

**LGBT ADVOCACY ON TWITTER: CULTIVATING
EXPOSURE AND PERCEPTION OF MUSLIM USERS
AND THE CHALLENGES TOWARDS ISLAMIC
MORALITY**

BY

NURLIYANA MOHD NOOR

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degree of Master of Arts in Islamic Thought and Islamic
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ABSTRACT

LGBT issues are gaining attention in Malaysia due to escalating portrayals of advocacy contents on social media. Multiple case studies in the United States have proven how social media engagements and interactions has led to acceptance by the general public. Virtual platforms have provided most conducive space and practical tools for self-identification, coming out and advocacy activities. While multiple studies have investigated Facebook as a medium to convey advocacy messages, there have been very few studies on how Twitter could play the same role. Thus, this study intends to unravel how users' perceptions can be shaped through continuous advocacy initiatives on Twitter, specifically of how the Malaysian Muslim Twitter users' perceptions are shaped through exposure to LGBT advocacy contents on the social media platform. The research instrument employed is quantitative, and the variables include perception of users towards advocacy activities, perception of users towards the prevalence of advocacy contents and exposure to advocacy contents. The outcome of this research shows confirmation in terms of users' encounter with LGBT related contents through their experience of being Twitter users and the agreement of being exposed to a lot of LGBT contents through the platform.

Keywords: LGBT advocacy contents, social media, Twitter, Malaysian Muslim Twitter users.

خلاصة البحث

تحتل قضايا المثليات ومزدوجي الميل الجنسي ومغايري الهوية الجنسية (LGBT) بالاهتمام في ماليزيا بسبب التصعيد المتصاعد لمحتويات الدعوة على وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي. أثبتت دراسات الحالة المتعددة في الولايات المتحدة كيف أدت التفاعلات والتفاعلات على وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي إلى قبول عامة الناس. قدمت المنصات الافتراضية مساحة مواتية أكثر وأدوات عملية لتحديد الهوية الذاتية، والخروج وأنشطة المناصرة. في حين أن العديد من الدراسات قد بحثت في فيسبوك كوسيلة لنقل رسائل الدعوة، كانت هناك دراسات قليلة جداً حول كيف يمكن أن يلعب تويتر نفس الدور. وبالتالي، تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى كشف كيف يمكن تشكيل تصورات المستخدمين من خلال مبادرات الدعوة المستمرة على تويتر، وتحديدًا كيفية تشكيل تصورات مستخدمي تويتر الماليزيين المسلمين من خلال التعرض لمحتويات مناصرة المثليات على منصة التواصل الاجتماعي. إن أداة البحث المستخدمة هي أداة كمية، وتشمل المتغيرات تصور المستخدمين تجاه أنشطة الدعوة، وتصور المستخدمين تجاه انتشار محتويات الدعوة والتعرض لمحتويات المناصرة. تظهر نتيجة هذا البحث تأكيداً من حيث مواجهة المستخدمين للمحتويات ذات الصلة بـ LGBT من خلال تجربتهم في كونهم مستخدمي تويتر والاتفاق على التعرض للكثير من محتويات LGBT من خلال النظام الأساسي.

الكلمات المفتاحية: محتويات مناصرة LGBT، وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي، تويتر، مستخدمو تويتر الماليزيون المسلمون.

APPROVAL PAGE

I certify that I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion, it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts in Islamic Thought and Islamic Civilisation.

.....
Zaleha Bt Kamaruddin
Supervisor

I certify that I have read this study and that in my opinion it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a thesis for the degree of Master of Arts in Islamic Thought and Islamic Civilisation.

.....
Yusuf Imtiaz Ahmad Shaukat Ali
Internal Examiner

.....
Megat Al Imran Yasin
External Examiner

This thesis was submitted to the Institute of Islamic Thought and Civilisation of the International Islamic University Malaysia (ISTAC-IIUM) and is accepted as a fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of Master of Arts in Islamic Thought and Islamic Civilisation.

