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## **The Representation of Homosexuality - A Content Analysis in a Malaysian Newspaper**

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## **Abstract**

Homosexual activities in Malaysia have been around for a long time but it was not considered to be dangerous until it was highlighted by the local press (Ho, 1998). The media played a crucial role in communicating and popularizing homosexuality, which forced and provoked unparalleled discussion on sex and sexuality which are considered taboo subjects in this country (Tan, 1999).

In Malaysia, homosexuality is considered illegal and is punishable with long prison sentences of up to 20 years and canings. The establishment of People's Voluntary Anti-Homosexual Movement (PASRAH) an organization that has vowed to eradicate homosexuality by imposing severe penalties and closing down gay gathering places, has caused quite a stir. Homosexuality was suddenly branded as a "threat" to the society, forcing the society to openly discuss the issue of homosexuality.

This kind of sentiment reflects that there is an increasing amount of intolerance or resistance towards people whose sexuality preference is different from the rest of the society. Can the conservative Malaysian society be able to treat the homosexual equally based on the sexual orientation?

This paper examines how the Malaysian print media i.e., *News Straits Times* represents the issues of homosexuality and the stance of homosexuals in Malaysia. These representations, should tell us something about the representation of homosexuals as well as how the media construct the social reality of homosexuals/homophobia.

In order to determine this, the media's coverage on issues pertaining to homosexuality is explored through a combination of qualitative and quantitative analysis of content as published in i.e., *New Straits Times*.

The findings indicate that the media relied heavily on experts' sources i.e., prominent politicians and religious leaders when it comes to expressing judgment. As such, there was a less favourable representation towards homosexuality - 74% of the news articles were framed in a negative way. Furthermore, the media by highlighting the seriousness of the issue informs its readers that homosexuality is not acceptable within Malaysian culture.

**Key words: Homosexuality, Media, Malaysia, New Straits Times**

## **1.0 Introduction**

Many people tend to rely on the media especially the press on what is happening around them and to form public opinion on issues. The media reflects and reproduces the dominant ideology of their times – that is, the prevailing ways of looking at and making sense of the world. In other words, the media decides on what news should comprise, what is important or what the public should know (Sei-Hill Kim et al, 2002)

According to David & Pavlik (2003), an event is deemed important or worthy of discourse, if it merits a mention in the news media. The media achieves this by framing on event or events in such a manner that it will hold public interest. Majority of the individuals still rely on the newspaper as the primary resource of information (Feeley & Vincent, 2007).

This paper examines how the Malaysian print media i.e., *New Straits Times* represents the issues of homosexuality and the stance of homosexuals in Malaysia. These representations, tell us how the media construct the social reality of homosexuals and homophobia. The media agenda affects the public agenda, as stated by Tan (1999), the media had played a crucial role in communicating and foreground homosexuality, which forced and provoked unparalleled discussion on sex and sexuality which are considered taboo subjects in this country. The potential exists that the media could influence matters, control innovation because it remains the potent way of informing society on a mass scale about things (Gideon, 2003).

Homosexuality refers to sexual behavior or attraction between people of the same sex, or to a sexual orientation. As a sexual orientation, homosexuality refers to "having sexual and romantic attraction primarily or exclusively to members of one's own sex"; "it also refers to an individual's sense of personal and social identity based on those attractions, behaviors expressing them, and membership in a community of others who share them." (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homosexuality>)

The term *gay* is frequently used as a synonym for homosexual; female homosexuality is often referred to as lesbianism. At different times and in different cultures, homosexual behaviour have been variously approved of, tolerated, punished, and banned<sup>1</sup>.

Attitudes toward homosexuality are generally in flux, partially as a result of increased political activism (gay rights movement) and efforts by homosexuals to be seen not as aberrant personalities but as differing from "normal" individuals only in their sexual orientation<sup>2</sup>. The conflicting views of homosexuality—as a variant but normal human

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/270637/homosexuality>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/270637/homosexuality>

sexual behaviour on one hand, and as psychologically deviant behaviour on the other—remain present in most societies in the 21st century<sup>3</sup>.

The society condemns homosexuality, either directly or indirectly by accepting the idea of homosexuality (its existences) but prohibits its expression (Kam-lun, 2005).

The findings of Conrad and Markers (2001) also indicate that media construction can influence the public image of homosexuality, how we think about homosexual orientation and how we treat people who are gay. This is due to the role played by the media by constructing identity and social realities. It is a place where the changing culture and values of society are being displayed, constructed and communicated (Gideon, 2003).

The trial of the former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim in September 1998 had brought out many issues (Offord, 1999) and concerns about homosexuality. Two years of regular references to sodomy (the charges) since September, 1999 in the mass media appeared to have left an impression on the public (Liebhold, 2001).

On the other hand, the newspaper plays a central role in shaping political and social reality because the editors and publishers are usually members of the elite (Weill and Castenada, 2004).

