



THE QUEER EXPRESSION AND CONSTRUCTION OF SEXUAL IDENTITY ON
INSTAGRAM: A STUDY AMONG MALAYSIAN GAY AND LESBIAN YOUTH

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TEOH KAI XIN

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APPROVAL SHEET

This research paper attached hereto, entitled “The Queer Expression and Construction of Sexual Identity on Instagram: A study among Malaysian Gay and Lesbian Youth”, prepared and submitted by TEOH KAI XIN in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Bachelor of Communication (Hons) Journalism, is hereby accepted.



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ABSTRACT

In Malaysia, sexuality and gender diversity are widely regarded as taboo topics, constrained by social norms, religious beliefs, and legal restrictions. LGBTQ+ youth often face challenges expressing their sexual identities both offline and online due to fear of stigma and discrimination. Nevertheless, online platforms such as Instagram provide greater control and relative anonymity, making them important spaces for sexual identity expression and construction. This study investigates how Malaysian gay and lesbian youth use Instagram for expression and the construction of their sexual identity. A qualitative approach is employed, beginning with a textual analysis of selected Instagram posts, followed by semi-structured interviews with five participants. These methods provide a comprehensive understanding of how sexual identities are expressed and constructed within Malaysia's conservative socio-cultural context. The study is expected to show how participants negotiate their sexual identities through captions, visual content, and daily online interactions, highlighting patterns of self-expression. It also examines how participants navigate challenges related to privacy, authenticity, and social acceptance, which shape identity construction. Both the textual analysis and semi-structured interviews are grounded in Co-Cultural Theory, which guides the study's examination of how Malaysian gay and lesbian youth employ strategic communication practices to express and construct their sexual identities. By situating the study within Malaysia's conservative socio-cultural context, this research highlights how Instagram enables sexual identity expression and construction in contexts where both offline and online channels for expressing sexual identity are constrained. It also provides insights into how social media supports the sexual identity expression and construction of Malaysian gay and lesbian youth.

Keywords: Queer, Instagram, Self-expression, Identity construction, Sexual Identity, Malaysia

DECLARATION

I declare that the material contained in this paper is the end result of my own work and that due acknowledgement has been given in the bibliography and references to ALL sources be they printed, electronic or personal.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Research Background

In Malaysia, sexuality and gender diversity remain highly sensitive topics due to the influence of religious, cultural, and legal norms. Given that Malaysia's majority population consists of Malays, who are predominantly Muslim, Islam is the national religion in Malaysia, and it generally considers homosexual behaviour as sinful or morally unacceptable (Lee et al., 2023). Malaysia has a dual legal system, consisting of secular laws inherited from the British colonial era and state-level Syariah laws, both of which include provisions that criminalize homosexual and gender non-conforming behaviours (Cheah & Singaravelu, 2017). Moreover, Malaysian society is overall conservative, with limited acceptance or recognition of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ+) rights. This social environment creates numerous challenges for the LGBTQ+ community, including restricted legal protection, social prejudice, and limited freedom of expression (Lee et al., 2023). Therefore, understanding the expression and construction of LGBTQ+ sexual identities in digital spaces requires situating their experiences within Malaysia's unique religious, cultural, and legal context. Compared to their heterosexual counterparts, LGBTQ+ individuals experience a distinct process that involves consciously navigating the formation and revelation of their identity (Fox & Ralston, 2016). This process is further complicated in the Malaysian context, where conservative cultural norms, religious beliefs, and legal restrictions contribute to stigma and discrimination, forcing LGBTQ+ individuals to express their sexual identities carefully. At the same time, as heterosexuality is widely regarded as the societal norm, LGBTQ+ individuals often face stigma and discrimination, which limits their opportunities to express their sexual identity openly

in public spaces. Consequently, LGBTQ+ youth often turn to social media to explore issues related to their identities, seek a sense of community, and engage in social interaction (Mohamad Tuah & Mazlan, 2020). In this study, the focus is specifically on queer youth, particularly gay and lesbian individuals, to examine how they express and construct their sexual identities on Instagram. The term ‘queer’ has evolved from a stigmatizing adjective meaning ‘not heterosexual’ to a broader noun denoting individuals whose sexuality and/or gender places them outside societal norms (Dilley, P., 1999).

