

“Love for All” versus Religious Teachings: Attitudes towards LGBT among Heterosexual Malaysians

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Abstract: *In Malaysia, LGBT is a punishable crime not only under the Syariah law but also under the civil laws. The present study examined how personal rationalisations mediate religious teachings on LGBT among heterosexual Malaysians, focusing in particular on their rationalisation for rejecting or accepting LGBT. Interviews were conducted with 12 participants from different religious backgrounds and the data were analysed thematically. The results of the study showed that a majority of Muslims and Christians rejected LGBT on religious grounds. The findings also revealed three rationalisations of Muslims and Christians rejecting LGBT. (1) LGBT goes against the teaching of God. It is viewed as a sin and this religious belief should be passed down to the next generation. (2) LGBT is morally wrong. (3) LGBT is physically wrong as they believe God creates male and female to produce offspring. Some participants acknowledged that Christians should be compassionate to LGBT individuals by giving moral support to them. However, one Buddhist participant rationalised the need to accept LGBT because of the core Buddhist teaching on love. The admonition of Buddha is not to harm others through sexuality. The study identified religious beliefs as one of the main influences people rejected LGBT culture but accepted LGBT individuals on the basis that they were human beings who deserved to be respected too.*

Keywords: religion, LGBT, attitudes, rationalisation, Muslim, Christian

1. Introduction

Lesbian, gay bisexual and transgender (LGBT) is a controversial issue in countries like Malaysia and Indonesia where Islam is the dominant religion. Same-sex marriage (Reuters, 2018), anti-discrimination laws for homosexuality (Mokhtar, Wan Sukeri, & Latiff, 2019) and any deviant thoughts such as liberalism and pluralism (Malaysiakini, June 26, 2012) are not acceptable. The prohibition of LGBT-linked activities can be found in civil laws, Syariah laws as well as fatwa. Two civil laws are applicable to LGBT-linked activities. Cross-dressing can be charged under the Minor Offences Act 1955 for indecent behaviour (Goh & Kananatu, 2019). Sodomy is punishable with an imprisonment of up to 20 years and whipping under the Penal Code 377B, and Section 377A states that “Any person who has sexual connection with another person by the introduction of the penis into the anus or mouth of the other person is said to commit carnal intercourse against the order of nature” (Lee, 2012, p. 172).

Syariah laws are Islamic laws applicable to Muslims, and can vary from state to state in Malaysia. *Fatwa* refers to religious opinions issued by religious authorities such as the mufti of a state and the Conference of Rulers. Although a *fatwa* is a religious opinion, it can be

“gazetted and take on the force of law” (Goh & Kananatu, 2019, p. 125). Among the earliest statements prohibiting practice of LGBT lifestyle is the decision of the 126th Conference of Rulers on 13 December 1989 (Haridi, 2016). Later, the Conference of Rulers issued a *fatwa* that prohibit “cross-dressing” among *mak nyahs* (transgender) and genital reconstruction surgeries (Teh, 2008, as cited in Goh & Kananatu, 2019, p. 117).

An Islamic law that applies to transgenders is Section 66 of the Syariah Criminal Enactment of the Negeri Sembilan state which imposes “a fine not exceeding one thousand ringgit or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding six months or to both” for cross-dressing (Goh & Kananatu, 2019, p. 118). In addition, the Syariah Criminal Offences (Federal Territories) Act 1997 describes “‘sexual intercourse between a man and a woman out of wedlock’ (*zina*), ‘sexual relations between female persons’ (*musahaqah*), ‘sexual relations between male persons’ (*liwat*), along with nonheteronormative expressions of gender” as punishable offences (Lee, 2012, p. 172). The caning sentence has been meted two times in Malaysia: by the Terengganu State to two women in September 2018, and to five men by the Selangor Sharia (Syariah) Court in November 2019 (Human Rights Watch, 2012, 2021). Recently, Datuk Ahmad Marzuk Shaary, Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's department (religious affairs) warned the public that harsher and stricter punishment will be imposed on LGBT community and amendment will be made on the existing Syariah Courts Act of 1965 or Act 355 if the need arises (Banerjee, 2019).