In Malaysia, the major mainstream newspapers are owned and/or under the control of the parties of the ruling coalition government, the Barisan Nasional (Zaharom, 2002). As Manjit Bhatia (in LJ, 2002) put it, that anti-homosexual behavior laws are being used utterly selectively by politicians like the former prime minister Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad to persecute his political challengers and other dissenters to his throne.

### **The Malaysian Context**

It is not part of the Asian culture to flaunt sexuality or sexual intentions, thereby conflating the rights to “flaunt” with the right to express sexual orientation and gender identity, the right to spectacle with the right to be seen and heard without fear<sup>4</sup>.

In Malaysia, homosexual activities have been around for a long time but not discussed in the open until it was highlighted by the local press (Ho, 1998) especially during the trial of the former Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim in September 1998. An interview with Abdul Kadir Che Kob, an officer from the Malaysian Islamic Affairs Department describes homosexuals as “shameless people” and homosexuality is a sin worse than murder (Ramakrishnan, 2001). Herek (1991), points out that long standing cultural myths and stereotypes that depict lesbian and gay men as immoral, criminal, sick and drastically different from what most members of society would be considered “normal” (p 134).

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/270637/homosexuality>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.iglhrc.org/cgi-bin/iowa/article/takeaction/resourcecenter/238.html>

Malaysia is a Muslim country and homosexuality is illegal. Lesbians, gay, bisexual and transgender in Malaysians are often seen as immoral and treated as deviants and criminals. As homosexuality is a crime, Malaysia does not recognize same-sex unions or have anti-discrimination laws for sexual orientation or gender identity.<sup>5</sup> In Malaysia, homosexuality is considered illegal and a sin that is punishable with long prison sentences of up to 20 years and caning (Hamidah, 2004).

The establishment of People's Voluntary Anti-Homosexual Movement (PASRAH), an organization that has vowed to eradicate homosexuality by imposing severe penalties and closing down gay gathering places (Ho, 1998), further adds to the seriousness of the government in its efforts to eradicate the society of homosexuals. According to Tan (1999), this kind of sentiment reflects that there is an increasing amount of hatred and intolerance towards a group of people whose sexual preference is different from the rest of the society.

Furthermore, Malaysia being a Muslim country does not condone homosexuality. This is supported by the statement of Datuk Hasmy Agam, Malaysian permanent representative to the United Nation and president of UN Islamic Group, that "homosexuality from the religious point of view is simply wrong and acts against the order of nature. No Islamic nation would think of recognizing the practice in their legal system" (NST, 2nd July 2001 - p10). This clearly indicates the Islamic views on homosexuality that condemn sexual acts between members of the same sex (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homosexuality>). Other religions too regard homosexual acts as morally wrong. For example, several leading Hindu organizations and leaders have called for the continuation of the illegal status of homosexuality in India.

There is relatively little research in this area of study in Malaysia, as such this study provides an insight into the representation of homosexuality in print media i.e., *New Straits Times* and how the media portray the issue to its readers. As stated by Ban & Adams (1997) news reflects what is really important to a society, minority coverage in mainstream news reporting provides insight into the (social) status of minorities.

## 2.0 Theoretical Orientation

Utilizing the theoretical framework of Agenda Setting, the *New Straits Times* was tested to see the extent of the dominant role played by the Agenda Setting theory in deciding the articles that were published on homosexuality. The question is how had homosexuality been portrayed by a newspaper.

McComb and Shaw (1972), coined the term "Agenda Setting". It is referred to as "the power to structure issues in the media in such a way that people think about what they are told, but at no level do they think what they are". As Conrad and Markers (2001) asserted, that through everyday news work – selecting what to report, locating and quoting experts commentary, and organizing and presenting the news, news organizations

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<sup>5</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LGBT\\_rights\\_in\\_Malaysia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/LGBT_rights_in_Malaysia)

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provide an important piece for the public discourse. Their view is also supported by Yuksel (2003) that the media over time, by featuring some issues more prominently and some issues less prominently and still other issues not at all, gives us a sense of what issues are important or salient of the issues, namely the degree of political importance a particular issue possesses. The media achieves this by framing on an event or events in such a manner that it will hold public interest.

What the media finds important will eventually be mirrored in what people think is important. The agenda setting role of the news media is a form of hegemony that is evident the world over (David and Pavlik, 2003). Allan, S., 1998 (cited in David & Pavlik, 2003) said that news media can be viewed as a mechanism that produces output that serves the interest of a ruling class or bloc. It is prevalent in Malaysia as media is largely owned or directly controlled by the 14 political parties which constitute the ruling party (Kenyon & Marijoribanks, 2007). Media Prima owns the New Straits Press (M) Bhd (NSTP) which publishes the English language newspaper New Straits Times, New Sunday Times, and the Malay language newspaper Berita Harian, Berita Minggu and Harian Metro – the Sistem Televisyen Malaysia Bhd (TV3), 8TV, Channel 9 and ntv 7; this group is said to be close to UMNO, one of the major parties in the Barisan Nasional coalition which is the ruling party (Mustafa, 2005) and is also know to be pro-government<sup>6</sup>.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were examined:

