

## Deconstructing Stigmatisation by Heterosexuals of LGBT Against the Backdrop of Religion in Malaysia

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### Abstract

The study focussed on deconstructing heterosexuals' stigmatisation of LGBT in the context of religion in Malaysia. The qualitative study involved semi-structured interviews with 21 heterosexuals (Buddhist, Christian, Muslim). The interview questions focussed on societal and personal views of LGBT. Thematic analysis of interview transcripts totalling 30,488 words showed the lay perspective on the construction of homosexuality in terms of personal choice, situational factors, and ideologies of stigma. The participants were able to empathize with personal choice only because they perceived the LGBT individuals had no chance of reverting to a so-called normal identity. The participants re-animated, rehearsed and re-presented the ideological defence of heterosexuality through repeated stigmatisation of difference and non-conformity in the context of the normative religious beliefs. They also perceived homosexuals as a potential threat to the morality of the norm-compliant population, prone to emotional and psychological instability, and a threat to the veneer of normalcy. The study showed that such popular theorising is not a neutral instrument of knowledge but one that carries ideological power in normalizing stigma towards LGBT.

**Keywords:** *LGBT, homosexual, heterosexual, stigma, social construction, ideologies*

### Introduction

In Malaysia, lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people experience state-backed discrimination which threatens their rights (Human Rights Watch, 2022). Research indicates that LGBT individuals in Malaysia face discrimination from both the legal and religious quarters, not to mention social rejection by heterosexuals. Zainon et al.'s (2018) interviews showed that the LGBT participants struggled between complying with the dominant heterosexual ideology and their desire to come out as homosexuals. The four Muslim LGBT participants interviewed by Shamsudin and Ghazali (2011) constructed themselves ("us") versus heterosexuals ("them") who considered them as having gone astray from their religion. Similarly, the four LGBT participants in Zulkffli and Ab Rashid's (2019) study tried to undermine the mainstream interpretation that the homosexual sexual act is sinful in Islam.

LGBT activity is criminalized in Malaysia because of religious and civil laws that ban crossdressing and same-sex relations (Human Rights Watch, 2022). The Syariah (Shariah) law is an Islamic religious law that can be used to apprehend LGBT individuals: Section 25 and Section 26 of Syariah Criminal Offences (Federal Territories) Act 1997 covers sexual intercourse between a man and a woman out of wedlock and same-sex relations (Lee, 2012, p. 172). Section 28 can be used to charge transvestites who are caught wearing women's attire or posing as a woman for "immoral purposes" in public. The caning sentence has been meted two times in Malaysia, once by the Terengganu State in 2018 and the second time by the Selangor Sharia (Syariah) Court in 2019 (Human Rights Watch, 2021). In view of the religious sanctions of the dominant religion in Malaysia against LGBT, it is important to study how heterosexuals bring in the religious argument to stigmatize LGBT individuals.

Malaysian civil law does not mention LGBT, although homosexual practice "is codified under the heading of Unnatural Offence of the Penal Code Act 574" (Mallow & Yeoh, 2019, p. 83). In fact, same-sex relations are punishable under Penal Code Section 377A, 377B and 377C and cross-dressing is punishable under the Minor Offences Act 1955. "In Islam, only khunsa, or hermaphrodites, are allowed

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to undergo sex-change operations ... Islam does not recognize the western category of transsexual, therefore, transsexuals are regarded as nonentities” (Teh, 2008, p. 85).

In the Western context, where discrimination is structurally measured and defined, it is possible to identify stigma as an objective reality. Hence, research on LGBT in Western scholarship has moved on from the aspects of social knowledge and perception to the examination of institutional, policies and legal frameworks that sustain discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. Hasenbush et al. (2014) found that in states in the Midwest, Mountains, and South, which do not offer legal protection for LGBT persons, LGBT individuals experience greater employment vulnerability. Hasenbush et al. (2014) also found that the social acceptance towards LGBT is lower, thus, reducing the pressure to address inequality and disparity between heterosexuals and the LGBT individuals. By addressing the “structural stigma,” defined as “societal-level conditions, cultural norms and institutional practices that constrain the opportunities, resources and well-being for stigmatised population,” the collective struggle for LGBT recognition is moved into political arena, where laws, policies, and resources are brought to bear to address discrimination objectively (Hasenbush et al., 2014, p. 5).

