

**BINDINGS OF THE HETEROSEXUAL MATRIX:
KUCHING YOUNG ADULTS' EXPERIENCES
WITH HETERONORMATIVITY IN THE HOME
AND ITS INFLUENCE ON PERCEPTIONS
TOWARDS LGBT IDENTITIES**



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**THIS THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT
FOR THE DEGREE OF BACHELOR OF SOCIAL
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2022

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this thesis has been composed solely by myself and that it has not been submitted, in whole or in part, for any other degree or professional qualification. I also confirm that the material in this thesis is my own except where explicitly stated otherwise in relevant quotations, references, and summaries which have been duly acknowledged.



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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Jeh', written over a horizontal line.

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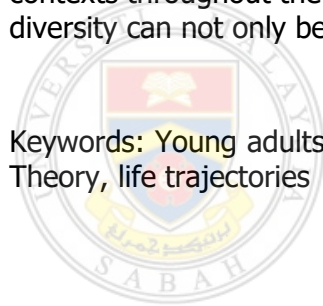
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ABSTRACT

Young adults in Kuching, Sarawak presently live in a society wherein heteronormativity, under the heterosexual matrix, remains prevalent and this inevitably influences their acceptance or rejection towards the development of various queer identities. Hence, this study intends to examine the heteronormative experiences of Kuching's young adults in the home and how these experiences go on to influence their perceptions towards LGBT identities. With that said, this study utilized snowball sampling to identify 15 participants made up of various sexual and gender backgrounds who were then interviewed utilizing semi-structured interviews. The Life Course Theory guided the subsequent thematic analyses of this study's results and found that participants experienced the pervasiveness of heteronormative culture growing up in the home. While this may have caused them to initially reject LGBT identities, various life trajectories enabled them to dismantle and rid themselves of the heteronormative ideals which were instilled deeply within them. Conclusively, this study aims to broaden our understanding of heteronormative culture and how it subsequently impacts people by factoring social, cultural, historical, and political contexts throughout the life course. This is done in the hopes that sexual and gender diversity can not only be normalized and accepted but celebrated in the long run.

Keywords: Young adults, heteronormativity, heterosexual matrix, LGBT, Life Course Theory, life trajectories

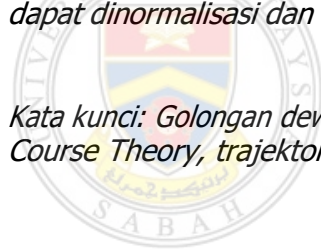


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ABSTRAK

Golongan dewasa muda di Kuching, Sarawak kini hidup dalam masyarakat di mana 'heteronormativity', di bawah 'heterosexual matrix', kekal berleluasa dan ini telahpun mempengaruhi penerimaan atau penolakan mereka terhadap identiti LGBT. Oleh itu, kajian ini ingin mengkaji pengalaman 'heteronormative' golongan dewasa muda Kuching di rumah dan bagaimana pengalaman ini seterusnya mempengaruhi persepsi mereka terhadap pelbagai identiti LGBT. Dengan itu, kajian ini menggunakan 'snowball sampling' untuk mengenalpasti 15 responden terdiri daripada pelbagai latar belakang seksual dan jantina yang kemudiannya ditemu bual menggunakan temu bual separa struktur. Life Course Theory telah membimbing analisis tematik dan hasil kajian ini dan mendapati bahawa peserta-peserta mengalami budaya 'heteronormative' yang amat berleluasa ketika membesar di rumah. Walaupun pada mulanya fenomena ini menyebabkan mereka menolak identiti LGBT, pelbagai trajektori kehidupan membolehkan mereka untuk meringgirkan kepercayaan dan budaya 'heteronormative' yang ditanamkan secara mendalam dalam insan mereka. Secara konklusif, kajian ini bertujuan untuk meluaskan pemahaman kita terhadap budaya heteronormatif dan bagaimana ia memberi kesan kepada orang ramai dengan memfaktorkan konteks sosial, budaya, sejarah dan politik sepanjang perjalanan hidup. Ini dilakukan dengan harapan kepelbagaian seksual dan jantina bukan sahaja dapat dinormalisasi dan diterima tetapi diraikan dalam jangka masa yang panjang.