- How was homosexuality represented in the newspaper? What sorts of news stories were given importance and were there recurring themes?
- How did the media define the significance/importance of homosexuality issue in terms of:
  1. number of articles
  2. standpoint/treatment of articles
  3. type of reporting- i.e. the homosexuality issue was dominant or just mentioned
  4. placement of articles
  5. size of the articles
  6. types of headlines used i.e. informative or interpretive headline
  7. Viewpoints of the articles based on themes (using Kuhar, (2003) categorization)

### **3.0 Methodology**

Content analysis helps reveal how a minority group i.e. homosexuals are portrayed in the mass media, which, in turn, reflects the access these groups have to the mainstream

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<sup>6</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New\\_Straits\\_Times](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Straits_Times)

media (Martin, 2008). The media coverage of the homosexuality issues was explored through a combination of quantitative and qualitative analysis of content.

The quantitative method was used to measure the duration and frequency of the news reported and qualitative analysis was used to interpret the viewpoints presented by the news articles. This supports what Smith, 1975 (cited in Yan 2006, p. 2), suggests that the same blend of both quantitative and qualitative analysis should be used

“..because qualitative analysis deals with forms and antecedent-consequent patterns of form, while quantitative analysis deals with duration and frequency of form.”

In order to determine this, the sample of study was focused on one of the major English newspapers in Malaysia, i.e. The New Straits Times (NST), established in 1845; it is one of Malaysia's oldest and largest newspaper publishers. The NST is widely read and has a circulation of 139,517 and readership of 339,000 (Media Guide, 2006) furthermore, it was selected based on availability (ease of collection of data) and it had a complete online database of news archive from 1998 to 2006.

For the purpose of this study, the time frame period covered was from 1<sup>st</sup> September 1998 to 31<sup>st</sup> December 2006. This period was chosen as it was the time when the trial of the former Deputy Prime Minister was on going, which had attracted a large degree of attention and extensive coverage was given by the press on the issue of homosexuality, which lasted till the end of the trial in March, 1999. The issue was again highlighted in the media during the release of the former Deputy Prime Minister in 2005. Only local news articles pertaining to the issue of homosexuality was considered. News articles mentioning the trial of the former Deputy Prime Minister case was excluded due to the sensitivity of the issue, moreover the news coverage was mainly on the court proceedings. Foreign news reports on homosexuality issue were also excluded as the purpose of the study was to analyze the local media reports on the issue of homosexuality.

The search for the news articles were done manually through the use of online database of news archive. First, each news articles from 1<sup>st</sup> September 1998 to 31<sup>st</sup> December 2006 were scanned and if the word “homosexuality” appeared the news articles is done and marked. The unit of analysis was the whole item, whether it was a news story, an editorial, a letter to the editor, or an opinion column.

Analysing the content, we wanted to establish and document the basic features and characteristics of the newspaper reporting and the way in which the newspaper represented issues regarding homosexuals. To ascertain the impact and the relevance of the articles, an assessment of the following categories were done: number of articles by date/month/year, standpoint of the articles, types of reporting, placement of articles, size of the articles, the headlines used, and the viewpoint presented in the story. This is similar to the analysis procedure used by Zorica, R. et.al. (2004), and Conrad & Markens (2001).

The limitation of this study was that, as the news articles were obtained online, we were unable to count the number of total articles with the word “homosexuality” against the total number of other articles that appeared in the newspaper and the space allotted to news articles on homosexuality issues in comparison to other news articles.

Next, a latent coding method was used. This method is best used for tapping the underlying meaning of communication, because people communicate meaning in many implicit ways that depend on content, and not just in specific words (Neuman, 2003). These news articles were coded into themes to see if there was an emergence of certain themes. As stated by Ma & Hildebrandt (1993) the most important indicators of coverage content are, of course, themes or topics, since they reflect what the press staff perceives as newsworthy about a group. ). The coding of the news articles were coded by both the authors, who are familiar with the technique of content analysis. To minimize subjectivity, the authors made their judgment only on the literal meaning of each news articles.

The themes were coded based on what Kuhar (2003) developed in his study, the five basis mechanisms of media representation of homosexuality: stereotyping, medicalization, sexualization, secrecy and normalization. Initially, the authors attempted to code the news articles based on Kuhar (2003) classification but the news articles were not in accordance with Kuhar (2003) categorization (please Appendix A). As such, the authors used Kuhar (2003) categorization as a base and the underlying implicit meaning of the news articles, the categorization of the news articles fell into the following categories: sex and sexuality is a taboo; religion and homosexuality; homosexuality and punishment; homosexuality and social illness; homosexuality as a western culture and the censorship of homosexuality in the entertainment industry.

The following operational definitions of the categories were used in the study (Ban & Adams, 1997):

Positive - when a news article or an editorial contained any of the attributes, relationships, terms, expressions and phrases showing positive image of homosexuals, it was coded as positive.

Negative- when a news article or an editorial contained any of the attributes, relationships, terms, expressions and phrases portraying a negative image of homosexuals, it was coded negative.