In Malaysia, the legal and religious sanctions against LGBT are interconnected because Islam is the official religion in Malaysia. The Quran decries the lewdness of same-sex relations in Surah 26:165 and Surah 7:80–81. Therefore, the civil and religious law penalize same-sex relations. Christianity also has explicit teachings against same-sex relations, and some of the Bible verses are found in Genesis 5:2, Leviticus 18:22, Leviticus 20: 13, and Romans 1:26–27. The main biblical exhortation is that God created human beings male and female and same-sex relations are described as detestable. The Bible records God punishing the men of Sodom and Gomorrah for practising homosexuality. Early Buddhism did not place any stigma on homosexual relations, and this is inferred from the silence on it (Coleman, 2002). Later some Buddhist texts, such as the Abhidharma, consider non-vaginal sex as sexual misconduct but this view is not based on what Buddha said (Chodron, 2008). Sikhism has no definite teachings on homosexuality and the Sikh scripture makes no explicit mention of homosexuality. The existence of LGBT practices has been attributed by some to western influences (“PM [Prime Minister] slams West for erosion of values, same-sex marriage,” Ramlan, 2019). Given multiple contexts in Malaysia that are against LGBT, it is important to find out whether heterosexuals stigmatize LGBT and, if they do, how they justify their stigmatization.

In this study deconstruction of heterosexuals’ stigmatisation of LGBT was undertaken in the context of religion in Malaysia. The aspects focussed on were personal choice, situational factors, and ideologies of stigma. The process of deconstruction is needed to reveal the obvious and subtle stigmatization of LGBT individuals because they suffer harm in a country where there are religious and legal laws to punish homosexual practices. The study will provide insights into societal prejudice against differences in sexual orientation, which is an important step towards recognition of LGBT rights.

## **Literature Review**

### ***Social Construction of Homosexuality***

The problematics of social construction illuminate the dichotomy between the freedom of will and determinism in philosophy and social theory. Taking the extreme side of the argument, gender is chosen by individuals willy-nilly, uprooted from social necessity. Butler’s (2006) version of social construction, however, disputes the stereotypes, and proposes instead that gender, either “fixed or constructed,” is a function of discourse, “which seeks to set certain limits to analysis or to safeguard certain tenets of humanism as presuppositional to any analysis of gender” (p. 12). Butler further explained that every discourse is a product of a “socially instituted gender asymmetry,” hence, universalising inequality as a fact in gender relations. Kamano (1990) studied the representation of homosexuality, and found rigidity in how people categorize gender, that is, gay men tended to be stereotyped as having feminine characteristics, and lesbian women as having masculine characteristics. It suggests their inclination for an “ideology” that naturalizes gender and dichotomizes the sexual world.

The theorising of homosexuality is not just the debate between scholars and theorists. The common people, too, have a knack for theorising. This popular theorizing is especially pertinent because ordinary people think and perceive the “real.” Berger and Luckmann (1991) reminded theorists to pay attention to the thinking of ordinary people, because the focus of their attention is on “here and now,” the “intersubjective world” that they inhabit and share with others, and in their mundane, yet “compelling reality.” For common people, “theorising” is a pedestrian way in actualizing their thought through an appeal to some universal constructs that carry a notion of generalized, known “truth.” Ordinary people do have the knowledge and skill necessary to become effective players in the social situation and for which they could optimize their material and symbolic advantage.

