013. Given how the number of the LGBT community in Malaysia is rising, social media has become a tool in order to spread influence and changing the perception of Malaysians towards the LGBT movements.

In a society to which homosexuality is considered to be a tabooed subject, the LGBT community relied on social media to communicate with other LGBT peers due to the fact the Malaysian society is deep-rooted to religion and the majority of people believe that being a part of the LGBT community is sinful which goes along with the study conducted by (Felix, 2014). Despite it all, social media is now a popular gathering place for the LGBT community and provide a chance to speak up about their experiences in being a part of LGBT community in Malaysia, the outcomes of being a part of the LGBT community and giving a chance for other people in the LGBT community to speak up about their experience as they believe that they are not alone in this country in which was highlighted by (Clementi, 2012) article. Social media has become a platform for the LGBT community due to the fact that in social media, communicating 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. An observation in the social media showcases that the LGBT movements is discussed by the usage of hashtags as these provide a specific topic to get into by just one click people can get into the discussions. As an example, one can click #LoveWins or #SeksualitiMerdeka and get instant access and information because of all the appropriate information is gathered within one specific hashtag. 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 that only social media is able to provide.

Social media allows respondents to speak up more freely as its nature of no gatekeepers allows the LGBT community a chance for other LGBT peers to join in and share their experiences with them. In relation to (Vickery, 2016) study, social media allows space to fit in and acceptance, circulation of information, demonstration mobilization, along with romantic partner search. Nowadays, more and more people are tweeting on how proud they are to be gay, lesbian and transsexual and even incorporating it into their social media bios, posting pictures on Instagram about LGBT and sharing about the LGBT movements in Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. In terms of the relevance of the theory that has been used in this study which is the Uses and Gratifications theory, the LGBT community uses social media in order to communicate and spread the words of the community and the movement towards of the Malaysian society to which LGBT has the gratifications. This answers the research objectives and questions on how social media spread the LGBT movements in Malaysia while also recognizing social media's potential in influencing Malaysian minds on the LGBT movements.

5.1 Limitations of the study

There are several limitations in this study. The first one being that there is a lack of journals/literature for the study. Since LGBT culture is considered as a tabooed and forbidden subject in Malaysia, there are a lack of journals and studies about LGBT in Malaysia. The conservative culture in Malaysia has garnered this deficit of study for LGBT. But there are some LGBT studies in which several journals which are produced by Malaysians has been published.

Another limitation is some of the respondents are a bit shy and unwilling to disclose about their experiences about being in the LBGT community but there are some who are willing to share about their experiences about joining the LBGT movements and share about their knowledge about the movements.

6.0 CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the LBGT community in Malaysia is not as prominent the west but it cannot be denied that the LBGT presence in Malaysia is there and there are indeed LBGT movements in Malaysia. Case in turn, the Seksualiti Merdeka, Love Wins and the Gay Pride movements that has been done in Malaysia. Social media is tool to the spreading of the LBGT movements in Malaysia. Given that the LBGT movement in Malaysia is rather small in comparison to the west due to the society that is deep-rooted to religion, the LBGT community became hidden but with the rise of global LBGT community and movements, more and more people in the LBGT society gain confidence in expressing themselves based of the beliefs that they are free to express themselves and with social media providing them the freedom to express, the ease of accessibility and the lack of gatekeeping in social media.

In Malaysia, LBGT is considered to be a taboo subject and whoever is a part of the LBGT community will be perceived as infidels and sinners. Therefore, social media has become a tool to spread the LBGT influence and culture in Malaysia. Nowadays, more and more people are coming out as gay, lesbian and transsexual. Given how the western cultures has embraced the idea of LBGT into their daily lives, LBGT community in Malaysia hopes to follow suit and wants to spread the influence and culture of the LBGT by using social media as a medium to spread news and information about LBGT movements in hopes that Malaysia is as accepting as the western cultures.

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