Neutral - when a news articles or an editorial was neither positive nor negative towards the homosexuals, it was coded neutral. In other words, the contents of the news articles in this category showed a balance of, or no, positive and negative arguments

## **4.0 Findings**

### **a. Number of Articles**

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A total of 323 articles with the word “homosexuality” appeared in the New Straits Times from the period of September 1998 to December 2006. These articles appeared in the various sections of the newspaper but were mainly in the main paper - prime news, world news, letter to editors and in the Life and Times – feature articles and entertainment.

About two fifths of the articles were concentrated between September 1998 to March 1999 which includes the trial of former deputy prime minister which were mainly the court proceedings and from 2004 to 2005 during the appointment of a gay bishop in America and the release of the former deputy prime minister which had sparked intense discussion on the issue of homosexuality in Malaysia. Only 86 local news articles were analyzed (excluding the former Deputy Prime Minister case).

The graph below indicates the number of articles published and analyzed from the year 1998 to 2006.

*Table 4.1: Number of Articles*

Year	Published Articles		Analyzed Articles	
	No	%	No	%
1998 (Sept –Dec)	41	12.7	8	9.4
1999	41	12.7	5	6.0
2000	33	10.2	9	10.6
2001	23	7.1	8	9.4
2002	32	10.0	15	17.5
2003	31	9.5	13	15.2
2004	45	14.0	9	10.6
2005	39	12.0	9	10.6
2006	38	11.8	10	11.7
	323	100	86	100

## **b. Portrayal of Homosexuality**

The portrayal of homosexuality is divided into three categories that are negative, neutral and positive. In negative articles, homosexuality is seemed as deviant, an outrage by the public and leaders, against the norms and totally unaccepted by religion. Out of the 86 articles analyzed 64 articles were portrayed in a negative manner.

In Malaysia, virtually all mainstream religion has something negative to say about homosexuality. These negative depictions of homosexuals portray them as deviant, unacceptable and against the religion.

As for neutral articles, it is defined as no commitment made by writers, for example, homosexuality may be due to genetics or the nurturing process and thus is unavoidable. There are 13 articles that are categorized under this category. Only nine articles are seen Language in India [www.languageinindia.com](http://www.languageinindia.com) 32  
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as positive where homosexuality is seen as basic human rights, freedom of choice and even portrayed in theatres. The table below will illustrate further on the portrayal of homosexuality.

**Table: 4.2: Portrayal of Homosexuality**

Year	Positive		Neutra		Negative		Total	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
1998	2	2.3	1	1.2	5	5.8	8	9.3
1999	0	0	0	0	5	5.8	5	5.8
2000	2	2.3	1	1.2	6	7.0	9	10.5
2001	1	1.2	2	2.3	5	5.8	8	9.3
2002	0	0	1	1.2	14	16.2	15	17.4
2003	1	1.2	1	1.2	11	12.8	13	15.0
2004	1	1.2	1	1.2	7	8.1	9	10.5
2005	1	1.2	4	4.6	4	4.6	9	10.5
2006	1	1.2	2	2.3	7	8.1	10	11.6
TOTAL	9	10.6	13	15.2	64	74.4	86	100

**Examples of statements those are negative:**

*PAS hudud law – harsh punishment for sodomy, incest, bisexuality, homosexuality and lesbianism (NST, 10<sup>th</sup> July 2002 p. 10)*

*We simply cannot make ‘halal’ of what is not. There is no way we can accept homosexuality or encourage the use of condoms outside of marriage. (NST, 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2003 p.8)*

**Examples of statements those are positive:**

*Suara Rakyat Malaysia also expressed its concern that PASRAH action was an attempt to incite discrimination of a minority group. (NST, 23<sup>rd</sup> Oct 1998 p. 6)*

*Short film festival in USM showcase issue that are taboo in society such as homosexuality and random sex. (NST, 18th Jan 2004 p.3)*

**Examples of statements those are neutral:**

*Homosexuality had a largely genetic basic (research done in 1993) but backlash from the political party. (NST, 26<sup>th</sup> Sept 2004 p. 24)*

*Homosexuality is not hereditary but through a nurturing*

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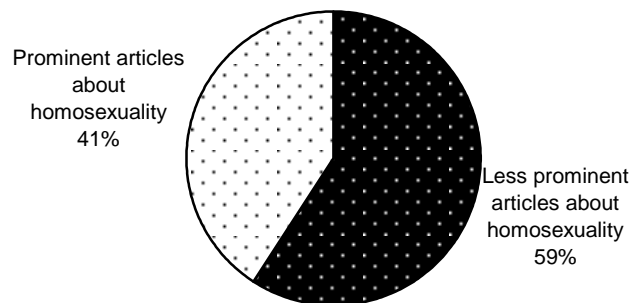
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process. (NST, 24<sup>th</sup> Feb 2001 p. 11)

### c. Types of Reporting

Types of reporting show if homosexuality issues were prominent or less prominent in the articles. Prominent issues are articles that discuss the homosexuality issues. Less prominent are articles that do not discuss about homosexuality but has words related to homosexuality in it. The chart shows that out of total articles analyzed, 41% (35) of the articles were prominent issues and 59% (51) of the articles were less prominent.