### ***The Moral Ideology of Homosexuality***

In this paper, the theorizing on gender non-conformity is explored from the vantage of gender conformists. There are two objectives for privileging the majority view. First, to make obvious the legitimization of stigma derived from the moral theory pertaining to homosexuality. Second, to make apparent the consequence of moral theory in affecting stigma. By drawing upon the perspective of the “social,” one is cognizant of the worldview of stigmatized persons that are excluded from the analysis.

Goffman (1968) coined the term “virtual identity,” to describe the identity assumed by stigmatized people in the encounter with the so-called normal, as they vacillated between behaving defensively (“defensive cowering”) by avoiding contact or exaggerating distinction (“hostile bravado”). The uncertain reaction continues as long as they feel uncertain about what the others are “really” thinking about (Goffman, 1968, p. 25). Until then, the maintenance of their virtual identity is important for the suffered who are aware that any slippage in the appearance or the situation where they are found out is a crisis for both parties. Goffman (1968, p. 31) states that the crisis “has the effect of cutting him off from society and from himself so that he stands discredited person facing an unaccepting world.” As such, to the normal people who are looking and theorizing about LGBT are most likely oblivious that the subject of their curiosity appears only in their secondary, non-fundamental characteristics. And so, the knowledge built on this appearance must also be taken as phenomenological knowledge true for the observers in question.

### **Method of Study**

The qualitative descriptive study involved interviews with 21 participants (P21 to P33 in this paper). Qualitative methods are appropriate for understanding the complexity of family issues and close relationships, particularly in understanding unique needs and concerns of LGBT individuals across multiple domains of social life instead of in isolation (Orel, 2014). The sample size exceeded the minimum number of participants recommended by researchers for reaching data saturation such as 12 for a homogenous group (Guest et al., 2016) and 20–30 for qualitative interviews (Creswell, 1998; Vasileiou, 2018).

Table 1 shows the participants’ demographic information. A majority of the participants were below 30 years old, Muslim, and not working at the time of the study. The selection criteria were Malaysians above the age of 18 so that participation in the study did not require parental consent.

The semi-structured interview guide consisted of questions on societal and personal views of LGBT, and influences on their views. So as not to lead participants, they were not directly asked about how religion influenced their attitudes towards LGBT.

For the interviews, the third researcher asked her social contacts who might participate in the study. She explained the purpose of the study, assured them of the confidentiality of their responses and their anonymity as subjects. She also informed them that the interview sessions would be audio recorded. For individuals who agreed to participate in the study, an appointment was fixed for the interview. The interviews were conducted in English, with the occasional use of Malay.

**Table 1** *Demographic Information on Participants (N = 21)*

Category	Sub-category	Frequency
<b>Gender</b>	Female	9
	Male	12
<b>Ethnic Group</b>	Chinese	3
	Malay	9
	Indigenous	8
	Others	1
<b>Age</b>	18–20 years old	8
	21–30 years old	8
	31–40 years old	3
	41–50 years old	1
	51–60 years old	1
<b>Educational Background</b>	Form 5	1
	Form 6/ Diploma	5
	Degree or higher	15
<b>Monthly Income</b>	Not working	13
	RM2000–RM3999	3
	RM4000–RM5999	3
	RM6000–RM7999	0
	RM8000–RM9999	1
	RM10000 and more	1
<b>Religion</b>	Buddhist	2
	Christian	5
	Muslim	13
	Other religions	1

The 21 audio-recorded interviews were transcribed. The 30,488-word transcripts were analysed thematically, guided by Caulfield's (2019) thematic analysis. The researchers reread the transcripts to identify initial themes on ideologies of stigma. Later readings focussed on identifying themes on situational and personal reasons for individuals to break away from the normative heterosexual orientation. Finally, recurring themes and relationships among themes were analysed by referring to contextual influences such as values, media, family, and friends.