Social media use can be defined as web-based behaviours, including actions such as liking, commenting, messaging, and observing other users' behaviours (Trifiro & Gerson, 2019). Social media and social networking sites (SNSs) serve multiple purposes for LGBTQ+ individuals, such as facilitating the expression, construction, and regulation of their identities (Fox & Ralston, 2016). Among these SNSs, Instagram is currently the fourth largest social network, followed by Facebook, YouTube, and WeChat (Chen, Nguyen, & Jaroenwattananon, 2021). According to Fisher et al. (2024), Instagram is one of the most popular social media platforms among young people, with almost 90% of sexual minority youth having an active account. This finding comes from a study conducted among LGBTQ+ youth in the United States, using a mixed-methods approach that combines qualitative coding with quantitative analysis. Although the study focuses on the U.S. context, it usefully highlights Instagram's role as a key space for the expression of sexual minority youth identity. Existing research on Instagram usage has identified several key motives. One is self-expression, which involves sharing personal information and updates, allowing users to present themselves to others; another is socialization, which refers to maintaining connections with friends and family, while creativity relates to expressing artistic or creative skills

through photos (Kocak et al., 2020). Lucero (2017) also suggests that social media platforms often function as safer spaces for multiply minoritized LGBTQ youth, offering room to explore questions related to sexuality and gender in ways that may not be possible offline. Together, Instagram serves as a crucial platform for investigating how queer youth, particularly gay and lesbian individuals, express and construct their sexual identities online.

Instagram, as a visually oriented platform, offers flexible privacy settings and the freedom to showcase individual personal images, enabling Malaysian LGBTQ+ youth to manage the identities they wish to present more autonomously. Compared to offline environments, Instagram provides a relatively controllable space, allowing Queer to express their sexual identity symbolically. Turkle (2011) argues that digital communication allows individuals to manage vulnerable interactions by deciding when to communicate, how to craft their messages, and how much emotional exposure to permit. Similarly, Lucero (2017) notes that social media enables users to edit their ideas, exert control over the flow of conversations, and construct online identities that may differ from their offline identity. Features such as captions, hashtags, Stories, and private accounts allow users to maintain authenticity while effectively managing visibility and security (Chen, Nguyen, & Jaroenwattananon, 2021). This makes Instagram a key social media for investigating the expression and construction of sexual identities, particularly within socially and culturally restrictive contexts. For these reasons, Instagram plays a central role not only in enabling the expression of sexual identity but also in shaping the ongoing construction of sexual identity itself, as users negotiate visibility, interaction, and self-presentation within a space that feels safer than their offline surroundings.

Sexual identity refers to an individual's understanding of the important aspects of their sexual self, shaping how they answer the question "Who am I sexually?" (Döring et al., 2022). This encompasses an individual's sexual orientation, their foundational beliefs about sexuality, sexual behaviour, and desire, and their understanding of who they are sexually (Noon et al., 2024). According to Döring et al. (2022), sexual identity evolves across the lifespan as individuals develop an understanding of their sexual self. This definition is important for the present study, as it highlights that sexual identity is both constructed and expressed, which are the processes that increasingly take place on digital platforms such as Instagram.

Online social networks are key venues not only for social interaction but also for identity-building and self-expression (Eleuteri et al., 2017). For LGBTQ+ youth in particular, these platforms can provide valuable opportunities to explore and express aspects of their sexual identity. Through sharing content, interacting with peers, and managing their online presence, youth actively construct and negotiate their sexual identities in digital spaces. According to Goffman (1949), individuals communicate through two forms of expressiveness: expression given and expression given off. The expression given refers to the intentional, conscious use of verbal symbols or other deliberate cues to convey specific information to others. This "traditional" form of communication captures the messages individuals purposely choose to present (Goffman, 1949). Drawing from this concept, Goffman's idea of "expression given" is especially relevant to this study because it refers to the intentional, controlled forms of communication individuals consciously use to present themselves to others. In the context of LGBTQ+ youth on Instagram, these deliberate acts, such as choosing captions, curating photos, selecting hashtags, or managing followers, can be understood

as forms of self-expression through which they intentionally craft and communicate aspects of their sexual identity.