**Types of Reporting**



### d. Placement of Articles

Out of the 86 articles published, 66 articles on homosexuality were published in the News Straits Times whereby 47 of the articles were in the main paper of the newspaper and 19 were in the Pull out especially in Life and Times. The rest of the articles (20) were published in the New Sunday Times, 6 in the main paper and 14 in the pull out. (Refer Table 4.3). 53 articles had appeared in the main newspaper, indicating the importance given to the news articles in terms of accessibility and readership, a clear indication of the salient of the issue.

*Table 4.3: Placement of Articles*

Year	News Straits Times		News Sunday Times		TOTAL
	Main Section	Pull Out	Main Section	Pull Out	
199	4	3	1	0	8
199	3	0	1	1	5
200	5	4	0	0	9
200	4	3	0	1	8
200	8	6	0	1	15
200	8	2	2	1	13
200	3	1	1	4	9
200	5	0	1	3	9
200	7	0	0	3	10
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>47</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>14</b>	<b>86</b>

**e. Size of Articles**

The size of the articles have been categorized as “big”, “medium”, “small” and “very small” depending on the article length. Big articles are articles that have more than 1500 words (more than a page of the newspaper), medium articles are articles that have between 1001 to 1499 words (one page of the newspaper). As for small articles the length is from 501 to 999 words (two third of a page of the newspaper) and very small articles are articles that have below 500 words (one third of a page of a newspaper). Table 4.4 below will illustrate further.

*Table 4.4: Size of Articles*

Article Size	Article length	Number	Percentage
	words		
<b>Big</b>	> 1500	3	3.5
<b>Medium</b>	1001 – 1499	18	21
<b>Small</b>	501 - 1000	35	40.7
<b>Very Small</b>	< 500	30	34.8
<b>TOTAL</b>		<b>86</b>	<b>100%</b>

The three articles which are categorized as big are in the main paper of the newspaper. Two of it are statements made by Malaysia’s former Prime Minister, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamed. As for the medium size articles, only 5 articles were in the main section of the newspaper and the rest were in the pull out section. In general, the news stories merited at

least 2/3 of a page of the newspaper thus emphasizing the importance of the news articles featured.

#### **f. Headlines**

The headlines are divided in two categories. Informative headlines provide brief information on what an article is about and interpretative headlines present the personal points of view by the author or editor. 32.5% of the articles were based on interpretative headline. Examples of interpretative headlines are as stated below;

*Straight-Talking In a Queer World (NST, 7<sup>th</sup> Nov 1998 p. 8)*  
*Open Society Still Betrays Sign of Intolerance (NST, 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2002 p. 8)*  
*Desperate Times, Desperate Measures (NST, 15<sup>th</sup> June 2005 p. 19)*

Besides that only 8% of the articles headlines have the word homosexuality or words that are related to homosexuality such as gay and sodomy in the headlines. Examples are as follow:

*Anti-gay Movement Launched (NST, 22<sup>nd</sup> Oct 1998 p.7)*  
*'No' to Sodomy Being Legalized (NSUNT, 13<sup>th</sup> June 1999 p. 2)*  
*Objections to UN Homosexuality View (NST, 10<sup>th</sup> Feb 2004 p. 4)*

Headlines used by the newspaper can also be quite misleading as to what the content is about as the word homosexuality does not appear in the headlines. Instead very general headlines such as the following are used.

*Time To Erase Last Trace of Colonialism (NST, 15<sup>th</sup> Oct 1998 p. 12)*  
*Where You Can Open Up About Sex (NST, 8<sup>th</sup> Nov 2001 p. 8)*  
*'Spinning' in the right sprint (NST, 5<sup>th</sup> May 2002 p.9 )*

This is in support of what Manjit Bhatia (cited in LJ, 2002) Malaysia is a conservative and religious society in which homosexuality is frowned upon and not discussed in public and the headlines on NST, 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2002 (p.8) "Malaysia as a super – closeted country who will not talk about homosexuality openly".

#### **g. Statements / View Points**

Generally Malaysians are uncomfortable about discussing the issue of sex and sexuality, which are considered as taboo. As such, a controversial issue such as homosexuality is not discussed or debated among the general public. Freedom of speech on the issue of homosexuality is much reserved to the internet (certain websites) and electronic newspaper, for example Malaysiakini.

The former prime minister of Malaysia, Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad also confirms this by stating that in Malaysia where Islam is the official religion, homosexuality is a taboo (NST, 5<sup>th</sup> September 2004). Below are some of the findings and statement that support the idea of sex and sexuality as a taboo.