Kata kunci: Golongan dewasa muda, heteronormativity, heterosexual matrix, LGBT, Life Course Theory, trajektori kehidupan



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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

- LGBT** - Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender
- AMAB** - Assigned Male at Birth
- AFAB** - Assigned Female at Birth



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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

There are no reservations towards the fact that heterosexuality is, by all means, considered the default sexuality in modern, contemporary society. Which begs the question: what would this entail for individuals who exist outside the confines of this box? Accordingly, Bell (2009) notes that the very implication that heterosexuality serves as the standard sexuality heavily implements the notion that anything but would be irreversibly deemed 'abnormal' or a sign of 'deviance'- this is a concept known as heteronormativity. With that said, heteronormativity is known for marginalizing or placing strict sanctions on those who exist outside of the heterosexual sphere on the basis that privilege and power are held by heterosexuals who are considered the ideal of society (Jackson, 2006; Magnus & Lundin, 2016).

To put it simply, the term 'heteronormativity' is a combination of the words 'heterosexual' and 'normativity' which refers to the establishment of a norm. It was first coined by Michael Warner in the early 90s (Herz & Johansson, 2015) and has since gone on to become one of the central concepts within gender and queer studies. Basically, the concept of heteronormativity acts as a powerful, intangible tool with its strict beliefs and practices which perpetually establishes the idea that heterosexuality is associated with the 'normal', thus deeming it as the assumed natural form of sexuality. With that said, it is clear that most, if not all, institutions in our society perpetuate the idea that the heteronormative nuclear family is the standard and preferred family. Consequently, societies' preference for the heteronormative nuclear family wrongly marginalizes families who do not fit the ideal.

Bell (2009) refers to this phenomenon as 'The Heterosexual Matrix' which encompasses gender, sex, and desire, and binds these together through rituals, assumptions, and socio-spatial practices. This places individuals into strict binaries:

the male sex is, by default, the masculine gender whilst the female sex is associated with aspects of femininity. A prime example of this matrix would be the heterosexual married couple which is commonly perceived as a romantic, sexual, reproductive, and monogamous relationship between two individuals of the opposite sex. This relationship is further cemented as the norm through religious or civil ceremonies aside from being supported by countless institutions such as the government, family and et cetera (Bell, 2009).

Thus, this study adds onto the discussion by examining how heteronormative culture which stems from the home, arguably one of the most important places for an individual to curate personal gender and sexual identities (Stacey, 2021), go on to influence Kuching youths' lifelong perceptions towards the LGBT community or the establishment of LGBT identities as a whole. This is because after further analysis of the existing literature, it was concluded that there exists a research gap in terms of how heteronormativity affects young adults, specifically in a conservative Southeast Asian country like Malaysia. Therefore, this reasoning validates this study as it may provide a potential framework which can aid future researchers who intend to conduct studies on gender or sexuality in Southeast Asia.

1.2 Problem Statement

According to Woodford *et al.* (2018), one of the main issues faced by the LGBT community is that they are continuously subjected to heterosexist prejudices- an ideology that perpetuates stigmatization of any non-heterosexual forms of behavior, identity, relationship, or community. Within context of Malaysia, a recent survey conducted by Manalastas *et al.* (2017, as cited Tan *et al.*, 2021) reported that about three-fifths of 1,300 Malaysians held negative perceptions of LGBT people wherein the predominant perception was of same-sex attraction being not morally justifiable. Further discrimination of the LGBT community in Malaysia is promptly escalated through pathological referencing of queer identities as mentally disordered aside from negative portrayals and representations of LGBT people on media (Manalastas *et al.*, 2017; Singaravelu & Cheah, 2020, as cited in Tan *et al.*, 2021). Consequently, results from Woodford *et al.*'s (2018) study notes that LGBT individuals' experiences of blatant and subtle heterosexism were each associated with an increased risk of depression and attempted suicide.