Social constructionist perspectives suggest that identity is continuously under construction and formed through social interactions (Christiansen, C., 2000). Building on the concept of intentional expressiveness, it is important to recognize that self-expression on social media is not only a reflection of identity but also a mechanism through which identity is actively constructed. In other words, the ways individuals choose to present themselves online become part of the ongoing work of shaping “who they are.” Identity construction is inherently social, relying on interpersonal relationships, the sharing of self, and the performance of social roles valued both by the individual and their social environment (Christiansen, C., 2000). On Instagram, these dynamics are manifested through features such as captions, hashtags, Stories, and private accounts, which allow LGBTQ+ youth to selectively share aspects of themselves, manage visibility, and engage with peers in ways that are meaningful also perceived safer environment than offline contexts. Through these deliberate acts of self-expression, youth not only express aspects of their sexual identity but also participate in its continuous construction of sexual identity.

1.2 Research Problem

In Malaysia, state-sponsored discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals remains pervasive, including the funding of conversion practices. Federal law punishes “carnal intercourse against the order of nature,” interpreted as adult consensual same-sex conduct, with up to 20 years in prison and mandatory caning. Additionally, Sharia (Islamic law) criminalizes both same-sex activity and gender nonconformity. In March 2024, Home Minister Datuk Seri Saifuddin Nasution Ismail stated that Malaysia “does

not recognize any LGBTQ lifestyle” and that the government would continue banning films featuring “LGBTQ themes” (Human Rights Watch, 2025). These legal and policy measures create a hostile environment, restricting LGBTQ+ individuals’ ability to safely express and explore their sexual identities, which may in turn drive them to seek alternative spaces, such as social media, for self-expression and identity construction.

Although Instagram is a widely used platform among young people, how LGBTQ+ individuals utilize its visual and interactive features to express and construct their sexual identities has not been adequately studied. Moreover, prior studies tend to examine self-expression and identity construction separately rather than exploring how these processes intersect and mutually influence one another. This leaves a gap in understanding how Queer youth, particularly in socially and culturally conservative contexts like Malaysia, use Instagram to express and construct their sexual identities simultaneously. Qualitative approaches are not designed to generate broad generalisations, but instead aim to develop an in-depth understanding of specific sub-groups and the underlying processes, values, emotions, and relationships that shape their experiences (Drury et al., 2011). This makes qualitative methods particularly appropriate for the present study, which seeks to uncover how Malaysian gay and lesbian youth navigate sexual identity expression and construction within a conservative sociocultural environment.

This study focuses specifically on Malaysian queer youth, particularly gay and lesbian individuals, who are active Instagram users. The research examines their use of Instagram for self-expression and sexual identity construction, including the ways they create, share, and manage content such as captions, photos, hashtags, Stories, and interactions with followers. The study is geographically limited to Malaysia,

considering its unique cultural, religious, and legal context, which influences how LGBTQ+ youth navigate expression and identity online. By combining qualitative interviews with textual analysis of Instagram posts, the research investigates strategies, experiences, and challenges in expressing and constructing sexual identities within a restrictive social environment.

1.3 Research Objectives

1. To investigate how Malaysian queer youth use Instagram to express their sexual identities.
2. To examine how Malaysian queer youth actively construct their sexual identities through Instagram interactions and content curation.
3. To identify the challenges and constraints Malaysian queer youth encounter in expressing and constructing their sexual identities on Instagram.

1.4 Research Questions

1. How do Malaysian gay and lesbian youth express their sexual identities on Instagram?
2. How do Malaysian gay and lesbian youth actively construct their sexual identities through Instagram interactions and content curation?
3. What challenges and constraints do Malaysian gay and lesbian youth face in expressing and constructing their sexual identities on Instagram?

1.5 Research Significance

This study is significant both academically and practically, as it addresses a gap in understanding how Malaysian queer youth use Instagram to express and construct their

sexual identities simultaneously. While Instagram has been studied in various contexts, limited research has examined how Malaysia queer youth specifically use its visual and interactive features to express and construct their sexual identities. By examining these processes together in the context of Instagram, this study provides nuanced insights into the ways queer youth actively express and construct their sexual identities within socially and culturally conservative environments. Practically, the findings can inform educators, social workers, LGBTQ+ support organizations, and policymakers about the strategies that youth employ to navigate online visibility, privacy, and social interaction. Understanding these strategies can guide the development of interventions, digital literacy programs, and support mechanisms that enhance the safety and well-being of marginalized sexual and gender minority youth.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Online Self-Expression and Authenticity

Existing research on online self-expression highlights an ongoing tension between authenticity and selective self-presentation. Coker et al. (2023) argue that LGBTQ+ individuals often perceive online environments as spaces that allow greater authenticity compared to offline contexts, as digital platforms enable connection with like-minded communities and supportive networks.