*Research by Asian family.com shows that people don't discuss issues concerning sex (NST, 8<sup>th</sup> Nov 2001 p. 10)*

*Malaysia as a super – closeted country who will not talk about homosexuality openly. (NST 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2002 p.8)*

*3R programme, episode on sexuality did not reach our screens (NST, 14<sup>th</sup> Aug 2003 p. 13)*

*The conversation dwelled on sex and homosexuality, even menstruation and gay marriages are taboo subjects at family dinners (NST, 7<sup>th</sup> May 2005 p. 9)*

Repeated statement made in the press further strengthens the idea that the Malaysian society is a close and conservative society that does not discuss or debate on such issues openly.

For the purpose of discussion, the statements were categorized based on five different themes that were apparent, i.e.

- i. Religion and homosexuality
- ii. Homosexuality and punishment
- iii. Homosexuality leads and social illness
- iv. Homosexuality as a western culture
- v. Censorship of homosexuality in the entertainment industry

#### **i. Religion and Homosexuality**

The issue of sex and sexuality that is a taboo is further infuriated by the various religious viewpoints by prominent religious leaders. Statements such as “homosexuality is a sin” put an end to any further discussion.

Malaysia being a Muslim country does not condone homosexuality. In politically conservative countries such as Malaysia, there is little overt anti-gay hostility (Choong, 2000). The editorials in the main newspaper are in support of what is politically correct and has chosen to highlight the statements mentioned below in the main newspaper. In this instance the newspaper has chosen to highlight homosexuality as a threat.

*The Deputy Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Najib Razak said that any attempt to legalize homosexuality would never succeed as it was against the teachings of Islam and other religions. (NST, 9<sup>th</sup> July 1999 p. 10)*

*According to Datuk Hasmy Agam , Malaysian Permanent representative to the United Nation and president of UN Islamic Group, homosexuality from the religious point of view is simply wrong and acts against the order of nature. No Islamic nation would think of recognizing the practice in their legal system. (NST, 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2001 p. 10)*

Most religions regard homosexuality as wrong. This is supported by the statements made by other religious bodies.

*“Same sex unions are against the course of nature, against biblical teachings and church doctrines and as abomination to God”, Datuk Yong Ping Chung, Archbishop & Head of Anglican Province of SEA. (NST, 4<sup>th</sup> Dec 2003 p. 13)*

*Goh Tay Hock, President of Young Buddhist Association stated that Buddhism forbade sexual relationship outside the institution of marriage and homosexuality morally wrong. (NST, 10<sup>th</sup> Feb 2004 p. 4)*

## **ii. Homosexuality and Punishment**

Sexual acts “against the order of nature” are punishable by up to 20 years in prison and whipping. These outlawed sexual acts include anal and oral sex (Logan, 2000).

*A movement to combat homosexuality was launched today, and among its first move was to call on the government to increase the penalties against those found guilty of sodomy.*

*According to Senator Datuk Ibrahim Ali, the head of PASRAH, the movement is also to create awareness on the danger of homosexuality and other unnatural sexual acts like lesbianism. (NST, 22<sup>nd</sup> Oct 1998 p. 7)*

*PAS Hudud law – harsh punishment for sodomy, incest, bisexuality, homosexuality and lesbianism. (NST, 10<sup>th</sup> July 2002 p. 10)*

*... civil and syariah laws clearly stated that homosexual behavior was illegal. Section 377(A), (B) and (C) states that any penile penetration through the anus or mouth is considered carnal intercourse against the order of nature. An offender could be jailed a minimum of five years and maximum of 20 years. (NST, 10<sup>th</sup> Feb 2004 p. 4)*

*Under article 3 of the Federal Constitution, Islam is the religion of the Federation and the religion does not permit homosexuality which is a criminal offence under the Syariah Criminal Offences (Federal Territories) Act 1997. (NST 15<sup>th</sup> April 2006 p. 8)*

### iii. **Homosexuality and Social Illness**

Various statements were made by the ministers and prominent figures as to the negative effect of homosexuality on the society in relation to culture. The media has further enhanced this by highlighting it in the main paper of the newspaper with quotes by experts in the various fields. Examples of direct quotes:

*“..the local mak nyah community were viewed as social outcasts – human beings who have “deviated” from nature’s norms.” (NST, 15<sup>th</sup> Aug 2002 p. 7)*

*“There was a time when we were accused of runtuhkan akhlak (destroying the morals) of the country because we discussed the subject of homosexuality.” (NST, 7<sup>th</sup> Sept 2004 p. 12)*

*All kind of vices, such as homosexuality, lesbianism and bestiality are sold in the night market, will lead our children and youths have succumbed to vice and immorality.” (NST, 26<sup>th</sup> Jan 2000 p.13)*

*Rizal Kahar a columnist views that if God wanted men to be homosexual, he would have created Adam and Bruce. He also feels that there is intuitive connection between gayness and theatre and that the Ministry of Youth and Sports should work closely with PASRAH and recommend a special rehabilitation course for queer kiddies, where participants could spend weekends undergoing sexual orientation courses and bonding in hot sweaty tropical jungles. (NST, 7<sup>th</sup> Nov 1998 p. 8)*

Statements such as these generally inform the public on what to think about or the line of taught to follow.