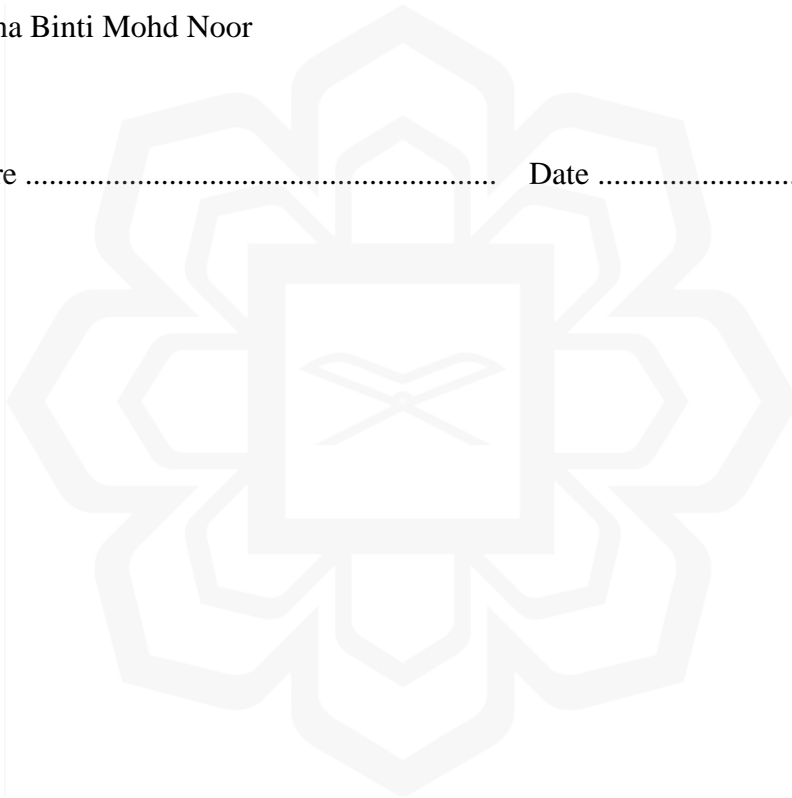
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND OF STUDY

Studies on homosexuality have been around for many years and human rights movement to continue eliminate stigma towards the community have never subsided. Unlike in past centuries where people could only take their causes to the streets and protest through marchers and riots, technology of the 21st century allows the public to go out and create double the impact by recruiting supporters through online media. The Stonewall riots in 1969, had historically bench-marked modern-day gay pride protests and movements in America (History, 2018) and eventually, the world, as LGBTQ¹ liberation becomes a significant human right concern.

Today, the Women's March on January 1st, 2017, is a fitting example of how a movement can be mobilized through social media. 470 00 protesters were reported to have gathered in Washington D.C (The New York Times, 2017) and nearly 5 million worldwide had marched (The Telegraph, 2017) on President Donald Trump's very first day in office to press his administration due to multiple allegations of the President's nonconforming attitude towards United States diverse population. The march was also mobilized online where 11.5 million tweets tracked through the

¹ The term LGBTQ and LGBT will be used interchangeably throughout this paper. LGBT is more familiar in the Malaysian layman context, as observed through media headlines and discussions taking place on social media platforms. In fact, if counting LGBTQ in for the purpose of being specific, this paper will have to deal with more variance of LGBT derived acronyms such as LGBTQ+, LGBTQIA+ etc. which is not necessary for the direction headed of this paper.

In addition, 'Q' at the acronym LGBTQ stands for 'queer,' and according to Merriam Webster mobile app, stands for "differing in some way from what is usual or normal: odd, strange, weird." But, specifically, in this context, referring to its noun definition: "a: a person who is gay, lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, or otherwise not heterosexual" and "b: a person whose gender identity is nonbinary or differs from the sex they had or were identified as having at birth: a genderqueer or transgender person, : a person who is not cisgender."

hashtag #WomensMarch, reported by Twitter through their official tweet handle, @TweetData, 24 hours after the march took place. In fact, the protest was entirely sparked online through one Facebook post of a retiree in Hawaii, Teresa Shook, who saw the need for a peaceful march through Washington D.C after the inauguration of the US President. Included in the Women's March mission was to oversee the needs of the LGBTQ people alongside the demands of equality for women, immigrants, and minorities across the country.

