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Learning to be Gay: Narrative Socialization of Young Indonesian Homosexuals

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Abstrak

Meningkatnya konservatisme agama dalam masyarakat Indonesia telah mendorong tumbuhnya kebencian dan main hakim sendiri yang membidik minoritas seksual—yang dianggap melakukan dosa tak terampuni—terutama terhadap LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Biseksual, dan Transgender). Studi ini membahas proses yang dialami minoritas ini untuk mengekspresikan identitas seksual mereka dan menjalin hubungan sosial dengan sesama sesama jenis. Secara khusus, penelitian ini berfokus pada cara kaum gay muda mulai memahami dan mengembangkan identitas seksual mereka di tengah lingkungan sosial yang sebagian besar tidak bersahabat. Dengan memanfaatkan media sosial, para gay muda ini telah membangun komunitas digital untuk bersosialisasi dengan sesama gay, serta untuk mengekspresikan orientasi seksual mereka sambil tetap disembunyikan dari bagian masyarakat lainnya. Namun, dengan dipaksa untuk tidak menonjolkan diri, mereka juga tidak diberi perhatian untuk mempromosikan hak-hak kewarganegaraan dan kewarganegaraan mereka. Temuan penelitian ini didasarkan pada beberapa wawancara kualitatif dengan gay muda yang tinggal di kota Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

Abstract

The increasing religious conservatism within Indonesian society has propelled the growth of hatred and vigilantism targeting sexual minorities—which are seen as committing an unforgiven sin—especially towards LGBTs (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender). This study addresses the processes that these minorities experience in order to express their sexual identities and forge social relationships with fellow same-sex queers. In specific, this study focuses on the ways young gays begin to understand and develop their sexual identity amidst a largely hostile social environment. By utilizing social media, these young gays have built digital communities for socialising with fellow gay people, as well as to express their sexual orientation while remaining concealed from other parts of society. Yet, by being forced to keep a low profile, they have also been disincentivized from paying attention to promote their civic and citizenship rights. The findings of this study are based on several qualitative interviews with young gays living in the city of Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

Keywords: homosexuals, gay identity, gay relationships, Indonesian youth

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the status of gay people within modern Indonesian society has experienced several alterations in relation to wider social change.

Ever since gays made their earliest public appearance in the 1980s and found further expression via varieties of pop cultures in the 2000s, Indonesia has also witnessed a rise of religious conservatism among its Muslim-majority populace. The trend, which began in the 1990s and accelerated in the post-1998 democratic era, has been defined by a strong tendency to pursue the Islamisation of the public sphere through promoting religion-inspired rules, norms, and customs in everyday life (see van Bruinessen 2013; Hefner 2018). This conservative turn is also manifested in the rise of public vigilantism against any form of activities and groups that are considered to violate the conservative-religious rules and norms of Indonesian society, including lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) sexual minorities (Liang 2010; Davies 2014). It is not uncommon for LGBT individuals to conceal their sexual orientation and identity as they live and socialise under the radar of an increasingly religious and conservative Indonesian society (see Blackwood, 2010; Arli, Badejo & Sutanto, 2019).

Existing literature have asserted that homosexuality is not a merely “modern” phenomenon, but have already been rooted in traditional cultures across Indonesia. A renowned scholar of Indonesia, Benedict Anderson (2001), stated that homosexual practices, particularly in Java, emerged as an antithesis to the promotion of a puritan, heterosexual culture which followed the massive Islamization in the 17th to 19th century. By examining the 19th century classic *Serat Centhini*—a work of Javanese literature inspired by Hindu and Buddhist traditions—Anderson underscored how several Javanese communities defined “sexual relationship” in very loose and broad terms. The sexual, it was stated, is not merely an exclusive relation between males and females, but can involve the interplay of sexual identities within the spectrum of masculinity and femininity. Rather than being imbued with an aura of religious sacrality, it aims to seek pleasure and revolve around the concept of “play”. One prominent example of homosexual practices within Indonesian subculture is the figure of *Gemblak*, a young male, who acts as the wife of *Warok*, a mighty figure within traditional Javanese society who had to avoid any form of sexual relationship with females to preserve his supernatural and superhuman power (Oetomo, 1991; 2001a). There is also *Mairil*, a young male with lady-like physical features and gestures who is loved and taken care of by his seniors as a concealed and uncommon practice within several *pesantren* (traditional Islamic education institutions) in Java (*Ibid*; see also Fikri & Wardana, 2019).