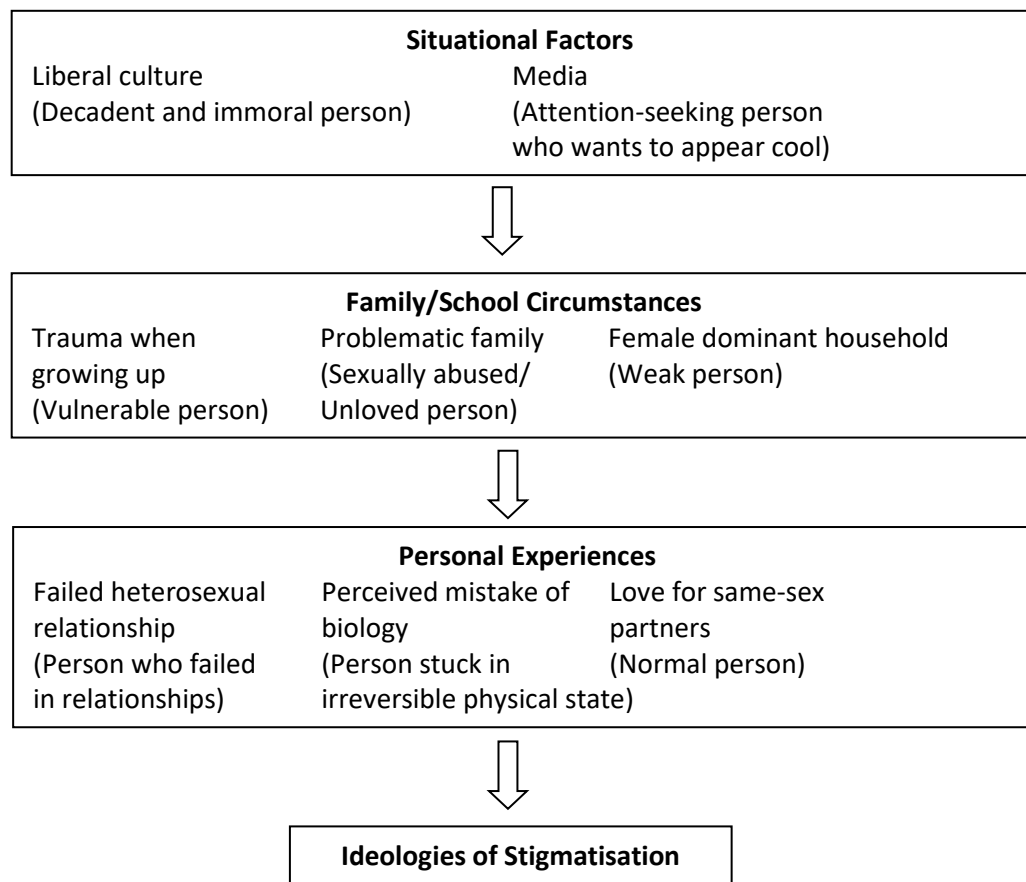
## Results

This section describes the different layers in the stigmatization of LGBT individuals based on the heterosexuals' construction of homosexuality in terms of personal choice and situational factors and ideologies of stigma in the context of their religious beliefs (Figure 1). Due to the word limit, only some extended excerpts can be included.

### *Personal Choice*

The analysis revealed that the heterosexual participants believed that non-gender conformist persons made a conscious personal choice due to personal experiences that were sometimes influenced by their family circumstances and wider situational factors. A Chinese Christian, AL (P13), said that one chooses to become homosexual because one seeks attention and wishes to appear "cool," possibly due to media influence. In contrast, some participants like AF (P33, a Malay Muslim) believed that the personal choice to come out as an LGBT individual is driven by a mistake in biology. They have no choice because they are stuck in an irreversible physical state. AL conceptualized homosexuality and transgenderism as instances of "gender dysphoria."