In this digital era, LGBT has come into the public consciousness of Malaysians more than ever. Present day Malaysians, especially the younger generation, are more exposed and informed about LGBT culture with easy accessibility of media. Nurul Jannah, Sobihah, Riza and Chik's (2017) study revealed that social media played significant role in disseminating LGBT information and had positively influenced public acceptance towards LGBT with the spreading of LGBT movements in Malaysia. Examples of LGBT support groups are “Seksualiti Merdeka” (Arif, Shafie, Hanapi, & Mohd, 2018; Owoyemi & Sani, 2014) and the #LoveWins movement (Mokhtar et al., 2019). At the same time Malaysian authorities are also becoming more public and vigilant in addressing homosexuality through civil and Syariah laws.

Generally, studies have shown that Malaysians have negative attitudes towards LGBT (Alagappar & Kaur, 2009; Mokhtar et al., 2019; Ng, Yee, Loh, and Moreira, 2015; Teh, Ee, & Pua, 2016). Some researchers have found that religious beliefs are linked to negative attitudes towards LGBT such as Ng et al.'s (2015) study among Malaysian nursing students and Teh et al.'s (2016) study on Malaysian university students. The Bible verse that is often quoted to show that heterosexuality is the intended order of nature is Genesis 5:2 which says, “Male and female He created them, and He blessed them. And in the day they were created, He called them “man.” A verse from Qu'ran that carries a similar meaning is Qur'an 26:165 which says, “What! Of all creatures do ye come unto the males, and leave the wives your Lord created for you? Nay, but ye are forward folk.” Another Quran verse that is often quoted to show that homosexuality is a transgression is Qur'an 7:80-81 which says, “We also sent Lut: He said to his people: ‘Do ye commit lewdness such as no people in creation (ever) committed before you? For ye practice your lusts on men in preference to women: ye are indeed a people transgressing beyond bounds’”. Against this backdrop of religious teachings that consider heterosexuality as the order of nature and homosexuality as a transgression, a question which arises is whether Christians and Muslims hold on to these religious teachings and profess disapproval of LGBT individuals, including transgendered individuals. Transsexuals are also referred to as *mak nyah* in Malay in Malaysia.

Malaysia has a multiracial and multicultural population who practises various religions, and there is a need to find out how the followers of various religions feel about LGBT. According to the 2010 Population and Housing Census, Islam is the dominant religion (61.3%), followed by Buddhism (19.8%), Christianity (9.2%), Hinduism (6.3%) and other beliefs such as Animism, Sikhism, Taoism, Confucianism (3.4%) (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2010). Studies in Malaysia have found that most of the Muslims and Christians regard LGBT as a sin (Alagappan & Kaur, 2009; Goh, 2011; Lim, Brown, Shaw, Kamarulzaman, Altice, & Beyrer, 2018). There are differences in attitudes towards LGBT. From their study on Malaysian university students in medical degrees, Foong, Liow, Nalliah, Low, Samy, and Zahra (2019) found that the Muslims were the least positive towards LGBT, followed by Christians, Buddhists, Hindus and others. They also reported that while there were ethnic differences, there were no gender differences in attitudes towards LGBT. Other religions such as Hinduism view LGBT as morally wrong (Alagappan & Kaur, 2009). Elsewhere, LGBT practices are also considered morally wrong (Worthen, Lingardi, & Caristo, 2017). These studies involved questionnaire studies, and the personal reasons underlying their attitudes towards LGBT were not explored and therefore less understood.

Therefore, this study examined how personal rationalisations mediate religious teachings on LGBT among heterosexual Malaysians. The specific aspects studied were receptivity towards LGBT and religious background, rationalisations for rejecting LGBT, and rationalisations for accepting LGBT.

2. Method of Study

The descriptive study involved 12 participants from different religious backgrounds (5 Muslims, 6 Christians and 1 Buddhist).

The interview guide comprised four main questions on attitudes towards LGBT. The questions were indirect but the responses would reveal whether religious teaching is a factor that influence views of LGBT.

- 1) How does our society view LGBT? (Does it accept or reject LGBT?)
- 2) How do you personally view LGBT? (Do you accept or reject LGBT?)
- 3) What influences your view of LGBT?
- 4) Which one has the strongest influence on your view of LGBT?

For the data collection, the first researcher identified individuals in her social network who might participate in the study. She explained the purpose of the study, assured them of the confidentiality of their responses and their anonymity as subjects. She also informed them that the interview sessions would be audio recorded. For individuals who consented to participate in the study, an appointment was fixed for the interview. The participants were given the Google Meet link for the interview. The participants used either mobile phone or personal computer to join the interview session. The interviews conducted in English, with the occasional use of Malay, were audio recorded.