However, this sense of authenticity is not straightforward. Haimson et al. (2021) challenge the idea of “pure authenticity” online, arguing that users continuously engage in selective disclosure in order to maintain socially acceptable impressions. This suggests that authenticity online is always mediated rather than fully expressed.

Choi and Sung (2018) further extend this argument by focusing on platform influence, suggesting that Instagram’s visual and persistent structure encourages idealised self-presentation. In this sense, authenticity is not only a personal choice but also structurally shaped by platform design.

In contrast, Craig and McInroy (2014) highlight that selective disclosure among LGBTQ youth should not only be understood as impression management, but also as a protective strategy, allowing individuals to explore identity safely in potentially hostile offline environments.

More recently, Noon et al. (2024) reconceptualise authenticity as relational rather than individual. Authentic self-expression only becomes meaningful when it is validated by others within online communities.

2.2 LGBTQ+ Sexual Identity Construction Online

Ruberg and Ruelos (2020) argue that conventional demographic frameworks fail to capture the fluid and evolving nature of queer identities. Their findings show that many LGBTQ individuals experience shifts in their understanding of sexual identity over time, while gender identity often involves overlapping and relational dimensions. Such perspectives highlight that queer identities are not static categories but are continuously negotiated and reconstructed, a process that becomes particularly visible within digital and online environments.

Social media and other online platforms have become crucial tools for LGBTQ+ individuals to explore, construct, and manage their identities. Unlike their heterosexual and cisgender peers, LGBTQ youth often follow a unique trajectory, in which they must deliberately manage the development and disclosure of their sexual or gender identities (Fox & Ralston, 2016). In this context, Hillier et al. (2012) suggest that LGBTQ+ youth may take greater risks online than non-LGBTQ+ youth, a behaviour shaped by the need to navigate hostile or unsafe offline environments. Similarly, Hillier and Harrison (2007) argue that homosexual youth are active and strategic participants online, using the internet not as passive users but as a space to explore sexual identities, build supportive networks, and develop confidence.

This identity construction process is further facilitated by a wide range of digital tools, including social media, mobile applications, and online informational resources. For instance, a qualitative study of 63 gay or bisexual male youth revealed that participants used these tools to explore and accept their sexual identities, increase self-awareness, and learn more about the LGBTQ community (Harper, Serrano, Bruce, & Bauermeister, 2016). In addition, online environments provide spaces where LGBTQ youth can experiment with self-presentation, selectively disclose personal information, and engage with supportive communities. These affordances allow LGBTQ youth to

safely explore and rehearse their identities before integrating them into offline life (Craig & McInroy, 2014).

2.3 Instagram Affordances and Identity Negotiation

In face-to-face communication, individuals cannot control every aspect of their self-presentation, whereas computer-mediated communication allows for greater control over how the self is presented (Seibel, 2019). This increased level of control enables users to mediate their self-expression by selectively revealing, modifying, or concealing content in online environments. As a visually oriented social media platform, Instagram functions as a mediated space in which users can carefully curate images, captions, and interactions, thereby shaping how others perceive their identities.

Furthermore, an increasing number of scholars adopt an affordance-based approach to examine how social media platforms enable or constrain user behaviours (Khazraee & Novak, 2018). Social media affordances refer to the action possibilities permitted by specific platform features (Karahanna et al., 2018). Treem and Leonardi's (2013) four-item taxonomy—visibility, editability, persistence, and association—provides a concise framework for understanding how users navigate and negotiate platform environments.

Within this framework, Lee (2023) found that Instagram offers a range of affordances that significantly shape how users express and negotiate their identities online. Its visual and mobile-oriented design allows users to share photos and short videos with extensive editing options, including filters, brightness adjustments, text, emojis, and multi-photo posts, as well as content captured outside the application. Features such as Stories and Reels further expand opportunities for short-form video expression, although the main feed remains centred on curated image-based posts. In

addition, Instagram emphasizes original content creation, requiring users to produce their own photos and videos rather than directly reposting others' material. Interactivity is facilitated through hashtags, which categorize content and enhance discoverability within follower-based communities, fostering targeted networks rather than broad viral exposure.

