

## Social Media and Lesbians in Malaysia

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### Abstract

A lesbian refers to a woman who is attracted to those of the same sex, i.e. other females. In Malaysia, lesbian relationships are a serious offence that could result in a jail term of up to 20 years as well as caning. Due the various forms of discrimination received, lesbians tend to distance themselves from the community and try to hide their different sexual identity. The lesbian community is seen to use social media as a safe medium to communicate among themselves. Therefore, this study was carried out to determine the extent to which social media is used as a hidden world and safe haven for this group of people in Malaysia, to avoid being ostracised from the current social system. The method used for this study is via online observation. Based on data received from December 2015 until July 2016, it is found that there is an increase in the number of visitors to or followers of websites (240,102 users), facebook (56,671 users) and twitter (8957 users), which shows that social media is indeed the hidden world of lesbians in Malaysia.

**Keywords:** Lesbian, homosexual, social media, hidden world, Malaysia.

### Introduction

The term homosexual is often used by the public to label individuals that have a desire for sex or sexual activities with an individual of the same sex (Hughes, 2008). Even so, according to Low (2009), a majority of homosexuals have voiced out being uncomfortable with the label "homosexual" given to them, as it refers to sexual behavior and is frequently used to relate to certain diseases such as HIV and AIDS or other deviant behaviours. There are a number of categories for homosexuals, including lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT). According to Gamache and Lazear (2009), a lesbian is a woman who is physically, emotionally and mentally attracted to other women. Ahmad et al. (2015) believes the term lesbian has been used to refer to women who like other women. In Malaysia, there are a few terms used to describe lesbians, such as *pengkid* (butch) and *femme*. *Pengkid* are usually used to describe a Malay lesbian that is characteristically masculine (Jerome, 2013). On the other hand, *femme* are seen to be hiding their lesbian tendencies by trying to act straight and accepting dominantly female characteristics (Eves, 2002).

The lesbian phenomenon is seen to be becoming more widespread in Malaysia, but the absence of precise data to prove this matter has made it difficult to determine the total number of this particular community. Research regarding lesbians is also the hardest as there is no data that can be used as a guide. This was explained by Shield (2012) who stated that statistics regarding the population of the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community are hard to find and any information on them is limited. Apart from that, lesbian relationships in Malaysia are also seen to have not yet reached a level that involves sex compared relationships between other homosexual couples. Even so, lesbians, as with other categories of homosexuals in Malaysia, face discrimination, stigma and abuse, not only from the community, but also from their own family. According to Low (2009), lesbians are reproached extensively, ignored and discriminated in society, causing them to hide, distance themselves and pretend they do not exist. Due to the unacceptance of people around them towards their sexual orientation, this group is seen to have turned to the use of social media as a platform to communicate among their own community. This is agreed with by Md Yusof et al. (2014) who mentioned that this community can only be identified through semi-public mediums such as facebook, YouTube, blogs, and non-governmental organisations (NGO) that align with the plight of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender (LGBT).

### **Problem Statement**

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most homosexual men and women hide their identities as a homosexual due to factors such as religion, laws and culture (Patterson, 1995). This is also since those who practice homosexuality are associated with deviant behaviours (Patterson, 1995). They are deemed the minority in a community, especially in countries that deny equal protection for this group. In Malaysia, lesbians are assumed to be the minority since they are denied public rights. In Malaysia, lesbians are considered a minority group and are excluded from public protection. This statement is agreed upon by Baba (2001) who explained that the social environment in Malaysia does not allow this population to reveal their sexual identity openly thus creating social exclusion towards this population. Due to this, statistics regarding this population are difficult to acquire and information related to this group is also limited (Shield, 2012). This opinion is also supported by The Equal Rights Trust (ERT) (2012) which explained that there is no statistics that are reliable related to the total of the LGBT population in Malaysia. Wong (2012) also stated that a lack of written records concerning lesbians is caused by the marginalisation of this group from society. Hence, the existence of this population can be tracked through social media (Md Yusof et al., 2014).

Even though this activity is restricted according to society norms, this has not inhibited them from moving actively because this population has the related community support to fight for their rights fairly (Ahmad et al., 2015). In this modernised era, all information can be acquired easily at our fingertips (online communication), thus it is so too for this population, who, having faced difficulties in terms of social support especially in getting information, can now seek and form relationships with online friends to continuously support the development of their sexual identity (Ybarra et al., 2014). According to Higa et al. (2014), there are various online lesbian communities that have been formed as a support for this group which also allow

them to be directly involved in asking questions, getting advice, and sharing experiences. This online community uses a Self-Help Model where individuals help each other through shared experiences, sharing of information such as suggesting how to seek support in the community and how to expose their sexual orientation to their children, husband, parents and other people (Cooper, 2010).