Accordingly, contemporary Asian societies may harbour more pessimistic perceptions of LGBT identities as traditional family values and gender roles still hold a tight grip on them (Feng *et al.*, 2012). At home, individuals of Asian ancestry are continuously faced with obligations of preserving the family lineage aside from being bombarded with strict cultural standards of femininity and masculinity. In turn, homosexuality can be perceived as a threat considering it derails the traditional concept of the heterosexual married couple and seemingly jeopardizes human reproduction and the maintenance of the family line. For example, Kong (2011, as cited in Chan, 2017) refers to this phenomenon within context of Chinese culture as 'familial heteronormativity' which describes an individual's self-obligation to honour their family's wishes. Specifically, this sort of heteronormativity places a person's perceived worth on the basis of meeting certain requirements such as fulfilling their parents' wishes of marrying and reproducing offspring to continue familial bloodlines and ties.

Thus, the harsh reality for LGBT individuals is to seek out alternatives in order to escape such discrimination and oppression under the reign of heteronormativity. For example, as queer people continue to be marginalized and oppressed in real life, online communities on social media platforms help to enhance the well-being of LGBT individuals aside from allowing them to seek emotional and social support (Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011). Therefore, it is important to determine the impacts in which heteronormativity has and how it gradually shapes an individual towards acceptance or discrimination of the LGBT community. It is with this in mind that the findings of this study may help in developing LGBT-friendly policies that may aid in dismantling heteronormativity and cisheterosexist practices which continue to oppress and discriminate Malaysia's LGBT community.

In relation to that, Feng *et al.*'s (2012) study strengthens the relevance of this proposed research as they've highlighted that in order to work towards establishing positive perceptions of the LGBT community, there must be an understanding of the factors related to those perceptions. Despite that, majority of the existing literature on these particular issues have mostly been conducted in Western societies (Feng *et al.*, 2012). Moreover, the authors also found that young adult's perceptions of LGBT identities have not yet been established in non-Western societies. Ergo, the present study addresses this research gap by exploring Kuching

young adults' experiences with heteronormativity and consequent perceptions of LGBT identities.

Clearly, there is a clear lack of understanding of just how ingrained and widespread heteronormativity is in Malaysian society. Thus, this study aspires to add to the existing body of literature on heteronormative culture and its effects on the youth. By broadening our understanding on this topic, it may help people to come to terms with the existence of gender and sexual non-conformity in a conservative, developing country like Malaysia. Besides that, this study hopes to disrupt heteronormativity and, by doing so, possibly decrease the stigmatization surrounding LGBT identities. In light of that, LGBT people may then be able to openly experience more support and comfort in expressing themselves.

1.3 Research Question

This research intends to address the following questions:

1. What are Kuching young adults' experiences with heteronormativity in the home?
2. How has heteronormativity influenced Kuching's young adults' perceptions towards LGBT identities?

1.4 Research Objective

This research aims to achieve the following objectives:

1. To ascertain Kuching young adults' experiences with heteronormativity in the home.
2. To identify how heteronormativity has influenced Kuching young adults' perceptions towards LGBT identities.

1.5 Research Methodology

This research examined the experiences of Kuching young adults with heteronormativity and is thus designed as a qualitative study. Through observations,

interviews and reflections, researchers are able to gain a better understanding of the views of the participants, interpret their meanings, and formulate themes that are rooted within the data.

1.5.1 Qualitative Approach

According to Creswell (2014), a qualitative approach is characterized as having a constructivist worldview, ethnographic design and observation of behaviour. That is to say that qualitative approaches can be utilized in research which seeks to establish the meaning of a phenomenon from the perspectives and explanations of its participants. In other words, a qualitative approach to research would require narrative designs and open-ended interviewing strategies during its implementation. Specifically, for this study, the researcher sought to examine an issue related to how heteronormative experiences have affected Kuching young adults' perceptions towards LGBT identities throughout their life course. As such, to study these specific life trajectories, semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect these specific experiences through the utilization of a narrative approach. With that said, a qualitative approach allowed room for creativity and innovation which worked well within the researcher's established framework. This in turn undoubtedly created a strong stimulus to pursue topics and issues that are of personal interest which may work towards creating a better society for the LGBT community and everyone in not only Kuching, but hopefully Malaysia as a whole in the future.