**Figure 1** *Schematic Representation of Different Layers of Stigmatisation of LGBT by Heterosexuals Derived From Analysis of Interview Data*



Unlike AL and AF, who expressed clear opinions about choice, other participants like OB (P18, a Melanau Christian) expressed ambiguous opinions about choice. Based on his acquaintance with a gay, OB learnt that sometimes LGBT individuals go through an extended phase of exploring their sexuality and they may not have reached a conclusive sexual orientation. Equally sympathetic was AJ (P22), a Malay Muslim, who said that individuals who are not clear about their sexuality may suffer from a feeling of “isolation,” “confusion,” and “loneliness.” AJ speculated that the LGBT individuals’ confusion could have a biological basis, besides family and personal experiences.

To me, they are just lonely, confused with their sexuality. They don’t know who they’re with, or to be paired with, or partnered with. Or probably because of, I don’t know, home background? Or maybe not enough friends? Maybe some, scientifically, I don’t know, re-genetic ... chromosomes, X, Y. (AJ)

Finally, “love” is seen as motivation for homosexual practices. SS (P29), a Melanau Muslim learned from her gay friends that they experienced heartbreak in a prior, heterosexual relationship. AT (P17), a Chinese Buddhist, was told by his gay friends that they felt real love towards their same-sex partner. In both cases, homosexuality was a rational choice driven by affection. The heterosexual participants could empathize with the compelling love, and this enabled them to go against the official stance of their religion and be tolerant towards LGBT.

Knowing that homosexuality is a choice does not entail unqualified acceptance. The heterosexual participants tried hard to be open about it. A Chinese Buddhist, AT (P17), stated that since sexuality is a personal affair, one should not impose one’s values over the other. Buddhist scriptures are not known to make explicit prohibitive stance against same-sex relationships. However, other participants put aside religious teachings and related to LGBT individuals as persons. A Melanau Christian, SR (P24) recognized that the non-conformist choice for being different is not an easy, inconsequential one. She

said, “they actually really struggle with their own identity. They struggle on their feeling of guilt, religion ....” The inner struggle for many LGBT individuals was not resolved, which is why they kept their identity a secret from people around them for fear of rejection, but it made them feel depressed.

Knowing that homosexuality is a choice forms a basis for its rejection and in some instance, its management. (P22) claimed that the “sex dilemma” may best be resolved in a non-surgical manner such as counselling and correct peer example instead of “transformative surgery.” Similarly, AT (P17, a Chinese Buddhist) talked about a gay friend who was referred to a psychologist by his mother. In another instance, Na (P30), a Malay Muslim said that gay people can get help from “psychiatrists” and “reform institutions” to be rehabilitated. The views on the need to correct the sexual orientation of LGBT individuals could stem from the religious labelling of same-sex relationships as sinful in Christianity and Islam.

### ***Family/School Circumstances***

The participants expressed knowledge of social causes of gender non-conformity. They attributed homosexuality to family and school circumstances where one is driven to a particular sexual identity rather than being born as homosexuals.

Growing up in a female-dominant household could condition some males to be non-conforming in their sexual orientation. AF (P33, a Malay Muslim) believed that being close to sisters can make boys feminine, prone to psychological disruption, and predispose them to turn gay. An example of a feminine behaviour given by FF (P20, a Malay Muslim) was following the girls in the family in using cosmetics. In addition, NH (P32), a Malay male, said that an effeminate friend he knew at school lacked confidence to befriend fellow boys. These participants believed that insufficient learning of masculinity at home could make a male person effeminate, prone to emotional and psychological instability, and lead to the development of a weak and easily suggestible personality.

Some participants believed that trauma, such as sexual abuse and disciplinary problems could cause an individual to turn homosexual. A researcher BJ (P19, a Punjabi Sikh) talked about his encounter with gay persons in the course of his research. A subject in BJ’s research claimed to have accepted repeated sexual abuse by a male relative.