Collectively, these affordances enable users to strategically manage self-presentation, regulate visibility, and engage selectively with audiences. Such affordances are particularly significant for LGBTQ+ youth, for whom identity expression often involves navigating concerns related to safety, stigma, and audience perception. On Instagram, some users maintain multiple accounts to manage self-presentation, including a public “Rinsta” account that showcases curated and socially acceptable content, and a private “Finsta” account shared with close friends, where users may present themselves more authentically (Huang & Vitak, 2022). Similarly, LGBTQ+ users often engage in diverse identity performances on highly flexible online platforms through secondary Instagram accounts, which allow them to experiment with multiple aspects of their identities (Coker et al., 2023).

However, scholars such as Choi and Sung (2018) emphasize that Instagram's persistence encourages highly curated identity performances, as users continually refine their posts to align with platform norms and audience expectations. This pressure toward curation may conflict with queer youths' desire for authenticity and identity exploration, particularly in social contexts where explicit sexual identity expression can be risky or dangerous.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Co-Cultural Theory (CCT) as its theoretical framework to understand how Malaysian gay and lesbian youth navigate sexual identity expression and negotiation on Instagram. Mark Orbe (1998), who developed this theory, uses the term co-culture to refer to cultural groups that coexist within social spaces and negotiate their cultural identities within the power structures of dominant cultural groups. It provides a lens to examine communication between a dominant cultural group and a marginalized or co-cultural group. This theory provides a useful framework to explicate the complex and dynamic way members of co-cultural groups interact with members of dominant cultures. The co-cultural group refers to the collection of people, places, things, or ideas that are considered secondary or marginalized and hold less power than another cultural group (Orbe, 1998). In the context of this study, mainstream Malaysian society, which is dominated by heteronormative norms, is considered the dominant group, while gay and lesbian youth are seen as the co-cultural group navigating these norms.

Co-Cultural Theory emphasizes two key components, which are preferred outcomes and communication approaches. Preferred outcomes reflect what members of the co-cultural group hope to achieve in each communicative exchange with the dominant group. Orbe (1998) identifies three types of preferred outcomes, which are assimilation, accommodation, and separation. Assimilation involves conforming to the dominant group's norms, potentially at the expense of one's co-cultural identity. Accommodation entails advocating for both one's own group and the dominant group, allowing co-cultural members to maintain most of their identity while negotiating mutual understanding. Separation occurs when co-cultural members intentionally distance themselves from the dominant group to preserve their unique identity.

Communication approaches describe how co-cultural members pursue these preferred outcomes, categorized as non-assertive, assertive, or aggressive (Orbe, 1998). Non-assertive approaches involve avoiding conflict and passively aligning with the dominant group. Assertive approaches are characterized by active advocacy while considering the dominant group's needs. Aggressive approaches prioritize the co-cultural group's needs, potentially challenging the dominant group's norms to effect change.

By situating gay and lesbian youths' Instagram practices within the co-cultural framework, it allows for a nuanced understanding of how gay and lesbian youth strategically manage their sexual identities online, balancing personal authenticity and socio-cultural constraints.

Chapter 3: Methodology

3.1 Research Approach

This study adopts a qualitative research approach to explore how Malaysian gay and lesbian youth express and negotiate their sexual identities on Instagram. Qualitative research is essential for gaining a deep understanding of complex social phenomena, capturing experiences, relationships, and meanings that cannot be fully explored through quantitative methods alone (Drury et al., 2011). In this study, the qualitative approach enables an in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, perceptions, and strategies in the expression and construction of sexual identity online.

3.2 Research Method

A combination of textual analysis and semi-structured interviews was used in this study. The textual analysis examines selected Instagram posts, including photos, videos, captions, and hashtags to explore how Malaysian gay and lesbian youth express and perform their sexual identities online. Textual analysis is a qualitative research method that involves closely examining texts to uncover deeper meanings, themes, and patterns, allowing researchers to interpret how language and symbols reflect cultural and social contexts rather than just their surface content (Rholetter, 2021). Through textual analysis, this study can reveal both the explicit and implicit ways participants negotiate sexual identity within a conservative society. Semi-structured interviews complement this analysis by offering more profound insight into participants' motivations, experiences, and the strategies they use in constructing and negotiating their sexual identities. According to Weiss (1995), interviewing allows us to gain insights into places we have not been and could not go, and about settings in which we have not lived. This makes semi-structured interviews particularly valuable for understanding

the personal experiences, motivations, and strategies of Malaysian gay and lesbian youth in expressing their sexual identities online.