### iv. **Homosexuality as a western culture**

Another issue that been brought up in the newspaper is that homosexuality is regarded as a ‘globalize’ western virus that corrupts the local. However, in reality, there are no borders when it comes to sexuality. This is illustrated as the presence of hatred towards homosexuals exists in the heart of the world’s most vocal and chauvinist democracy (Offord, 1999). Furthermore, PASRAH founder labeled homosexuality as a “new threat to the country”, following the apparently likes of communism, the Aedes mosquito and HIV/AIDS. It was a “serious social illness” (Jacqueline, 2005). The examples below

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clearly show how some parties believe that homosexuality is a western influence that has corrupted our society.

*“The pendulum of sex has swung from unrestrained abandon to repression and back to permissiveness. Riding this momentum, the current sexual revolution is a progeny of western modernity”, Prof. Malik Badri – Sudan born, Psychology lecturer at IIU and author of “The AIDS Crisis: An Islamic Socio-Cultural Perspective –*

*He blames the Western media for championing the gay revolution with “scholarly enticements” to anal sex. (NST, 24<sup>th</sup> June 1998 p. 7)*

*UMNO Youth Exco Ab. Rauf Yusof reported in a Malay daily that there were Malay professionals who practiced homosexuality and that youth could have picked up homosexuality while studying abroad, but did not deny that there could be local influences too. (NST, 31<sup>st</sup> Aug 2001 p. 10)*

*Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad state that degradation of moral values due to western exposure through films, videos.... Will weaken our spirit to fight and bring ill to society. (NST, 1<sup>st</sup> Sept 2003 p. 19)*

*Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad – Western values spread sodomy and homosexuality. (NST, 13<sup>th</sup> Oct 2003 p. 2)*

The above statements made in the newspaper shows that homosexuals were deemed a threat that needed to be weeded out and dealt with. In her article, Jacqueline (2005) stated that western values were also blamed for the rise in homosexuality but how homosexuality could threaten the nation was never explained except for the often repeated description of sodomy as despicable.

#### **v. Censorship of homosexuality in the entertainment industry**

The issue of homosexuality as a threat seems to spill over into the entertainment industries with the banning of any movies, television programmes, or plays that has the touch of homosexuality.

*The movie director had to deal with outrage quarters and crude censorship(in Spinning Gasing movie) due to subject like homosexuality was discussed in the movie. (NST,, 5<sup>th</sup> March 2002 p. 9)*

*Banning or censoring of movies that portray or promote lesbianism or homosexuality. (NST, 27<sup>th</sup> May 2003 p. 1)*

*Red Communication, the producer of 3R, a television programme episodes were banned as they were accused of destroying the morals of the country because they discussed the subject of homosexuality. (NST, 7<sup>th</sup> Sept 2004 p. 12)*

*Mohd Hussain Shafie, chairman of film Censorship Board banned the movie Brokeback Mountain since it dealt with homosexuality and portrayed two cowboys in love. Homosexuality is not something we allow in films here. (NST, 18<sup>th</sup> Sept 2006 p. 6)*

The above statements clearly indicate that the authorities have the right to decide on what the society can or should watch as they feel that the society can be easily influenced by what they watch on television or movies.

## **5.0 Discussion and Conclusion**

The findings indicate that the media representation on the issue of homosexuality in Malaysia is negatively skewed as 74% of the articles are framed/ portrayed in a negative way. This is in agreement with Kuhar (2003) and Kam-lun (2005) that the media reporting on homosexuality perpetuates a negative attitude of public opinion towards the phenomenon. By emphasizing or frequently mentioning the issue in a negative manner, the media increase the salience of this issue among the public.

Furthermore, a significant number of the negative articles were published during a significant period of the former Deputy Prime Minister's sodomy case in 1998 – 1999, the appointment of a gay bishop and during the release of the former Deputy Prime Minister in 2002- 2003 which acted as a reminder to the public that homosexuality is not accepted in this country. Besides that, most of the articles were published in the main section of the newspaper and the size of the news stories merited at least 2/3 of a page of the newspaper thus highlighting the importance of the issue given by the media. Therefore, creating the public awareness and concern for issues that are reported by news media (Gewijzigd, 2003)

Negative words such as 'immoral act', 'illegal', 'not halal', 'criminal offence' and 'harsh punishment' in the articles leave an impression to the readers that homosexuality activities are not acceptable and if they're caught, they will be punished. The media, by portraying homosexuality as an act that is punishable or which leads to social illness, generally informs the public what line of thought to follow. These are clearly seen in the statements made by prominent leaders in the following;

***Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang, the Menteri Besar and acting PAS president**  
PAS Hudud law – harsh punishment for sodomy, incest, bisexuality,  
homosexuality and lesbianism. (NST, 10<sup>th</sup> July 2002 p. 10)*

***Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak – Education Minister***

*Sodomy is a disgusting and unnatural act and that the West would want Malaysia to follow what they do and to be liberal as they were. (NST, 13<sup>th</sup> June 1999 p. 2)*