However, the link and continuity between traditional (Javanese) practices and homosexuality in modern Indonesia seem to be questionable. Tom Boellstorff (2005) argued that homosexual practices, including the social identity of lesbians and gays can be considered as a modern phenomenon in Indonesian public, and only began to emerge in the 1970s and 1980s. These new sexual identities are partially the result of the expansion of western culture—which had begun to accept homosexuality—to people in countries across the globe (Altman, 1996). Boellstorff (2005) also argued that a process of “dubbing culture” also took place, in which the western-form of homosexuality was expanded and transformed into the subcultures of Indonesian society.

The most crucial period for the introduction and development of homosexuality in Indonesia—especially the forms of gay identities—occurred alongside the national pop culture industry boom. This new public arena became a site of fierce contestation between modern Indonesian identities, including gay and lesbianism that are particularly attractive for the youth (Heryanto, 2008). As explained by Ben Murtagh (2013), the influence of lesbian/gay-themed movies in 1990s to 2000s Indonesian cinema such as *Arisan* (2003) and *Arisan 2* (2011) were monumental for the development of lesbian-gay identities, as well as the sociability of homosexual minorities in society. Along with several LGBT foundations and communities such as GAYa Nusantara and its provincial branches (see Oetomo, 2001b; Boellstorff, 2005), popular culture provided new cultural references for Indonesian youths with urban lifestyles, encouraging them to be more open for non-mainstream sexual orientations and identities (Murtagh, 2013).

However, aside from celebrating the rise of sexual diversity in Indonesia, these studies had yet to adequately elaborate the complexities faced by these sexual minorities. Young queers, in particular, are faced with the struggle to present their non-mainstream sexual identities amid the growing Islamic conservatism in the country. It is believed that the current number of LGBT individuals in Indonesia has now increased to 2 million out of a national population of 270 million (GAYa Nusantara, n.d.), although these figures can hardly be corroborated due to a lack of official data. And yet, the discourse that surround these sexual minorities in the last few decades has shaped the dynamics of state-societal life in Indonesia, including the current wave of backlash against their public presence and sociability.

Since the new millennia, public hostility against LGBT individuals and groups have been rising prominently (Liang, 2010). Three different reports, namely the UNDP-USAID initiative on 'Being LGBT in ASIA (2014), Human Right Watch (2016), and Equality Index (2022) on LGBT Rights in Indonesia, all convey that both the state and society in general harbour ignorant views and misunderstandings against LGBT minorities. While there are no legal provisions that allow the Indonesian state to prosecute and prohibit homosexual practices, there are also no legal support or protection for LGBTs from socio-cultural attacks and discrimination. The absence of legal protection has rendered LGBTs prone to be victims of intolerant attitudes, especially because society remains adamant on recognizing homosexuality and other non-mainstream sexual orientations. Human Rights Watch had also reported sporadic vigilante attacks against sexual minorities by various hard-line religious groups across the country (see HRW, 2016).

This study seeks to elaborate how young Indonesian gays come to understand and express their sexual orientation and identify as homosexuals. By focusing on the narrative life of young gay people, we aim to explain their learning process of "becoming gay", especially in relation to their awareness of the ignorant and/or intolerant views of the society at large. Through this inquiry, we offer a fragment of understanding regarding the challenges and difficulties faced by young Indonesian gays in their process of understanding their sexual orientation, settling themselves with it, and in navigating through the increasingly hostile and largely conservative Indonesian society. The lack of recognition from the state and society have left these young people with little to no information about homosexuality, sexual health, and most importantly, the civic and sexual rights of homosexuals. This situation has likely exposed them to be vulnerable against misunderstandings, abuses, sexual attacks, and exploitation from fellow homosexuals and other people.