When I met him, he was already like, 30 years old. He told me this is what happened. He was raped by a random relative when he was on a trip to India, more than one time. And he accepted it as a normal thing. This guy is no more around. He died of it [AIDS]. 50 years ago, they don’t have Internet. He was influenced by his surroundings. Move forward to now. Now people Google for pornography. And, you’ll find all sorts of sex, anal sex, and that becomes normal. It’s taboo. Yet it’s normal. So people start doing it because of that. So I can draw a conclusion that 80% of them are actually, really not truly gay because of their hormones. It’s not inborn in other words. They are influenced by friends, by role models, and also by the environment. Role models like Elton John, Ellen DeGeneres. So when they start proclaiming, people believe it’s normal. Once it’s normal, oh I can do it. It’s okay. So, and all they need is a trigger, somebody who is like that, to come closer to them and encourage them. And then they accept it. (BJ)

BJ’s rendition of gender non-conformity was triggered by family circumstances because fifty years ago, the terms “gay” and “transvestite” did not even exist but in the present digital era, it is the media that popularizes LGBT.

### ***Situational Factors***

From the perspective of the heterosexual participants, the two situational factors that propagate gender non-conformity are the liberal culture and the influence of the media. The “liberal culture” is often associated with western countries. A Malay Muslim AF (P33) cited an instance of an acquaintance who said she was a “non-binary.” AF said that her friend grew up in Australia and the permissive environment there “eventually shaped her mindset and her point of view” to accept LGBT practices as acceptable. AF (P33) believed that heterosexuals should engage more with gays, rather than avoid them, to enable them to revert to the “normal” gender.

However, other participants were of the view that the influence of the media was the stronger factor in popularizing LGBT. NH (P32, a Malay Muslim) believed that one does not have to live in a foreign country but can be influenced by the globalized media and social network.

I have one friend. She likes to watch K-pop. She is like bisexual. She likes to watch boys group, and then you know usually, they will have one boy interact romantically with another boy, I think. And then, she will go, "woo so cute." She will be interested in that kind of way. Like, in Japan they have this kind of genre for boys on boys. Like, I think is C-R-O-A, probably means the Boy's Love culture exists in Japanese manga or anime. And then, when it comes to the girls group. She will talk a lot, "oh, she is so cute." She wants to be with her and she doesn't want anyone to take, to take her. (NH)

Boys' Love is a genre of manga and novels aimed at a female readership, and originated from Japan. NH believed that homoerotic manga, novels and other media can glorify male-male love relationships. Boy's Love culture is believed to prompt social change in the form of greater acceptance for sexual minorities (Fukari, 2020). In an excerpt cited earlier, BJ also said that when celebrities like Elton John and Ellen DeGeneres came out, this induced people to believe that being LGBT is normal.

### ***Ideologies of Stigma***

The heterosexual participants were aware that homosexuality is socially constructed, real, and grounded in reality. They recognized the existence of LGBT individuals, contrary to the Islamic teaching that considers them as non-entities (Teh, 2008). Their knowledge-content of homosexuality was, indeed, sociologically useful, for it pares down the theoretical, scholarly understanding of gender construction to the phenomenology of ordinary life. Another possible reading of the construction is the function it plays within the wider, fundamentally heterosexual gender relation. The participants reanimate, rehearse, and re-present the ideological defence of heterosexuality through repeated stigmatization of difference and non-conformity at the thought level. Through ideological reproduction of heterosexuality, the binary structure of male/female is reinforced. The popular, non-elitist construction of gender ideology illustrates how stigma is naturalized at the level of ideas; hence, it demands scrutiny.

First, the ideology of stigma pertaining to explaining inferiority will be commented on. On the subject of personal choice, the participants were able to empathize with the choice only because they perceived the non-conformists had no chance of reverting to a so-called normal identity. The abnormality of nurture became an object of both derision and sympathy. Their moral regression is thought to be fated, a consequence of adopting a sexuality contrary to nature and against evolution, both religiously and scientifically.