1.5.2 Research Instrument

As mentioned prior, this study utilized semi-structured interviews as its research instrument. Thus, questions were constructed based on Badgett's (2009) guide on how best to proceed when asking specific questions for research pertaining to sexuality. Questions were also prepared by closely following the five (5) principles of the Life Course Theory in accordance with this study's objectives, that is: i.) The Principle of Life-Span Development, ii.) The Principle of Agency iii.) The Principle of Time and Place, iv.) The Principle of Timing, and v.) The Principle of Linked Lives (Hammack, 2005). The final product has three sections aptly named Section A: Demography, Section B: Experiences with Heteronormativity in the Home, and

Section C: Influence of Heteronormativity on Perceptions Towards LGBT Identities. In relation to that, each section has five (5) questions, twelve (12) questions and eleven (11) questions, respectively. Questions for the first section were constructed in order to obtain basic background information of the participants such as their age, gender, sexuality, occupation, and level of education. Next, the second section took into account Elder *et al.*'s (2003) Life Course Theory by constructing questions which helped to make sense of the diversity of lived experiences which inevitably influence the history of individuals, cultures, and societies. Expanding on that, questions under the second section were made to understand the multifaceted nature of what makes up a person's gender and sexuality, in this case being Kuching young adults' experiences with heteronormative culture in the home. Lastly, the third section heavily referenced Johnson's (2015) book on the relationship between heterosexuality and love in contemporary society and, as such, these questions were constructed to examine how LGBT identities or relationships have been impacted as a direct consequence of heteronormativity's prevalence. This included questions regarding the extent in which heteronormativity has influenced Kuching young adults' perceptions towards the development or acceptance of LGBT identities.

1.5.3 Research Design

Accordingly, a research design is defined as an arrangement of conditions or collection which guide a study. For example, this specific study will utilize a descriptive research design and will thus carry out a case study involving Kuching's young adults and their experiences with heteronormativity which in turn builds personal opinions and beliefs of the LGBT community.

1.5.4 Research Sampling

Since this study is designed as qualitative research, snowball sampling was utilized to identify and gather potential participants. Snowball sampling is a sampling technique commonly used in the field of social sciences (Kirchherr & Charles, 2018) where the researcher would first identify and gather a small number of participants who fit the research criteria. These very participants would then be asked to recommend others who may fit the research criteria and who might also be willing participants, who in turn recommend other potential participants, and this process would repeat all over again. Hence, the term 'snowball' is derived from the fact that the sample will continue growing like a rolling snowball if more than one referral per interviewee is provided. It should also be noted that the snowball sampling procedure is a non-probability sampling technique. That is to say that it is an inherently subjective method of selecting specific participants which fit this study. As it is a non-random method, it is a quick, easy and inexpensive way of obtaining data. Thus, considering that the researcher is currently based in Kuching wherein the COVID-19 pandemic might still pose potential hindrances to their research, it was found that snowball sampling may provide some leniency and aid in helping them find and access participants easily in the long run.

1.5.5 Data Collection

With regards to the COVID-19 pandemic and social distancing standards, most participants preferred to undergo interviews virtually using online platforms such as Google Meet as they felt comfortable in the safety of their homes aside from it being much easier for them to access. Only a select few agreed to face-to-face interviews. To ensure the quality of transcripts, interviews were recorded and transcribed within 24 to 48 hours. With that said, data analysis was conducted after a full transcription of each interview has been completed. Moreover, interviews were conducted in English and all quotes are verbatim transcriptions of the interviews. Considering the subject matter at hand, participants' consent and confidentiality were prioritized and it should be noted that they voluntarily participated in this study and were not coerced, forced nor blackmailed into joining. Relevant data from the interview sessions were then transcribed and subsequently analyzed into themes.