Ethical considerations are central to this study due to the sensitive nature of LGBTQ+ issues in Malaysia. Voluntary participation, informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality will be ensured, and participants' comfort and privacy will always be respected.

3.3 Research Scope

3.3.1 Textual Analysis Scope

This study uses textual analysis to examine how Malaysian gay and lesbian youth express and negotiate their sexual identities on Instagram. The analysis focuses on user-generated content, including posts, captions, images, Stories, and Reels. Instagram content is treated as more than just visuals. Instead, posts are understood as combinations of images, text, and symbols that work together to communicate meaning.

The analysis focuses on the technical aspects of Instagram posts, including visual, textual, and audio elements. Attention is paid to how different technical features are used to shape self-presentation and regulate the visibility of sexual identity expression. In addition, the analysis considers the degree of explicitness in posts to examine how users negotiate openness, subtlety, and ambiguity when expressing sexual identity on Instagram. Through this approach, the study seeks to understand how users strategically manage visibility and self-representation within the platform's affordances.

3.3.2 Interview Scope

To address RQ1, the interview explored participants' patterns of self-expression on Instagram, focusing on both visual and textual elements. The scope includes

understanding how participants choose what to post, what aspects of their identity they display or conceal, and how they use captions, stories, emojis, or hashtags to signal or hint at their sexual identity. Participants were also invited to share how often their posts relate to sexual identity expression, whether such expression is deliberate or spontaneous, and how their online expression differs from their offline identity presentation.

Furthermore, to answer RQ2, the interview explored how participants shape their identities through ongoing self-expression and interpersonal interactions on Instagram. This includes what kinds of content they choose to follow or engage with, how they interact with LGBTQ-related accounts or communities, and how feedback, such as likes and comments, influences their sense of self.

Lastly, to address RQ3, the interview examined participants' experiences with sociocultural, relational, and platform-specific constraints. The scope includes perceived risks, fears of judgment, concerns about being outed to family members, and strategies used to navigate Instagram's visibility settings. Participants may also discuss pressures to appear "normal," the need to self-censor, experiences of harassment or misunderstanding, and the impact of Malaysia's conservative social context on their online expression.

3.4 Research Sampling

3.4.1 Research Sampling of Textual Analysis

A purposive sampling strategy, supplemented by snowball sampling, is used to select Instagram content relevant to the research objectives. Purposive sampling refers to the deliberate selection of participants who are able to provide useful experiences, perspectives, and insights relevant to the research topic, making efficient use of limited

research resources (Campbell et al., 2020). Purposive sampling is employed to ensure that the selected posts meet specific inclusion criteria related to sexual identity expression. In contrast, snowball sampling is a widely used sampling technique in qualitative research that relies on participants' social networks and referrals to recruit additional respondents (Parker et al., 2019). It facilitates access to suitable accounts within a relatively private and marginalised community. The sampling focuses on posts shared within two months to capture recent practices of sexual identity expression. This time frame is chosen to explore participants' current Instagram use and their ways of expressing and managing sexual identity online. Accounts are selected based on several inclusion criteria. First, the account owner must identify as Malaysian. Second, the user must self-identify as gay or lesbian. Third, the selected content must reflect personal self-expression related to sexual identity, either explicitly or through symbolic elements. Finally, both the original posts and the content reposted by the account owner are included in the analysis, as the decision to repost reflects the user's identity positioning and self-presentation. Exclusion criteria include commercial accounts, purely promotional material, and posts unrelated to identity or self-expression. Both public and more private or secondary accounts are considered, where access and consent are ethically obtained. This sampling strategy aligns with Co-Cultural Theory by capturing both overt and subtle forms of identity expression used by marginalized individuals as they navigate dominant cultural norms.