***Datuk Hasmy Agam – Malaysian Permanent Representative to the United nation & United nations president of UN Islamic Group***

*No muslim country would accept homosexual. They are from the religious point of view, simply wrong and acts against the order of nature.(NST, 2<sup>nd</sup> July 2001 p. 10)*

If the media regularly represents homosexuals as an illness and a threat to the nation or morality, then such an image becomes realistic for homosexuals, particularly in terms of its consequences i.e. the public's response. Branston and Stafford (in Kuhar, 2003), point out a link between the frequency of the appearance of a specific image in media texts and the public's response. This further enforces the fact that homosexuality acts are not accepted in Malaysia.

The sources of the news articles were mainly from politicians, religious leaders, activist and individuals. The media had relied heavily on experts' sources i.e. prominent politicians and religious leaders when it comes to expressing judgments, opinions or views. This adds to the seriousness of the issue and eventually these viewpoints will be mirrored in what the readers think as important too. This is in accordance to McCombs and Shaw (cited in Sei-hill Kim, 2002) argument that the media emphasize certain issues in their coverage of politics by devoting a greater proportion of the news hole to them or by placing them more prominently in the newspaper and this emphasis, in turn influences the salience of these issues among the audience.

This further enforces the fact that the issues of homosexuality are banned in the entertainment industry, as the relevant authorities believe that they have the right to decide on moral grounds of what can or should be viewed or read by the society. What were missing were the voices of the homosexuals themselves in terms of their opinion and rights. As such, it was clear that the media portrayed, as what according to Littlejohn 1992, this picking and choosing activity "establishes the salience of issues or images in the minds of the public" (cited in Akpabio, 2005, p.174). The media should obtain the viewpoint of all relevant parties i.e. the homosexuals themselves and of those directly or indirectly involved with the homosexuals.

In a politically conservative country like Malaysia, the media tends to report what is politically correct and issues that conforms to the general public norm. Quist and Wiegand (2002) asserted that conservatives' representations would be less favorable toward the gay community in general. Therefore, the media choose to portray homosexuality in a negative manner as this conforms to the general public idea or stereotype images of homosexuality. It would be ideal if the media took greater responsibility for and placed more focus on generating unbiased reports.

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The news media's portrayal on the issue of homosexuality in Malaysia as either deserving or undeserving of civil rights not only tells us about their social standing but also the prevailing societal view of homosexuality (Meyers, 1994). This study concludes that the media by emphasizing certain attributes of an issue tell us "how to think about" this issue as well as "what to think about".

Former de facto Law Minister Dr. Rais Yatim said that, "developing and Islamic countries like Malaysia did not recognize sexual relations between people of the same sex" (J.J. Ray, 2005). Therefore, it would take a long time before Malaysians can openly discuss or accept the idea of homosexuality being another sexual orientation. Society is still homophobic as it was then, and heterosexuals are just as ignorant today about homosexuality as they were then (J.J. Ray, 2005).

An article in *The Star* by Loh (2005) titled "Homosexuality more about politics than biology" concludes that regardless of whether homosexuality is inborn or nurtured, the greater question is: Where does society draw the line in sexual behavior? If some of us choose to express our homosexuality, what should a society's attitude be without demeaning homosexuals as persons? These are questions that every society needs to address and to see if they can embrace diversity and treat all members as equal.

The study is rather limited as it is based on only one newspaper and much of the sources of information were based on online local and foreign newspapers and magazines. The study has established the way in which print media represents the issue of homosexuals but it cannot be generalized as it merely reflects the representation of homosexuals in only one newspaper i.e. the *New Straits Times*.

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## Appendix A

Table 1 - Comparison between Roman Kuhar (2003) and the present study on the five basis mechanisms of media representation of homosexuality.

Roman Kuhar (2003)	The present study
Stereotyping- in defining some group, the most prominent place is given to certain selected charpresumably belonging to that group, which are th presented as inherent to all of its members from immemorial.	Homosexuality and social illness Homosexuality as a western culture
medicalization - homosexuality had been turned medical problem, a disease that requires treatm homosexuality is recognized as a disease or a di	
Sexualization - The centralization of homosexual sex constituted its subject (i.e. a homosexual, alr invariably a male homosexual) as essentially or p sexualized being, one concealing his doings bec are sinful (the Church),	Religion and homosexuality Homosexuality and punishment

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punishable (the police), or pathological (psychiat	
Secrecy- In the texts analyzed here, the secrecy surrounding homosexuality is sustained through anonymity of interviewees, the changing of people names, the media reproduction of the closet, the titles, images and the like. Secrecy appearing on connotative level of the media representations of homosexuality implicitly raises the issues of acceptability, shame, and unnaturalness.	
Normalization - The media representation of normal homosexuality is in fact the representation of homosexuality in the image of heterosexuals, so not pose a threat to the heterosexual world.	Censorship of homosexuality in the entertainment industry.

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