For years, notable scholars have examined the process of sexual identity development in homosexual people (see Cass, 1979; 1984; Coleman, 1982). These studies assert the complex and uneasy process of homosexuals in recognizing their same-sex sexual orientation, formulating their sexual identity, and their attempts to fit in their wider social life. This topic has been studied further along with the growing acceptance of societies toward LGBTs, culminating in the legal recognition of minority sexual rights around liberal countries in the world (Pettinicchio, 2012). However, the process of coming-out remains a major obstacle for

sexual minority groups in conservative countries where homosexuality is not legally recognized and/or criminalized (Shamsudin & Ghazali, 2011; Davies, 2014; Cheah & Singaravelu, 2017). Taking into account the increasing conservatism in Indonesian socio-political life and the hostility against sexual minorities, homosexuals—especially younger ones—find themselves living in a constant state of duress and surveillance. These social pressures might undermine the process of forming and developing their sexual identity, and prevent them from being acknowledged as a constitutive part of Indonesian society.

RESEARCH METHODS

This qualitative study involves 12 young gay informants (between 20-24 years old) living in the city of Yogyakarta. There is no specific reason on why Yogyakarta was chosen as the location of this research. Life-history interviews were conducted from April to May 2018 in order to excavate their learning process of understanding and expressing their sexual orientation. The interviews also focused on elaborating their reflections regarding the status of lesbians, gays, and other sexual minorities within Indonesian society; the sociability and public engagements of queer folks, both through direct, face-to-face interactions or mediated via cyber-communities and social media; and their political opinions on the sexual-citizenship rights of gays and other sexual minorities.

Data analysis was carried out following a Grounded Theory approach, in particular to the original formulation of Nathan Glazer and Anselm Strauss (1967) that encourages a simultaneous process to “compare and contrast” between data, elaborate facts and findings, and iteratively interpret them by cross-examining with relevant issues and topics within existing literature (see also Charmaz, 1994). To protect the privacy and confidentiality of informants involved in this project, all names that appear in the report are pseudonyms, in which any similarities with the real individuals are pure coincidence. All data collected from informants also remain strictly confidential, and are only accessible to researchers of this study.

In the end, this study aims to develop a form of understanding on the process of becoming gay. It elucidates how young gay people form their social identity and establish social networks with fellow young homosexuals amidst the increasing intolerant views and attitudes of Indonesian society.

ADOLESCENCE AND SEXUAL IDENTITY

Existing literature on homosexuality in Indonesia tend to see it as a modern phenomenon with limited to no links and roots with older, previously-established cultures/sub-cultures and traditions that has similarly defied heteronormativity (see Boellstorff, 2005; Adihartono & Jocson, 2020). Instead, they emphasize how existing social processes affect homosexuals in the country in the process of realizing, understanding, and developing their sexual orientation to same-sex partners, and relate to gay identity at large. This emphasis on contemporary social conditions finds its resonance in how our gay informants describe the early stage of realizing their sexual orientation, in which the majority of them began to notice feelings of being attracted to their same-sex friends during secondary school, or around the age of 13 to 15. Several informants describe themselves as having an effeminate personality, and would more often socialize with girls during their childhood until adolescence, while being mostly left out by their male peers. These personalities further developed into feelings towards friends of the similar sex, before finally being realised as gay.

Young gays often find themselves feeling curious and confused on how their personalities, interests, physical development, and sociability differed to their neighbourhood peers and schoolmates. The process of knowing, understanding, and realizing their sexual orientation have been largely facilitated by social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. The availability of various information throughout the internet and social media helped young gay men to find answers that justify their sexual identity, and later enabled them to pave their own ways in realizing their sexual orientation, as well as to socialize with others of a similar identity. Ezza, a 21 year-old university student, describes his process as below:

It started when I was sitting in the last years of elementary school. As I was given a smartphone, I began to search and visit pornographic sites and found interested in homosexual couples. Thus, I did often visit those sites. But how I began to know more about being gay was from social media, Facebook. That gave me some sort of understanding that out there, there some people with a similar [effeminate] personality like me and like people from the same sex (Interview on 27 April 2018).