3.4.2 Research Sampling of Interview

This study used a combination of purposive and snowball sampling to recruit respondents. The target population consists of Malaysian gay and lesbian youth aged 18–30 who actively use Instagram for personal self-expression. Purposive sampling ensures that participants meet the study's criteria, while snowball sampling allows

recruited participants to refer others who fit the profile, which is particularly helpful for reaching marginalized groups such as LGBTQ+ youth. Approximately five participants were recruited for individual semi-structured interviews, with the final number determined by saturation, the point at which additional interviews no longer provide new insights. Participants were included if they are Malaysian residents, aged between 18 and 30, self-identify as gay or lesbian, and actively use Instagram for personal self-expression. Those who are under 18 or over 30, non-Malaysian residents, do not identify as gay or lesbian, or primarily use Instagram for commercial, promotional, or non-personal purposes were excluded.

3.5 Data Collection

3.5.1 Data Collection of Textual Analysis

Data collection involved systematically gathering Instagram content from the selected accounts within the defined sampling period. Posts were collected as screenshots with captions, while Reels and Stories were documented via screen recordings where applicable. Only content relevant to sexual identity expression was retained for analysis.

3.5.2 Data Collection of the Interview

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted online via Microsoft Teams. This approach ensures flexibility and accessibility for participants across different locations. An initial minimum of five participants was recruited, and the final sample size was determined based on data saturation, continuing until no new themes or insights emerged. With participants' consent, selected Instagram posts will also be analyzed to identify visual and textual patterns. The combined data from

interviews and Instagram posts focused on how participants express and construct their sexual identities online.

3.6 Data Analysis

This study employs a qualitative approach to data analysis. Thematic analysis is a qualitative data analysis approach that involves examining a dataset to identify, interpret, and present recurring patterns of meaning (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). As an analytical and explanatory tool, thematic analysis enables the interpretation of experiences, perspectives, and belief systems through the guidance of a specific conceptual or theoretical framework (Lochmiller, 2021). In this study, two sources of data are analysed, which are Instagram posts and semi-structured interview transcripts. While the data sources differ, both are analysed using thematic analysis as the primary analytical technique, allowing for systematic identification of recurring patterns and meanings across visual, textual, and narrative data.

3.6.1 Data Analysis of Textual Analysis

The Instagram posts are analysed through qualitative textual analysis, guided by thematic analysis. Each post is examined holistically as a multimodal text, considering how visual, textual, and symbolic elements interact to construct meaning. This includes the analysis of technical sides, such as images, colour usage, captions, emojis, hashtags, and content visibility.

3.6.2 Data Analysis of the Interview

The data collected from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method used in qualitative research to identify patterns, or themes, within a given data set (Miller, 2024). This method is suitable for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning within qualitative data.

This approach is suitable for capturing the complexities of online identity expression, as it enables systematic interpretation of both interview transcripts and Instagram content.

3.7 Expected Outcomes

This study expects to uncover the strategies Malaysian gay and lesbian youth employ to express and negotiate their sexual identities on Instagram, as well as examine how the platform's affordances, such as captions, hashtags, stories, and interactive features, influence identity presentation, authenticity, and community engagement. By applying Co-Cultural Theory (CCT), the study provided a nuanced understanding of how these youth, as members of a co-cultural group, navigate interactions with the dominant group, a society in which heterosexual norms are taken as norm. It illustrated how participants use different communication approaches, which are non-assertive, assertive, or aggressive, to achieve preferred outcomes such as assimilation, accommodation, or separation in their online self-expression. The study is also expected to identify the challenges, risks, and constraints that participants encounter as they balance personal authenticity with the norms and expectations of the dominant culture. Overall, the research provided insights into the interplay between online self-expression and sociocultural pressures in Malaysia, demonstrating how Malaysian gay and lesbian youth strategically navigate Instagram to express and continuously construct their sexual identities.

3.8 Research Limitations

Several limitations are acknowledged in this study. The small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings, as they may not represent the broader Malaysian Queer youth population. Focusing solely on Instagram restricts the applicability of findings to

other social media platforms with different affordances and cultures. While the qualitative approach provides rich, in-depth insights, it inherently limits generalizability. Furthermore, due to the sociocultural and legal sensitivity surrounding LGBTQ issues in Malaysia, participants may moderate their responses, which could result in partial disclosure of experiences.