In this context, social media space will easily attract more individuals to become actively involved in lesbian community and this community is clearly positive for reducing stress in facing societal stereotyping, facing marginalisation, and giving emotional support (Brooks, 1981). However, the increase of this population in secret will also create other unexpected risks such as sexually transmitted infection (STI) as they tend to have sex with many partners (Canadian Pediatric Society, 2008). Apart from that, Women's Institute (2009) also explained that same sex practice does not exclude the possibility of HIV/AIDS infections, proven by a case where a woman who had sex with another woman who had previously been infected with HIV from a past bisexual relationship (sexual behavior toward both males and females). This risk is also apparent when the same sex couple actively uses injection drug use (IDU) (Women's Institute, 2009). This is due to the inability of this group to communicate their sexuality (afraid of prejudice and being misunderstood), barring them from accessing information on safe sex and protection procedures (Matebani et al., 2013). Besides this, Johns et al. (2013) stated that this population may possess high mental stress such as depression and anxiety, as well as low self-esteem due to experiences in lack of social support and prejudice. Generally, the frequency of drug usage either legally or illegally is higher in lesbian circles because of their lifestyle that is mostly exposed to wild parties, night clubs, etc, which facilitate their access to drugs (Hyde et al., 2007). Thus, this research is important to identify the involvement of social media as a medium for the lesbian population in Malaysia to hide behind and the findings would give a clearer picture on how far this population can develop.

### **Importance of Study**

The lesbian population are more willing to hide their real sexual identity rather than be marginalised by their families and stigmatised widely in society due to their identity and sexual practice being considered as deviant and immoral (Low, 2009). Thus, they tend to choose social media as a medium of communication in the aim to gain social support especially emotionally and in terms of guidance. This space also allows them to voice anything freely without any prejudice, thus communication is much easier because they are within the same group and have higher acceptance of each other. Thus, the exposure of social media as a main medium among lesbians not only reveals their increasing population but also pictures the effects of social community marginalisation towards this population which pushed them to create their own world and opened them up to the other social risks.

In this context, society normally only looks at homosexual activity in general, without knowing that discrimination and stigma from the public can affect lesbians, causing them to experience depression, wanting to hide from the world, get involved in drugs, and become suicidal. According to previous studies by Spitzer (2003), Ahmad et al. (2015), and Md Yusof et al. (2014), there are some lesbians who want to change but stigma from society hinder this

from happening. In addition, previous research such as the one by Md Yusof et al. (2014) also stressed that the existence of sexual minority populations can be seen through social media such as facebook, YouTube and blogs. Studies by Shield (2012) and The Equal Rights Trust (ERT) (2012) explain that there are no statistics that show the total population of lesbians in Malaysia as it difficult to retrieve information on them. Wong (2012) also stated that social exclusion limits written documentation. Therefore, this study surveyed social media to form a statistic that can be revealed to the public as guidance for other researchers and to give a clear picture regarding the increase in this population.

### **Methodology**

For this study, the method used was online observation. There are two forms of online observation, which are reactive online observation and non-reactive online observation. For reactive online observation, also known as non-participating observation, respondents are aware about the observation of their behaviour (Biro et al., 2014). The non-reactive online observation method involves respondents who are not made aware of the whole observation process (Biro et al., 2014). Therefore, this study only used the method of non-reactive online observation as the respondents, or lesbian individuals do not know that they are part of this study. The observation method chosen by the researcher enabled the researcher to be directly involved in the research process. This is because the researcher had to list down and take note of the total number of respondents for each social media application. Apart from that, with the researcher's virtual presence, respondents would be less influenced compared to if the researcher was directly present. In this matter, observation was carried out from December 2015 to July 2016. Observation notes on the social media applications were made every three months, ie in December 2015, March 2016 and July 2016. The period of observation was set to see the clear changes and increase in total number of users for each social media application. This study was only carried out until July 2016 due to time constraints and research funds. In the research period, four applications were identified, namely websites, facebook pages, facebook communities and twitter.