Setting aside the American context for a while, one of the most recent controversies involving the local LGBTQ community being brought to the spotlight was right after Malaysia's general election. Malaysia's 14th General Election (GE) has been by far, the most unprecedented and nerve-wrecking event for the Malaysian citizens that year. After 60 years, a newly formed coalition led by the former 4th Prime Minister, Tun Dr Mahathir has won over the people and taken over Putrajaya, bringing about the term 'New Malaysia'. Post GE however, as anticipated, calls for new challenges, as transformations are not small in scale. One that comes significantly with the 'agreements' of the people towards the New Malaysia, is freedom. Particularly, freedom of speech and expressions that although is not denied throughout the post-independence period, has been deemed restricted to some extent.

Not long after Pakatan Harapan (People's Alliance) enters office, they were bombarded by the public- of Muslim majority- due to the rumour of hiring of a gay activist under Syed Saddiq's -Malaysia's Youth and Sports Minister of the time, office. Numan Afifi is an openly declared gay individual, who come out a few years back and is infamous for organizing the 'Big Gay Iftar' just last year. Note here that 'come out' or 'come out of the closet' are universal terms signifying open proclamation of a LGBT individual's gender orientation. The event as Numan puts it

to malaysiakini (2017) is to “unite people from various backgrounds through a breaking of fast event” and to also “...remember the lives of 49 people from the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community who were killed in a nightclub shooting in Orlando, Florida, the United States on June 12, 2016.”

Upon receiving tremendous backlash from the public and opposition, Numan stepped down and quit his position as the Minister’s temporary press secretary. Syed Saddiq who was also severely attacked- for not defending Numan by LGBT activists and allies as well as for not citing a firm ground to condemn LGBT by those who refuse to conform with the mentioned community- tweeted that he respects Numan’s decision in quitting which Numan later added to Free Malaysia Today that the MP did not even try to make him stay (Pillai, 2018), which is perceived as him giving subtle cues of disagreement to Numan’s gender orientation or perhaps of having someone of Numan’s reputation in the office.

Following Numan Afifi’s case, Tan Sri Razali Ismail, chairman of the Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM) told the Sun Daily in an article dated July 11th, 2018 that Syed Saddiq should have stood for Numan and that he should have been assessed on merits and performance and urging for total erasure of discrimination as well as added that "the government must stand up for everyone while firmly upholding principles of equality and non-discrimination in accordance with our Federal Constitution." Fast forward to September, after reviewing SUHAKAM’s proposal to the Prime Minister, Tun Dr Mahathir was adamant in declining to be in the same page as SUHAKAM with regards to the LGBTQ issue where he emphasized that "...we cannot accept LGBT as well as the marriage of man and man or woman and woman and that “the concept of family remains the same -

that it (constitutes) a couple with their own children or adopted ones to be considered as family," (News Straits Times, September 21, 2018).

Following the Prime Minister's statement, backed by the his deputy Datuk Seri Dr Wan Azizah who amplified that it was unlawful or haram for Muslims to allow such culture (Shazwan Mustafa Kamal, 2018), a statement was then released to counter the Prime Minister's judgement of which SUHAKAM said, although they are consistent with their position in preventing all sorts of discrimination towards the LGBT community, however, they did not in any way, conform to same-sex marriage (The Star Online, September 22, 2018).

The New Malaysia promises inclusivity and freedom in expressing diversity. Numan Afifi's case, however, is nowhere near enough for Malaysia's LGBT community, activists, and allies. Numan's case and several others in recent years indicate that LGBT is no longer an issue to be kept behind closed doors. The LGBT community is slowly 'leaving their closets' and is actively advocating for people to embrace their identities. Multiple authorities around the world are taking the phenomenon from multiple angles- human rights, religion, psychology, and medicine. However, LGBT has been central in the human rights agenda these recent years as more people are coming out and exposed to violence. Human Rights activists are applauding and cheering as free countries embrace the community and promise equal opportunities, securities as well as acceptance, while continuing struggling for the rights of the LGBT people to be heard and recognized in more conservative states.