The 12 interviews totalled 260 minutes. The recordings were transcribed, and transcription conventions included commas to indicate short pauses and ellipses to indicate longer pauses. The excerpts were minimally edited for grammaticality to ease reading but the nature of spoken language was retained. The 39,948-word interview transcript was analysed thematically, guided by Caulfield's (2019) thematic analysis. Initially, the data were categorised into based

on three themes, namely, participants’ views of LGBT (accept or reject LGBT), followed by the influences and lastly their rationalisation of accepting or rejecting LGBT. Colour codes were used to identify the key phrases. For example, red was used to highlight the phrases that indicate rejection of LGBT, “I think I cannot accept the practice (P1)”, “Personally I would say I would reject because I think I fall into the older generation (P6)” and yellow was used to highlight phrases that indicate accepting of LGBT, “Personally I don’t reject (P4)”, “I will accept the person (P8)”. Since this study examined Malaysians’ attitudes towards LGBT from the perspective of religion, the key word “religion” was identified and highlighted using the search function in Microsoft word but subsequently a manual search was undertaken to examine the participations’ rationalisations of accepting or rejecting LGBT in relation to religion. During the thematic analysis, only the influences and their rationalisations pertaining to religious beliefs were coded. Other influences such as media, family value and friends were not coded. The results of the analysis of themes and sub-themes related to rationalisations for rejecting and accepting LGBT are presented as concept maps (see Figures 1 and 2 in the Results section).

3. Results

In this section, excerpts from the interview transcripts are used to illustrate the results. The participants are identified as P1, P2 to P12. Table 1 shows the participants’ religions and their receptivity towards LGBT in Malaysia.

3.1 Receptivity towards LGBT among heterosexual participants from various religious backgrounds

Table 1. Participants’ religions and their receptivity towards LGBT

Pseudonym	Religion	Receptivity towards LGBT
P1	Christian	Rejecting
P2	Islam	Rejecting
P3	Islam	Rejecting
P4	Christian	Accepting
P5	Christian	Accepting
P6	Islam	Rejecting
P7	Christian	Accepting
P8	Christian	Rejecting
P9	Christian	Rejecting
P10	Buddhism	Accepting
P11	Islam	Rejecting
P12	Islam	Rejecting

A majority of the participants rejected LGBT (eight out of 12 participants). Out of the eight participants, five were Muslims and three were Christians. One of the Christian participants did not reject LGBT on religious grounds but due to family values such as moral and ethical principles traditionally upheld and passed down in their family. Four participants were supportive of LGBT and they comprised three Christians and one Buddhist. On the basis of the results, receptivity towards LGBT is the highest for the Buddhist, followed by the Christians, and the least among the Muslim participants.

3.2 Rationalisations for rejecting LGBT

Figure 1 show that the participants rejected LGBT using three rationalisations, namely, (1) LGBT is morally wrong, (2) LGBT is against biological truth and (3) LGBT is against God’s teaching. On the surface, these rationalisations appear to be vastly different, but it was found

that the religious beliefs influenced their perceptions of LGBT being morally wrong, and this will be explained later in this section.

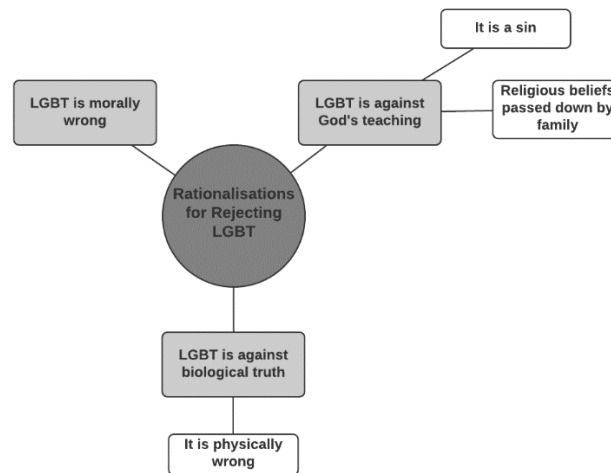


Figure 1: Rationalisations for rejecting LGBT

Some Christian and Muslim participants were of the view that LGBT is against religious teachings. A Christian participant, P1, stated that LGBT is against God’s teaching and God’s design. P1 illustrated God’s creation by quoting a Bible verse taken from the book of Genesis – God created male and female from the beginning of His creation and how God blessed humankind to fill the earth and subdue it. Genesis 5:2 says, “Male and female He created them, and He blessed them. And in the day they were created, He called them “man.” Excerpt 1 shows P1 highlighting that it is God who designed and created the concept of gender. There are only two God-created genders, namely, male and female.