## Results

Table 1: Statistics Regarding the Existence of Social Media Applications Related to Lesbians in Malaysia from December 2015 until July 2016

Types of application	Name	Visitors/followers					
		December 2015		March 2016		July 2016	
Websites	OneLoveNet.com	1,700	4.0%	1,800	0.8%	3,900	1.6%
	Lesbian Dating Malaysia	40,861	96.0%	49,922	23.5%	57,202	23.8%
	Malaysia Lesbian Personals	-	-	161,000	75.7%	179,000	74.6%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>42,561</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>212,722</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>240,102</b>	<b>100%</b>
Facebook pages	Lesbian Malaysia	12,977	33.8%	deleted		deleted	
	Malaysia Lesbian	8,506	22.1%	13,470	47.3%	14,107	29.2%
	Malaysia Lesbian Club	7,207	18.7%	7,350	25.8%	7,629	15.8%
	Persatuan Lesbian Malaysia	9,676	25.2%	deleted		deleted	
	Kebangsaan						
	Persatuan Lesbian Malaysia	-	-	2,276	8.0%	2,318	4.8%
	Kebangsaan 2						
	Lesbian Malaysia	88	0.2%	1,491	5.2%	deleted	
	Lesbian Satu Malaysia	-	-	84	0.3%	226	0.5%
	Malaysian Lesbian Love	-	-	1,057	3.7%	deleted	
	Lesbian Club Malaysia	-	-	1,095	3.8%	1172	2.4%
	Whatsapp Lesbian Malaysia	-	-	1,470	5.2%	1717	3.6%
	Lesbian Malaysia	-	-	189	0.7%	255	0.5%
	Malaysian Indian	-	-	-	-	2,052	4.2%
	Malaysia Queer Girl	-	-	-	-	1,094	2.3%
PLU Malaysia	-	-	-	-	1,401	2.9%	
Lesbian SG Confessions	-	-	-	-	15,771	32.7%	
Seksualiti Merdeka	-	-	-	-	555	1.1%	
<b>Total</b>	<b>38,454</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>28,482</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>48,297</b>	<b>100%</b>	
Facebook community	Lesbian Malaysia	634	14.0%	634	10.4%	deleted	
	Lesbian Malaysia	2,972	65.5%	3,225	53.1%	5,500	65.7%
	Lesbian Malaysia Official	759	16.8%	1,366	22.6%	1,600	19.1%
	Lesbian Malaysia	16	0.4%	16	0.3%	103	1.2%
	Malaysia Lesbian Club	68	1.5%	75	1.2%	77	0.9%
	Persatuan Lelaki Lesbian & Perempuan Gay	82	1.8%	82	1.4%	81	1.0%
	Pengkid & Lesbian Malaysia	-	-	670	11.0%	963	11.5%
	Club Lesbian Malaysia	-	-	-	-	50	0.6%
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,531</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>6,068</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>8,374</b>	<b>100%</b>	
Twitter	Lesbian Malaysia @lesbianmalaysia	187	43.2%	194	2.3%	199	2.2%
	lesbianmalaysia @sexyhornylesbo	246	56.8%	258	3.1%	277	3.1%
	A Real Bad Lesbian @MalaysiaSalene	-	-	41	0.5%	43	0.5%
	Zati Lesbian @ZatiLesbian	-	-	2,685	32.3%	2,869	32.0%
	lesbian terengganu @LesbianTganu	-	-	30	0.4%	29	0.3%
	nana eonni @nana_lesbian	-	-	5,107	61.4%	5,540	61.9%
	<b>Total</b>	<b>433</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>8,315</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>8,957</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 1 show the types of applications that can be found in social media that are related to lesbians such a facebook, websites and twitter. In December 2015, there were 42,561 visitors to websites related to lesbians. The website 'Lesbian Dating Malaysia' was visited by the majority of users with a total of 40,861 users at 96.0%. This statistic is followed by facebook pages with a total of 38,454 "likes". The page that registered the highest number of likes is 'Lesbian Malaysia' at 33.8%, or 12,977 likes. The facebook community has 4,531 members, with six communities formed. On twitter, it is found that this medium is less liked by lesbians with the number of followers totalling only 433 users.

However, a review of the statistics in March 2016 saw a huge change in all the social media applications. There were also new facebook pages, facebook communities, twitter accounts and websites that were formed during the period of December 2015 to March 2016. Websites still remain the social media application that is most synonymous with the world of lesbians by registering the highest total number of visitors of 212,722 users, with the website 'Malaysia Lesbian Personals' that was newly formed having the highest total visitors of 161,000 users, equivalent to 75.7%. For facebook pages, there was a big increase with a recorded 51,135 likes. Twitter also saw a very significant increase, with 8,315 followers, higher than the number of members of the facebook communities of 6,110 members in the same month of March 2016.