The self-realization of being gay among our informants mostly happened between the age of 17 to 19, when they were sitting in high school. Understandably, this period was marked with feelings of confusion. Some have found themselves being seduced by friends or seniors who were already gay, being asked to date albeit away from public eyes. To some extent, the process of realizing one's sexual identity could occur at a very slow pace, as our informants needed time to understand the feelings they developed towards their partners.

When I was in the second year of SMA (high school), a friend called and asked to visit me at my home. He later told me that he loves me and wants to forge a relationship. It took time for me to realise that, but our relationship had developed and we became closer and closer. He loved me so much, and I felt very comfortable with him. Then we started kissing, just kissing, no more than that... To let you know, my first time "having fun" [anal intercourse] was not with him, but with my other boyfriend after I graduated from school (Abby, a 21 year-old university student. Interview on 9 April 2018).

As all informants in this study are very young (20-24 years old), their homosexuality and gay relationships have been dynamic and full of sexual desires. They seemed excited in realizing their homosexuality—to be able to socialise with fellow gay men, to try and enjoy sexual activities with gay partners, and even to form intimate relationships. These desires contain implications on what homosexuality means for them and influences their sociability, in particular with fellow gay people and partners. As most of their process in realizing and learning to be homosexual have occurred in solitary or discreet settings, such as from the internet and/or practical interactions with other gay people and partners, their understanding of their same-sex orientation and relationships are imbued with the need to get attention (Cf. Kennedy and Oswalt, 2014; Martos, Nesahd & Meyer, 2015; Brescia & Afdal, 2021; Fatgehipon, Azizah. & Bin-Tahir, 2019). Being gay has also likely led to form intimate or sexual relationships during their younger years, before turning to various and free sexual activities as they move on to adulthood (Cf. Cass, 1979; 1984; Brady & Busse, 1994). Hence, being gay is also defined by these two aspects: the open-ended and short-lived intimate relationships, as well as the very active pursuit of sexual activities.

Most informants also acknowledged having boyfriends. Ever since coming to terms with their gay sexual identity, they have dated over 3 to 4 partners, with each relationship only lasting between 3 to 6 months. This pattern of short-lived relationships is an interesting point and deserves further explanation. First, as our informants are still young, they tend to easily fall in love, but would also not hesitate breaking up when facing disagreements or after getting bored. Second, relationships between gays tend to lack in commitment due to being socially unacceptable, making the parties involved prone to cheating and unfaithfulness, and eventually ending the entanglement.

Experiencing intimate relationships during the process of defining and realizing homosexual orientation and identity have been crucial for young gay men, particularly to deal with the disclosure/non-disclosure dilemma as reported in previous research (see Coleman-Fountain, 2014; Ranade, 2018; Baudinette, 2021). The experience of our informants also confirm previous studies that assert how homosexual intimate relationships tend to be short-lived with frequent changing partners (Rostosky & Riggle, 2017; Allan & Westhaver, 2017). While the brevity of these trysts can be interpreted that our informants have not matured enough to form a stable, intimate homosexual relationship, the common public view within Indonesia that rejects and renounces them might have also enclosed their opportunities of forming more positive, committed, and healthy relationships (CF Frost. Meyer & Hammack, 2015).

Our informants claim to be sexually very active (mostly on a weekly basis or more), either with their boyfriends and/or other sexual partners. They meet and get to know one another in a daily hangout spot or via social media, including applications and dating sites specifically tailored for gay people. Some also acknowledged to quite often have sex together with 2 or 3 other people (as in a threesome or foursome) during their young life as homosexuals. Although they are aware of the risks contracting HIV/Aids from these open, free, and unprotected sexual activities, most nonetheless admitted to have paid little attention, or see it as a matter of bad luck instead. Their frequent exposure to sexual activities can be understood as the excitement that accompany their newly-acquired understanding of their homosexual bodies. Considering their young age, as well as how their process of understanding the gay life largely involve self-learning, these attempts to explore various new meanings of being homosexual tend to be carried out in the form of sex, but with limited intention to form a more stable and positive intimate

relationship (see Coleman-Fountain, 2014; Ranade, 2018; Baudinette, 2021).