LGBTQ is not a new phenomenon. It has been around and underground for many years due to stigma, bullies, abuse, rejection, and discrimination (Tan, 2012; Demant et al., 2018 & Sa'dan A.A, Jaffary Awang & Nur Farhana Abdul Rahman, 2018; Chan, 2017; Nurul Jannah & Mutia Sobiha, 2017; Chaerunnisa, 2018) and also

because homosexuality is deemed unlawful in most religions. One of the main challenges of LGBT community in a world where majority of its population are believers of various religious doctrines, is that most religions condemn same-sex intercourse/marriage (Tan, 2012; Shanon Shah, 2013; Ashgar Ali Ali Muhammed & Yusuff Jelili Amuda, 2018; Azura Abas, 2018; Chaerunnisa, 2018 & Barmania & Syed Muhamed Aljunid, 2017 and JAKIM, 2018).

Major conservative people of faith in the west especially Christians and Muslims are currently deeply challenged where religious leaders and the pious, 'practicing devout' have also openly identified themselves as homosexuals (the emergence of gay imams, gay priests and pastors as well as LGBT operated places of worships- cathedrals and mosques), inferencing and allowing new interpretations of divine scriptures and proclaiming that God is the reason why they are, what they are (New Ways Ministry, 2018; Medium, 2018; Polianskaya, 2018 and Albawaba, 2018). International backlash and condemnations have been thrown to the Pope when he implicitly suggested that the LGBT community can be fixed and associated LGBT with mental illness (Sharman, 2018) as well as to the Federal Territory Islamic Religious Department of Malaysia when the department introduced rehab programmes (Chaerunnisa, 2018) and issued an outreach initiative in a form of e-book for "self-migration" purpose (Chaerunnisa, 2018; The Star Online, 2018).

However, with rapid movements and pressure from various human right activists, NGOs as well as several nation states, the numbers of people who identify as homosexual has escalated in the recent years (Smith, 2018 & Newport, 2018) which is attributed largely to active representations on social media (Nurul Jannah & Mutia Sobihah, 2017; Shelley L.Craig & Lauren McInroy, 2014). These are due to the merits

of social media itself. Virtual platforms offered most conducive space and practical tools for self-identification, coming out and advocacy activities.

Social media has provided a global, practical and engaging platform for interaction between LGBT communities from all over the world, as a safe-haven due to anonymity, experience sharing, identity development, information access, spaces to explore coming-out stories for individuals to relate to them or to simply be assured for the sense of belonging (Nurul Jannah Mohd Juaini et al., 2017; Lik Sam Chan, 2017; Ciszek, 2017; Lucero, 2017; Gonta et al., 2017; Craig & McInroy, 2014; Shapiro & Margolin, 2013; Shapiro & Margolin, 2013 and Kuga Thas, 2013). Advocacy movements include online campaigns, such as the It Gets Better Project (Lucero, 2017; Ciszek, 2017; Norton, 2016; Ward, 2013 and Tan, 2012) and active representations on various LGBT community moderated accounts on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter (Lucero, 2017; Hestres, 2017; Norton, 2016; Blackwell et.al., 2016 and Marine, 2014), Instagram, Snapchat (Norton, 2016) and Tumblr (Haimson, 2018) as well as a mobile application like Grindr (Miller, 2015; Van de Wiele & Tong, 2014) have all played active role in engagements.

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT

Social media has been proven to be one of the most practical platforms in conveying messages and Facebook has been a preferred platform among the virtual communities for quite some time. However, being the most used in this context is leading to a downside, where ‘majority’ cannot not help in reaching the goal of this study, whereby prevalence is prudent in generalizing the Malaysian social media users’ positions with regards to this issue. And prevalence here cannot be tracked through ‘majority’- of whom those largely on Facebook. This is because, LGBT community

threads carefully even on social media, especially among Malaysian/ Muslims Facebook users where family members, relatives, teachers, employers, and all those who would be considered as potential threats are 'friended' under the circumstances of maintaining connections and communication. Facebook is thus less desirable in advocating for the Malaysian LGBT community in particular. A preliminary personal observation deduced Facebook to be too big of a platform for immediate advocacy messages and too vulnerable for controversial messages to be communicated. Hence, the argument that LGBT community does not exist or is not apparent within the Malaysian online setting.