Excerpt 1:

Religion is a, later part of my life, I would say, later part, I think after I understand my religion more, Christianity more, and how God created man and woman in being this, original design of human kind to propagate and fill this earth. I mean that is very clear ah, design, how God made human should, should be in terms of sexual orientation, male and female. But this is later part, why I cannot accept LGBT, because they go against this design of God. (P1)

Similarly, a Muslim participant, P2, strongly rejected LGBT because Al’Quran is explicit in its condemnation of homosexuality. He quoted the story of Prophet Lut from Al’Quran, particularly the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah as a consequence of God’s wrath against male same-sex erotic practices. To P2, LGBT is considered as a major sin. Excerpt 2 shows P2 rationalising that Muslim should not commit the sin of “quam Lut” (Lot’s people) and the story should serve as a lesson.

Excerpt 2:

Now, being a Muslim, um, you’re taught not to engage in the same gender, as in the same interest, you know, same interest, and the same sex, because it is forbidden in Islam. It’s stated in the Quran itself that you know being gay is forbidden. Even pre-marital sex is like, already considered as a major sin...There’s actually a story in the Quran, about a story of prophet Lut. Now, this story is about um, a society that, er, evolves around sin. And the major [sin] that they committed [was] basically having interest in the same gender. Now, as a Muslim, you cannot dismiss this story as

figuratively, or you know, you can just dismiss it. This story is in the Quran for a lesson. Er, that you should take it, you know. It should be consider[ed] as a sin. And therefore, you know, as a Muslim, you should, er, take, er, that as a lesson. That, that you shouldn't be gay. (P2)

In addition, P2 also viewed religious beliefs as if it is a family legacy that should be passed down from generation to generation. Children are expected to inherit the religious belief that LGBT is a sin. To P2, it seems to be an identity – a form of self-definition that as a religious Muslim, he should not commit such sin. P2's family tried to pass on this negative view of LGBT in the hope that P2 would perceive LGBT as unreligious and preserve the identity as a religious Muslim by not making friends with LGBT individuals and committing same sex sexuality (Excerpt 3).

Excerpt 3:

And apparently my family sees it [LGBT] in a religious way as well. So, they say in a negative perspective, as if they were like, you know, as a Muslim, I was being born and raised to the fact that, they would told me directly that, you know, being gay is wrong, and you shouldn't be friends with people who are gay. (P2)

Furthermore, two Christian participants, P1 and P8, showed disapproving attitudes towards LGBT rationalising using biological truth. They said that God created man and woman with different sexual organs, and only sexual reproduction involving male and female can produce genetically unique offspring. Hence, it is also considered physically wrong to have intimate or sexual relationship with the same gender as LGBT goes beyond the natural way of reproduction. Both P1 and P8 reaffirmed that children are a natural result of sexual intercourse between a man and a woman only.

Excerpt 4:

But it means it's not from their own ah biological birth, so I would say this is from ... I mean, Chinese perspectives, from family, ya, biological, it's a biological truth that um, only male and female produce offsprings. (P1)

Excerpt 5:

We have those sexual organs that God created specifically for men and women for reproduction, but to, to have a woman and woman and then they have to go, you know, beyond the natural way of reproduction (P8)

These excerpts show that although the rationalisation used is based on science, P8 brought in the creation of human beings by God, showing that religious beliefs underlie the rationalisation that LGBT is against biological truth.

Apart from that, LGBT is considered as morally wrong by P8. To P8, it is always the individuals of the opposite sex who have sexual relationships. A normal relationship must be only between man and woman. P8 made it clear in Excerpt 6 that she could not accept the practice of having intimate or sexual relationship with the same gender but she did not link it to her religious background.

Excerpt 6:

I will not accept their practices. Because I think, um, it's morally wrong for let's say, a woman to have, to have the intimate, intimate or sexual relationship with another

woman. And to fall in love, a woman falling in love with a woman, I really cannot accept. Because, because, to me, um, is always the opposite sex. It cannot be a man falling in love with a man and a man, er, touching a man's body, like husband and wife. (P8).