1.5.5.1 In-Depth Interview

This study employed semi-structured interviews as its instrument. Accordingly, participants were interviewed with questions relevant to this study's two objectives- their experiences with heteronormativity and how it has influenced their perceptions of LGBT identities- within an hour or so. Specifically, the aforementioned semi-structured interviews were mostly made up of open-ended questions as these may allow participants to elaborate, discuss, or debate certain questions, thus enabling the researcher to obtain more in-depth answers in comparison to the employment of other research instruments.

1.5.6 Data Analysis

The results of this study were analyzed within context of the Life Course Theory due to its appropriateness in examining how certain life course trajectories- in the case of this study, the heteronormative experiences of Kuching's young adults in the home- go on to influence their perceptions towards LGBT identities well into their adult years. Additionally, as this study uses verbatim transcripts, the Life Course Theory encourages the researcher to procure a better understanding of participants' views, interpret their meanings, before formulating themes within context of their social, cultural, political and historical timelines. As such, in this study, verbatim transcripts were coded and analyzed thoroughly to look for relevant themes within the data.

1.6 Significance of Study

This study is essential as there exists a research gap which specifically examines the roles in which the family institution play towards displays of heteronormativity and how it fosters either acceptance or denial of the existence of LGBT identities in the long run. Furthermore, there remains a scarcity of LGBT studies conducted by Malaysian scholars; even then, a majority of these focus primarily on religious institutions' role in enforcing heteronormativity among Muslim men. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, this is the first study to provide a non-Western investigation of the pervasiveness of heteronormative culture in the home and how

exposure to such experiences influences perceptions of LGBT identities amongst Kuching young adults in the long run.

Besides that, findings from Evenson's (2019) study have shown that many of their participants suffered from heteronormativity for most of their lives in the sense that they could not properly develop identities of their own. To put it simply, they identified as heterosexual because they were not aware of the existence of any other identities, or because the default was heterosexuality and was thus expected of them. Moreover, several participants, even when referring to their own sexual orientation, thought of it as 'wrong' or as something that needed to be 'fixed' (Evenson, 2019: 75). To right this, some were found to have forced themselves into different-sex relationships in an effort to fit into the norm of heteronormativity. Therefore, this study hopes to contribute to the understanding of heteronormativity's pervasiveness on unsuspecting individuals and possibly derail how it enforces the stigmatization of LGBT identities.

Moreover, findings from Woodford *et al.*'s (2018) study further reinforces the significance of this study as it has been identified that prolonged acts of microaggression, discrimination and oppression stemming from heteronormativity have led to an increase in depressive symptoms and suicide attempts amongst LGBT individuals. With knowledge of this fact, this study aims to aid the existing LGBT community in Kuching through the identification of how heteronormativity presents itself in the home of Kuching's young adults. By understanding heteronormativity, there may plausibly be a construction of methods to contend its adverse effects before it influences the perceptions of future generations towards LGBT identities negatively.

1.7 Thesis Organization

This thesis is comprised of six chapters, firstly, Chapter 1 which provides a detailed description of the study. To be specific, in this chapter, the background of the study will be discussed, followed by the research problem, research questions, research objectives, research methodology, data collection, interview selection, significance of the study, and the organization of the thesis. Next, Chapter 2 encompasses the literature review section wherein the researcher will analyze and discuss relevant

studies within context of heteronormativity which would be able to provide some contextual clues and broaden the researcher's understanding. In Chapter 3, the researcher describes the conceptual frameworks and theories which will be utilized throughout the course of this research. Accordingly, Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 provides an in-depth description of this study's findings while corroborating it with this study's theory for further analyses. Lastly, Chapter 6 sums up the findings of this study before touching upon various limitations faced by the researcher throughout the process. The chapter goes on to provide some recommendations for practical applications of this study on top of recommendations for what future research should cover and look out for on this topic.



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