However, over on Twitter, where the culture is unobstructed, discussions on LGBT whether they involve opposing remarks or encouraging rhetoric, are conversed openly among users. While the majority- who are spending more time on Facebook are disregarding the existence of such discussions, minority Malaysians take to Twitter to create awareness, instill empathy, encourage unity and provide moral support to conflicted individuals to conform with LGBT as a form of self-identification. The impact created from lack of acknowledgement from the public has created a number of collective uprisings at the more open and liberal Twitter. Some of the active Malaysian curated accounts are QueerMy (@QueerMalaysia), PELANGI Campaign (@pelangicampaign), Queer Lapis (@QueerLapis), Kunyit Squared (@kunyitsquared), justiceforsisters (@justice_sisters), Numan Afifi (@NumanAfifi) and many others (Note that, tweethandles of allies, individuals or NGOs can also be identified through a rainbow *emojis*- a small pictograph generally made available at smart phones' qwerty keyboards, accompanying their usernames whereby a rainbow is a universally recognised symbol of solidarity for the LGBT community).

With very few studies covering Twitter being the platform of focus, existing studies are found to be insufficient in achieving prevalence. An example is of a research done by Nurul Jannah et al (2017), where they deduced that social media is responsible in mobilizing gay conformities, through a method of online observation. The method involves tracking numbers of followers of a few identified Malaysian based LGBT accounts throughout a period of three months on various social media platforms, Twitter included. The issue with this method in deducing prevalence is that 'follow,' being 'friends' or any sort of engagements on social media does not guarantee 'approval'. Thus, tracking through 'observation' is rather insufficient to reach prevalence.

Remarkably, as distant and as foreign LGBT issues to some Malaysians, ceasing the fact that people have been talking, discussions being pushed forward to the national level, conflicted individuals and NGOs struggled in debates, affected individuals becoming more confused, vigilant and even vulnerable to the pressure set upon them as well as authorities positioned in conflicting decisions between state, religion and human rights dilemma, to imply that LGBT issues does not exist and side lining it, is pure ignorance. It is out and it is an issue that questions not just the human morale but also of self-development, of family institution, of culture and faith and most importantly, of divided community due to the never-ending non-concurring perspectives. From the Big Gay Iftar and recent canning of Terengganu women, to LGBT community being hugely represented at the Malaysian level of Women's March and Brunei's stoning decision (although is only a neighbouring country, but it has imposed a tremendous impact on Malaysia as well), LGBT in Malaysia has almost equally shared massive media coverage just as other pressing national issues.

A survey conducted in 2017 in the United States reported 11 million adults have identified as LGBT, with the millennials (born between 1980 and 1999) recording the highest increase in percentage from the year 2016 (Newport, 2018). The highest number of social media users in the US is also aged between 18 to 29 with 86% of the estimated total population (Smith, 2018). Therefore, if the numbers of those identified as LGBT increased or remain the same in 2018, it can be derived that a huge number of percentages that make up the 2018 statistic of social media users distinctly include those who identify as homosexuals. The number of increasing LGBT also includes those who are raising children (Blackwell et.al., 2016).

Significantly, Malaysians are reported to spend 12 hours per day on their mobile phones and that includes internet browsing. 19.2 million of the Malaysian population are subscribing to broadband services and 98 percent is spent on social media. These are the numbers reported by The New Straits Times Online (2015) as the subject of Malaysians time spent on mobile phones is discussed at the House of Representatives of the Malaysian Parliament. Thus, with the increasing number of active social media users and if there exist as prominent numbers of LGBT representations on various virtual platforms, the probability of individuals coming out in Malaysia is likely significant in the coming years. The relevance of bringing up the US statistics is to point out that anything is possible within the borderless virtual world and that the numbers of high online engagement of the young adults is a probable factor the Malaysian community should be on the lookout for. A major fraction of what leads to inclination is the support advocated through online platforms.