Second, the ideology of stigma pertaining to elaborating danger will be considered. The homosexuals are described as people who are unable to control their desire, and prone to self-harming behaviour like drinking and unsafe sex as well as pornography. This generates the perception that the homosexuals potentially threaten the morality of the norm-compliant population.

The participants also constructed homosexuals as a threat to the veneer of normalcy. Gays should not socialize together among themselves and with the so-called normal because the heterosexuals find it disconcerting to watch their open display of affection. Ya (P27, a Melanau Muslim) said, "I don't like seeing them in public actually, especially if I know that they are part of community." The homosexuals are also typified as a group who are the most likely to consume illicit aspects of foreign culture, such as having an open discussion about gay identity, talking about same-sex partnership, and showcasing their lifestyle. The participants were eager to share some critical aspects of western culture, making LGBT agents, or becoming guilty purveyors of western immorality. Kheng (P16) thought that gay parenting is more of a "western" culture that can soon be adopted by homosexuals as they are unable to comply with the Chinese custom ("Chinese must have their own generation"). The attribution of LGBT to western influence echoes the views of politicians expressed in the media (Mohamad, 2015; Ramlan, 2019).

## Discussion

The study on deconstructing heterosexuals' stigmatization of LGBT in the context of religion in Malaysia showed that in the minds of the ordinary people, homosexuality is perceived as an anomaly. To the heterosexual participants, homosexuality is a belligerent, conscious act of choice pertaining to one's body and sexuality. The choice to have same-sex relationships is borne out of either negative sexual encounters earlier in life or the influence of celebrities who are openly proud about being LGBT. Such views reveal the perception of homosexuality as a social construction, and ironically this is used to reject homosexuality. The heterosexual participants believed that LGBT individuals do not have the right to choose their sexual orientation at all. They often reject homosexuality on the grounds of religion and socially recognized gender norms. Understanding the social construction of homosexuality from the viewpoint of lay persons is crucial to show how discrimination is rendered legitimate in a system where the interest of society precedes that of the individual.

In the context of Malaysia, heterosexuals interviewed in the present study were generally non-accommodating and non-accepting. They saw gender as fixed, and this appeared to cut across religious, age, and education groups. Social construction normalizes ambiguity, but the participants viewed gender identity as "black or white," with no shades of grey in between. The non-accommodating stance on LGBT can be summed up as "Malaysia is a Muslim country, and homosexuality goes against Islamic (or Christian) teachings." The overall tenor of the opinion appears consistently discriminative, but the fineness and the subtlety of the opinions demonstrated multiple shades of permissiveness within the dominant ideology.

Based on the findings of this study, Malaysians use "LGBT" in the same language game as the West, assuming that the sexual non-conformists in Malaysia are in some shifty, murky coalition with their western counterpart. This false impression mobilizes a collective moral panic that soon LGBT would be normalized in Malaysia like in the West. Such a distortion disregards the continuing struggle for recognition of the group in many parts of the world, which includes the western developed countries. Nevertheless, the difference in context does not make discrimination any less pressing.

The stigma on LGBT in Malaysia is known to occur socially, it is evident by overt expression of hostility, stereotyping, and harassment by religious and legal authorities. Given the hostile social environment, the gender non-conformists tend to keep their identity and sexuality private. Thus, the empirical evidence of structural discrimination is not widely available, most likely due to under-reporting. Yet, the study of stigma in its non-structural form remains pertinent because it reveals how stigma is ideologized, that is, a taken-for-granted socialized truth that masks discrimination into elusive art. Stigmatization of LGBT is felt and known, but stays unchallenged for now.

## Study Limitation

A limitation of the study is the focus on heterosexuals, and this restricts understanding of how they theorize what it means to be not conforming to the heterosexual norm. Future studies on the perspective of LGBT individuals on ideologies of stigma will provide insights on how gender and sexual non-conformists confront the hegemony of male-female binary.

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