SOCIAL MEDIA APPS, GAY INTERACTION, AND THE FULFILMENT OF HOMOSEXUAL DESIRE

Living as a sexual minority in a country witnessing a rise of religious conservatism, our gay informants experience violating religious-cultural rules as some sort of reality check. While our informants seemed to be proud of and truly enjoy their sexual identity, they all still face the same problem of “coming out”—to admit and explain their sexual orientation to other people—especially to families, friends and colleagues. It is widely acknowledged that gays often only disclose their sexual identity to several close friends or fellow gay men to avoid exclusion, discrimination, and other forms of social control. Our informants admitted that they have never experienced any outright violent attacks aside from some verbal bullying during school, which thankfully did not last very long.

I think I have a rather introverted personality. I prefer not to tell my personal matters to others, friends, or even my family. At the moment, I have a boyfriend, a gay-boyfriend. He works as a model, and I am still studying [at university]. We think it will be better for us, for our careers, to keep our [homosexual] relationship for us only. Imagine if in the future my boyfriend has a public position or I have a good career. What will be happen if people knew that we are gay, a homosexual? Society will not forgive us (Chiko, a 20 year-old university student. Interview on 15 April 2018).

As our informants made it perfectly clear, being gay in Indonesia most likely means concealing one’s homosexual identity in public. Furthermore, the wider use of social media apps and easy-going personalities to realise and accept their socially unwelcomed sexual orientation have proceeded such elusive gay narratives of identity constructions (Cf. Manning, 2014, 2016). Alternatively, their interactions occur on new public arenas facilitated by internet access: social media networks. These young gay people—who either fall into the category of Millennials or Generation Z, and regarded as digital natives—are active users of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, WhatsApp, WeChat, as well as gay-dedicated platforms such as Hornet, Blued, and Grindr.

These digital platforms have profound influence on what it means to be gay in the country. First, they play an important role in the early

stages of the self-learning process, helping gay men to understand, recognize, and realize their sexual orientation. Nonetheless, this trove of information is not without its caveats. Although the internet provides plenty of resources on homosexuality, positive gay/lesbian relationships, as well as how to conduct safe sexual activities, these young gays have been more interested in accessing sites and social media for pornographic content instead.

Second, these digital networks are widely used by young Indonesian gays to seek other gays friends, including gays to date and/or sexual partners for one-night stands (one-time sexual intercourse). A young person who just realized they are gay usually begin exploring their homosexuality by joining various gay forums on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or WhatsApp to find other gay friends—sometimes after being referred into by a mutual friend. Next, they begin to build friendships to hang out, gossip, and share life stories; if they start to develop feelings for one another, they might start forging an intimate relationship. Meanwhile, more experienced users have accounts in gay-dedicated social media apps like Blued—of which almost all informants of this study do—Hornet, and Grindr to socialize, and more importantly, find gay sexual partners.

In the past decade, Indonesia has seen a massive upsurge of internet users, amounting to 143 million people or 55% of the country's population. Furthermore, a 2017 survey suggests that 55% of Indonesia's digital natives are under the age of 35 (Teknopreneur & APJII, 2017). As part of this digital-savvy demographic group, young gay people in Indonesia also ubiquitously use social media for gay socialization. Nonetheless, such an online-centred socialization process contain certain ramifications to how gay men configure and realize their desires, namely: 1. The “dynamism” of their intimate relationships, which are almost-always short-lived, and, 2. Their unmistakable sexually-active behaviour. Although this does not mean that social media has allowed young gays in Indonesia to be completely anonymous and protected from the intolerant society-at-large, these digital platforms have nonetheless allowed them to tap into their homosexual desire. One of our informants recount his online activities:

I was using Blued and Hornet, and of course Facebook and Instagram. In the beginning, I just wanted to know [gay] people like me, befriend and hang out with them... After a while, I used them [the apps] to seek sexual partners for pleasure. This usually happens when

I really want to have sex. I would seek a good looking or handsome gay man. To let you know, I prefer to have sex with sexual partners but only have an intimate relationship with my (gay) boyfriend. With them, I am able to expand my sexual fantasy and try various sexual play. But I tend to get easily bored with my boyfriend (Abby, a 21 year old university student. Interview on 9 April 2018).