To sum up, the rationalisations for rejecting LGBT can be traced to Islamic and Christian religious teaching on how God created human beings as female and male. The results also revealed that rationalisations using biological determinism (i.e. humans are born as female and male) are sometimes influenced by religious teachings, particularly God's creation of human beings as female and male. Some participants considered LGBT to be morally wrong. However, despite their rejection of LGBT, some participants expressed compassion towards LGBT individuals and believe that they should not be discriminated, and this will be explained next.

3.3 Rationalisations for accepting LGBT

Figure 2 shows the rationalisations for accepting LGBT individuals from four participants (P4, P5, P7, P10). The analysis revealed that the participants emphasised acceptance of LGBT individuals, not necessarily the LGBT lifestyle.

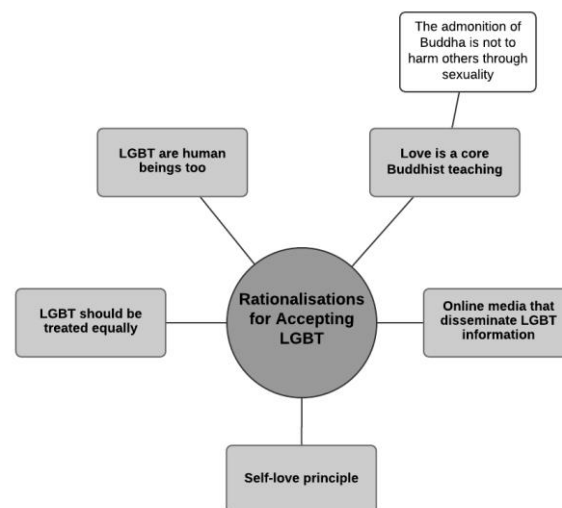


Figure 2: Rationalisations for accepting LGBT

In this study, there was only one Buddhist participant among the 12 interviewed. According to P10, love is a core Buddhist teaching, as illustrated in Excerpt 7.

Excerpt 7:

Ya. Accept this type of LGBT...but, because of maybe I'm Buddhist, so that's why I said love is everything. You have to accept everyone...Ya. They [don't] hurt every- they [don't] hurt [anyone]. So [they] just [want to] love the [partner], the soulmate only... They want to find the love only. (P10)

Love also means accepting everyone irrespective of their sexual orientation. P10 also highlighted that LGBT individuals are not violent such that they can hurt people and Buddhists should tolerate opposite-sex relationship because the admonition of Buddha is not to harm others through sexuality. P10 also believed that LGBT individuals are merely seeking love and wanted to be loved by their partners. Thus, it seems that Buddhism, from the perspective of

P10, does not necessarily view LGBT as a sexual misconduct if their sexual actions are motivated by love and desire to share and give comfort regardless of the gender. The teaching of “love for all” is not only found in Buddhist but also in Christian practice. There is the saying that one should hate the sin but love the sinner.

Besides the sole Buddhist participant, the other three (P4, P5 and P7) who expressed positive attitudes towards LGBT were Christians. Their acceptance of LGBT was not based on religious grounds. P4 and P5 said that they were influenced by online media that disseminate LGBT information. They had come across LGBT issues which made them aware of basic human rights, dignity of LGBT people and global LGBT equality. Hence, they stressed that LGBT are human beings who deserve respect and should be treated with dignity. As for P7, he supported LGBT as he believed in self-love principle. He said that everyone should learn to love oneself and that LGBT individuals should embrace this principle by taking care of their own needs, well-being and happiness regardless of how the society views them.

Interestingly, although the other participants were not receptive towards LGBT, there were three participants (P1, P8 and P12) whose personal rationalisations mediated the religious teachings against LGBT practices. Two Christian participants, P1 and P8, expressed disapproving attitudes towards LGBT practice, but P1 stressed that LGBT individuals should be treated equally. In Excerpt 8, P1 said that LGBT individuals should not be prosecuted; in fact they are the minority group that deserve sympathy and care. He further added that that LGBT individuals deserve to be treated equally as one should not be subject to inequality by virtue of their sexual orientation. Besides, moral support should be given to LGBT individuals.

Excerpt 8:

I still think this people do, do, ah, deserve our sympathy, do deserve our care, unbiased um, [pause] chance, [pause] service from the society. They shouldn't be prosecuted... I can speak from ah a lecturer's point of view, I, I don't think just because of his or her orientation, sexual orientation, then I treat her, I give her low marks, I don't think that is morally right to do so. Although that person has different sexual orientation that different from mine. So from this [perspective], I think generally even not in education, [in medical, general service], even eating out in restaurant, so I think they should get what others get as well. (P1)

P8 said that she was willing to counsel LGBT individuals if she encounters any LGBT individuals in the future (Excerpt 9), making it clear that heterosexuality is the norm for her.