Therefore, to support those arguments presented above, this paper intends to find out whether Malaysian users of Twitter are observing significant representations of LGBT community on their Twitter feeds. This exploratory employment will also

present literature encapsulating current premises in discussions involving Islamic perspectives and Islamic morality in framing this research into one that is done in defending Islamic stance on this issue.

1.3 SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY

“Indeed, as acceptance of homosexuality in the media has risen over time, so have viewer attitudes toward it” (Gabby et al., 2017, p.24). There has been an abundance of research in existence focusing on LGBT identified people in academia. But very scarce on the public attitudes towards this recent technology aided process of coming out. People might have been accustomed to the generalizations framed according to past events- marchers, riots, and protests. They know, generally, no matter how extravagant and massive a movement can go, stigmatization will take longer to subside. That is, minus the events happening in the virtual world. In the virtual world, interactions are complex, thus the results of many interconnected, borderless interactions are increasingly complicated. However, they are visible and easily accessible. Which is why, the internet is believed to be one of the most important factors to result in acceptance (Ayoub and Garretson, 2015).

For that reason, there has been multiple research on how social media assists the process of coming out for the LGBT community (Craig & McInroy, 2017; Lucero, 2017; Ciszek, 2017; Ayoub & Garretson, 2015). With more people identifying as such, portraying positive examples even to the heterosexuals, advancement in the field of medicine-in educating people about HIV, STDs and preventive measures as well as psychological guidelines for those who suffer mentally in the process of coming out, they are telling the world that they are to exist like everybody else and it is not a

problem. Utilising every advantage social media has to offer as a platform to communicate that intention, LGBT is a phenomenon to stay.

While that is the case with the advocacy on social media, rather few religious individuals and institutions have successfully put forward refutations under the basis and guidelines of Islamic morality. It is either their efforts have been shunned away under the premises of promoting stereotypical agendas thus creating societal tensions by individuals and organizations marching under the rainbow banner of human rights or it is simply still a taboo to be talking about something most people still gather as ‘intimate’ or personal. Thus, a question popped up to the extent to which degree this phenomenon imposes towards the concept of Islamic morality.

Therefore, with that urgency, proven through statistics in the West, this paper will gather data on how advocacy activities could lead the Malaysian social media users towards that direction. Specifically, the perceptions shaped through contact with related discourses on social media among the youth for higher tolerance towards the phenomenon is attributed to change of attitudes among the youth (Ayoub and Garretson, 2015). Over the years, until today, Facebook has been the number one choice for many. However, there has been very few studies on Twitter as a platform for mobilization. Therefore, this paper will look at how portrayals of LGBT contents on Twitter is contributing to shaping the perception of Malaysian Muslims towards the community, as well as literature with discussions related to the challenges, LGBT advocacy poses to Islamic morality.

1.4 RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

- a. To examine the level of perception towards the confirmation of Twitter being a platform for LGBT advocacy.

- b. To identify the exposure level of LGBT advocacy activities among Malaysian Muslim Twitter users on Twitter.
- c. To identify any significant difference between light and heavy Malaysian Muslim Twitter users regarding their exposure to LGBT related contents on Twitter.

1.5 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- a. What is the perception level of the Malaysian Muslim Twitter users towards the confirmation of Twitter being a platform for LGBT advocacy?
- b. What is the exposure level of LGBT advocacy activities among Malaysian Muslim Twitter users on Twitter?
- c. Is there any significant difference between light and heavy Malaysian Muslim Twitter users regarding their exposure to LGBT related contents on Twitter?

1.6 HYPOTHESES

RQ (c),

Null-Hypothesis: There is no significant difference between light and heavy Malaysian Muslim Twitter users regarding their exposure to LGBT related contents on Twitter.

Alternative Hypothesis: There is a significant difference between light and heavy Malaysian Muslim Twitter users regarding their exposure to LGBT related contents on Twitter.