Just like Abby, other informants also admit to have repeatedly used social media for seeking sexual partners without any hopes for an intimate and long-lasting relationship. However, they also treat this practice with caution, as social media apps tailored for gay users are also rife with gay sexual predators that “lay traps and catch prey”. They were able to recount how in more than one occasion, a gay man have chatted them and asked for sex in an offensive and/or manipulative way. These horrible experiences have forced them to almost deactivate their social media accounts and delete these apps from their smartphones.

Nonetheless, when reflecting on the wide use of social media by gay folk and other sexual minority groups, our informants admit that the digital arena have become a relatively safe place to disclose oneself to others of a similar sexual orientation. The tools to upload photos, videos, or even conduct live-streams have been extensively used by gay men to showcase themselves and attract other gay people. These social media practices highlight the underlying disposition amongst younger gays to treat their homosexuality as pleasure-oriented and geared towards “fun” (Wu & Ward. 2018). Furthermore, the wide use of social media apps and easy-going personalities to realise and accept their socially unwelcomed sexual orientation have proceeded such elusive gay narratives of identity constructions (Cf. Manning, 2014, 2016).

LIMITED INTERESTS IN GAY ASSOCIATIONS AND LACK OF UNDERSTANDING OF SEXUAL RIGHTS

One similarity among the young gays involved in this study is how they were able to express their sexual identity through *self*-learning: seeking information from various digital sources, form intimate gay relationships, and establish connections with fellow young gays through social media. However, the individualized manner of these learning processes have made them unlikely to participate in associations that provide support and fight for LGBT rights. In fact, they hardly even know organization such as *GayA Nusantara*, *Arus Pelangi*, or *Paguyuban Gay*

Yogyakarta (PGY—Association of Yogyakarta Gay Men). Our informants expressed little to no interest in joining these associations in the near future, while some raised questions pertaining to their goals and relevance. They seem to think that these types of formal associations would openly and confidently present themselves as a distinct sexual minority group to the public, which is perceived to likely invite harassment and discrimination from hardliners and conservative groups. Considering both their young age and tendency of concealing their gay identity to protect their sociability, the idea of participating in these associations seemed far-flung and do not present itself as a rational choice.

Our interviews also revealed that informants perceive these associations as incompatible to their current understanding of homosexuality and practices, which still largely revolve around seeking short-term intimate relationships and sexual pleasure. This finding echo arguments on how homosexuality (and other non-mainstream sexual orientations and practices) have become commonly associated with the fun and pleasures of youth, as well as against any forms of formality, which is seen to be traditionally embedded in the religiously conservative Indonesia society (see Boellstorff, 2005; Murtagh, 2013). These perceptions might have hindered our informants to develop a positive understanding of gay associations, thus foreclosing any intention to join and participate.

Another important topic that our informants have very little to say about is the civic-political rights of sexual minorities, including their sexual rights as citizens of a democratic country. To them, “citizenship rights” are mostly limited to getting a National ID Card after turning 17 years old, as well as the political right to vote in elections. There was a shared understanding that their homosexuality, which remains shunned upon by the majority of religions and cultural traditions in Indonesia, have precluded them from experiencing equal treatment as individuals and citizens compared to other members of society. For example, none of our informants seemed to be aware of the 2007 Yogyakarta Principles—an international agreement, signed in their city, to protect the sexual rights of LGBT and other minority sexual groups, and has since been used as a reference to legalize same-sex marriage in Australia, the Netherlands, and other countries (see Pettinicchio, 2012). While our informants believe there is little chance that the state will accept and recognize their sexual orientation anytime soon, they also realize that society have been kind of permissive of their existence—but only

as long as they keep a low profile and refrain from displaying intimacy in public.

This widespread depoliticization represent the current challenges surrounding efforts to promote the recognition of different sexual orientations and advocate the equal social-cum-citizenship status for LGBTs. The lack of the formal state recognition and protection, combined with the still-rampant attacks from hardliner religious groups, have put sexual minorities in very vulnerable circumstances (see Oetomo & Boellstorff, 2014; Arivia & Boangmanalu, 2015; HRW, 2016). Deprived of socio-political organization due to limited socialization into existing LGBT associations across the country, young gays have thus been lacking a valuable source of knowledge and information on sexual health, sexual rights, as well as other alternatives of a “good” social life for homosexuals. As mentioned in the previous sections, these young gays have shown strong sexual desire and eagerness to participate in sexual activities without paying attention to their long-term sexual health. They have also lacked basic capacities to build a mutually positive and long-term intimate relationship with their partners. If they keep up these lifestyles—rapidly changing partners, being ignorant of their sexual and citizenship rights, and exclude themselves from established sexual minority advocacy groups—their futures might be in jeopardy, especially compared to other young Indonesians (see Badgett, Hasenbush & Luhur, 2017).