Excerpt 9:

Ah I, I, of course I will say, initially is a shock. Ah, but later on, I think, ah, I will counsel them as far as I can...to the limit that I can. And, and talk to them and help them, you know, to come out of it. And as a Christian to pray together with them. (P9)

Similar to P8, P12 said that she would pray for LGBT individuals to return to a heterosexual sexual orientation. From the perspective of LGBT individuals, this is still showing that they are “less than” acceptable. P12, a Muslim participant, believed that LGBT individuals are human beings who deserved to be respected too, although she expressed disapproving views towards LGBT culture and value. P12 said that LGBT individuals should be treated like other human beings although LGBT is against her religion, as shown in Excerpt 10.

Excerpt 10:

Because to me, I don't know, I don't judge because I'm a human being. I also have a lot of sins, so I don't judge about, you know, them, you know, displaying their, you know, affection in public. Er, because I always believe that we are all human beings. We all have sins. Yeah, and we hope, we all have good deeds, too. So, normally, if people like that, like me, I'll just pray for them so that they, they are, yeah, so that they are not like that anymore. But I will not look down on them, go over to them and tell them that this is not, this is not, this is not right or wrong.

P12 further explained that everyone is a sinner and should not judge people according to their sexual orientation and belittle the sexual minorities. The idea of non-judgmental acceptance of LGBT individuals and "love for all" thinking underlie the rationalisations for accepting LGBT individuals, though not necessarily of the LGBT phenomenon.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

The study showed that religion has a strong influence on heterosexual Malaysians' attitudes towards LGBT. The findings revealed that most of the heterosexual Malaysians in the study have negative attitudes towards LGBT, and that religious teachings sometimes influence morally- and biologically-based reasons for rejecting LGBT. Muslim participants are less tolerant of LGBT compared to Christian participants. The sole Buddhist participant in the study was the only one who expressed unreserved acceptance of LGBT. All Muslim participants rejected LGBT as it is against their religion. Nevertheless, the personal rationalisations of some Muslim and Christian participants mediated the religious teaching against same-sex relationships, in that some believed that LGBT individuals should not be discriminated. Their acceptance of LGBT individuals is on the basis that they are human beings who deserve respect and should be treated equally. This reflects the stance of Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM) which highlights the universality of human rights as everyone deserves the same basic rights under the Federal Constitution (Boo, 2018). This is also supported by an earlier study that most of the heterosexual participants accepted LGBT individuals as fellow human beings and they should be treated as such even though LGBT is prohibited by their religions (Jerome, Ting, Yeo, & Ling, 2021).

The results of the present study concur with past research that found positive correlations between religion and homosexuality (Ahrold & Meston, 2010; Brown & Henriquez, 2008). Adamczyk and Pitt's (2009) study on public opinion towards homosexuality in 33 nations with the data taken from the fourth wave of the World Values Surveys showed that Muslims have more disapproving attitudes regarding homosexuality than other religious affiliates across the globe. In Malaysia, Ng et al. (2015) found that Muslims have more unfavourable attitudes towards homosexuals compared to Christians, Buddhists, Hindus and others. Christian and Islamic teachings prohibit LGBT activities. Furthermore, LGBT lifestyle is punishable by law in Malaysia with imprisonment and caning (Alagappar & Kaur, 2009). Although there was one Buddhist participant in the study, the finding on "love for all" concur with Cheng's (2018) finding on Buddhists being generally more accepting and being non-judgemental towards LGBT compared to other religions. This is guided by Buddhist principles that emphasise human equality, which is then extended to marginalised groups such as LGBT. Compared to views of the Muslim and Christians on LGBT, less is understood about the views of Buddhist, Hindus and less-researched religious groups and this is a potent area for future investigations.

Future research should also focus on the relationship between the intrinsic religiosity of individuals and their attitudes towards LGBT. An individual's involvement in religious activities may not reflect their personal conviction. The level of intrinsic religiosity can be one of the strong predictors of one's attitude towards LGBT (Ng et al., 2015). Hence, an extended study taking intrinsic religiosity into account would be useful to provide a more holistic understanding about the formation of attitudes towards LGBT. Different dimensions of religiosity such as personal practices, religious exclusivity, religious beliefs, experiences, knowledge and saliency should be explored in future research.

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