The increase in the number of visitors to websites related to lesbians continued until the next review carried out in July 2016, with the number of visitors amounting to 240,102 social media users. The website 'Malaysia Lesbian Personals' still remained as the website with the highest number of visitors at 74.6% or 179,000 users. The total number of likes received by facebook pages was very high at 48,297 likes compared to 28,482 likes in March 2016. The page 'Lesbian SG Confessions' recorded the highest number with 15,771 likes and a percentage of 32.7%. As for facebook communities, the total number of members as of July 2016 was 8,374 users, with the page 'Lesbian Malaysia' having the most members of 5,500 users with a percentage of 65.7%. Twitter saw a low increase with 8,957 users. The twitter account 'nana eonni @nana\_lesbian' recorded the highest percentage of 61.9%, or 5540 followers.

## **Conclusion**

According to Md Yusof et al. (2014), members of the LGBT community in Malaysia usually do not reveal themselves to the public. Socially, they are labelled as deviant; thus, this group would need to decide how far they would want to expose their sexual orientation to those around them (Burke, 2004). From the research results, the application with the highest number of visitors during every review carried out is the website, with 42,561 visitors in December 2015 going up to 240,102 visitors in July 2016. In December 2015, the researcher found that the website 'Malaysia Lesbian Personals' was not yet formed until the following review in March 2016. When a review was carried out in March 2016, the website had already amassed the highest number of visitors compared to other websites that had already existed prior to that. The total number of visitors to the website in March 2016 was 161,000 users or 75.7%, going up to 179,000 users at 74.6% during the review in July 2016.

As for facebook pages, the researcher found that there were two facebook pages that could not be found during the review in March 2016, namely the pages for 'Lesbian Malaysia' and '*Persatuan Lesbian Malaysia Kebangsaan*'. '*Persatuan Lesbian Malaysia Kebangsaan*' may have been replaced by '*Persatuan Lesbian Malaysia Kebangsaan 2*' that was formed before the second review was carried out. The page for 'Malaysian Lesbian Love' could not be found during the third review in July 2016. Meanwhile, there were also new pages found, i.e. 'Malaysian Indian', 'Malaysia Queer Girl', 'PLU Malaysia' and 'Lesbian SG Confessions'. Even though it was only a few months from the second review, the page 'Lesbian SG Confessions' had already recorded the highest number of total likes during the third review with 15,771 likes, equivalent to 32.7%. The researcher also found that there was one facebook community, 'Lesbian Malaysia' that had shut down during the third review. The researcher also managed to identify the existence of new facebook communities such as 'Club Lesbian Malaysia'. The facebook community with the highest number of members is 'Lesbian Malaysia' that rose from 65.5% during the first review to 65.7% during the third review. As for twitter, the account 'nana eonni @nana\_lesbian' that was only discovered in the second review recorded the highest number of followers with 5,107 users or 61.4% to 5,540 users, equivalent to 61.9% during the second review in July 2016.

From the results received from all three reviews, the researcher found that websites are the most popular web application among lesbians. Among the factors for this is that visitors do not necessarily need an account to access a particular website. If the website does require an account, visitors are able to create fake accounts without having to reveal their real identities. Apart from that, websites are their main choice because they do not leave a trail as with other social media applications. Users can access the wanted websites and then erase all traces in the "history" for their devices. According to statistics received from the reviews carried out on several types of popular social media applications among lesbians, they clearly show that there has been a rise in the number of lesbians in Malaysia. It is also found that the lesbians indeed use social media applications as a medium for them to communicate among themselves, making these their hiding places that can shield them from the outside world.

As members of the community, lesbians should be treated equally like any other person. This group should not continue to be made the victims of discrimination by the public without any help to guide them back to living normal lives. According to Ismail (2016), among the reasons this group is unable to change themselves is because of the attitude of the general public who like to label, criticise, humiliate, reproach and insult those who act queer and those who are perpetrators of immoral activities. This has caused this minority group to choose to distance themselves from the community who clearly judge and do not accept them. Even though the LGBT group are deemed deviant in their practices, to deal with them in an over the top manner is also considered deviant from the main aim of living together as a community, formed to allow for giving advice to each other (Ismail, 2016).

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