The disinclination towards activism shown by these young homosexuals also poses itself as an important challenge to the continuation of sexual minority advocacy groups. Yet it would be unfair to put the sole blame in not joining LGBT associations to these young queer folk, as larger structural factors also come into play. The current socio-political situation of Indonesia, along with the lack of recognition and protection towards sexual minorities, have also contributed to their ignorance (see Oetomo & Boellstorff, 2014; Badgett, et. al, 2017; Wijaya & Davies, 2019). Furthermore, participating in LGBT organizations would not guarantee their safety from both physical and non-physical violence, as well as discrimination. The choice to keep a low profile and conceal one’s homosexuality—yet continue to be sexually active and pursue short-term relationships with gay partners—is understandable, albeit potentially detrimental in the long-term.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this article, I argue that there is an ongoing process of self-learning among young gays to understand their sexual orientation and identity. This process of understanding what it means to be gay is largely facilitated by the internet, which had also allowed them to form friendships and intimate relationships through social media networks and gay-tailored apps. These digital ecologies have been particularly beneficial in helping younger gays move on from the “confusion” stage to tolerance and self-acceptance as they start to realize their homosexuality.

However, this ubiquitous internet use among young gays in Indonesia as a “safe haven” to find knowledge, establish relationships, and develop their sexual identity does come with its own caveats. As their social life as young homosexuals are being increasingly concealed away from the public, the gay digital world might have enabled them to live a “parallel life” where young gays are able to enjoy their freedoms, away from the religious-conservative Indonesian society. While this digital refuge brings short-term benefits of insulating them from the potential of discrimination, it might also eventually leave them alienated, hidden, unrecognized, and remain vulnerable against exploitation and violence—both by fellow sexual minorities and other social groups.

As the Indonesian state fails to provide sexual minorities with support and legal protection and its society becoming more conservative/religious, young gays feel that they will not be able to be recognized and accepted. This disenchantment not only prevents their homosexuality to be further developed into a sense of pride and honour, but also compels them to hide their sexual identity from public life out of fears of jeopardizing their individual lives, careers, and sociability. The risks that come with hypervisibility is also why young homosexuals in this study have also become wary of established LGBT communities and associations. Although these organizations have been conducting the important work of advocating the citizenship and sexual rights of sexual minorities, young gays tend to associate their formal structure with hierarchies and control—but at the cost of being less-informed of important issues pertaining to sexual health, citizenship/sexual rights, as well as how to forge positive, intimate relationships with other gay men.

The dissociation of these young Indonesian gays from established LGBT associations presents important challenges for both sides. On one hand, the disconnect of these sexual minority organizations from

members of their own group and target audience raises a huge question regarding their current strategies and approaches, especially regarding issues on homosexuality and/or other related topics faced by homosexual people. Nonetheless, this study suggests that efforts to promote safe sex, gay pride, and sexual rights are largely meaningless for these young Indonesian homosexuals without also considering the current state of ignorance and resentment from the society they live in, as well as the lack of state recognition.

On the other hand, by being disconnected to LGBT organizations, young gays are being deprived of spaces and opportunities to fully develop their sexual identity. They will be much less aware of important issues related to sexual minority groups, and eventually hinder the possibility to develop a social life as equal fellow Indonesians in the years to come. For the Indonesian society, this entire group of people living their own separate parallel lives might enrich its inherited “plural society”—especially in the face of existing segmentation, different life trajectories, as well as ethno-religious and political polarization hampering the social integration and cohesion of our modern times. The current apathy of these young gay people should be a point of concern for anyone with attention and interests to the future of minority sexual groups in the country.

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