Chapter 4 Findings and Analysis

This chapter presents the findings and analysis of the study on how Malaysian gay and lesbian youth express and construct their sexual identities on Instagram. A qualitative approach was employed, combining textual analysis of selected Instagram posts within a defined two-month period before data collection, together with semi-structured interviews conducted with five participants. This mixed-methods approach allows for a more comprehensive understanding of both the observable online practices and the personal experiences behind them. Data were analysed using inductive thematic analysis, enabling key themes to emerge organically from both the textual data and interview transcripts. The analysis was further informed by Co-Cultural Theory, which provides a useful framework for examining how marginalised groups negotiate their sexual identities within dominant social structures. In particular, the theory guided the interpretation of participants' communication strategies, such as selective self-presentation, identity negotiation, and varying levels of openness in expressing their sexual identities. The analytical process began with a close reading of Instagram posts collected within the selected timeframe, followed by line-by-line coding of both textual data and interview transcripts to identify recurring patterns in participants' behaviours, perceptions, and experiences. These initial codes were then refined and organised into broader themes that reflect how participants manage audience boundaries, navigate socio-cultural constraints, and actively construct their sexual identities on Instagram.

4.1 Overview of Participants and Instagram Usage

Participant	Gender	Sexual Identity	Occupation /Status	Location	Coming-out Status	Number of Accounts	Account Privacy Setting

P1 (G1)	Male	Gay	Student	Malaysia	Not out	2	Both Private
P2 (G2)	Male	Gay	Student/ Content Creator	Taiwan	Out	2	Main-Public Finsta-Private
P3 (L1)	Female	Lesbian	Student	Malaysia	Out	3	Main-Private Secondary- Public Finsta-Private
P4 (L2)	Female	Lesbian	Student/ Content Creator	Taiwan	Out	2	Both public
P5 (L3)	Female	Lesbian	Student	Malaysia	Not out	2	Both private

Table 4.1: Participant Demographics and Instagram Usage.

The following table summarises the demographic background and Instagram usage patterns of the five participants (P1–P5). In this study, participants are coded as G (gay) and L (lesbian), with G1–G2 representing gay participants and L1–L3 representing lesbian participants. All participants are currently students, with two participants, P2 and P4, also identifying as content creators.

Regarding Instagram usage, all participants maintain at least two accounts, indicating a common practice of separating accounts for different social purposes. P1 and P5 both maintain two accounts that are set to private, suggesting a more closed and controlled form of online self-presentation. P2 maintains a dual-account structure consisting of a main public account and a private Finsta account. On Instagram, some users maintain two accounts: a “real” Instagram (Rinsta), which presents a more curated and socially acceptable identity, and a “fake” Instagram (Finsta), which is typically private and used to share more authentic or unfiltered aspects of the self (Huang &

Vitak, 2022). Similarly, P3 adopts a more complex three-account system, including a private main account, a public secondary account, and a private Finsta account, reflecting differentiated levels of visibility. In contrast, P4 maintains two public accounts, indicating a more open approach to online identity presentation compared to other participants. Overall, the data shows variation in how participants manage privacy settings and account functions, particularly in balancing public visibility and private expression.

Additionally, participants' coming-out status varies across the sample, providing important context for understanding their identity disclosure practices on Instagram. Coming out has been widely conceptualised as a key process of identity management within queer communities, involving the disclosure of sexual or gender identities in heteronormative contexts (Zimman, 2009). In this study, P1 and P5 are not out, whereas P2, P3, and P4 are openly out. This distinction suggests differing levels of comfort and potential risk associated with sexual identity visibility on Instagram. Participants who are openly out may experience fewer constraints in presenting their sexual identities, while those who are not out may adopt more cautious strategies to manage their self-presentation and avoid unintended disclosure. As such, coming-out status serves as a key factor that may influence how participants navigate privacy, visibility, and identity expression across their Instagram accounts.

4.2 Textual Analysis of Instagram Content

This section presents a textual analysis of participants' Instagram content, focusing on how Malaysian gay and lesbian youth express and construct their sexual identities through various platform features. Drawing on screenshots and observations of participants' accounts, this analysis examines how identity is communicated not only

through explicit statements but also through visual elements, content choices, and interactional strategies across different sections of Instagram.

The analysis is guided primarily by RQ1, which examines how Malaysian gay and lesbian youth express their sexual identities on Instagram. By examining multiple layers of Instagram features, this section aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how Malaysian Gay and Lesbian sexual identity is negotiated within different levels of visibility and audience engagement.

4.2.1 Sexual Identity Expression in Instagram Bios

Digital creator myMalaysian Sarawakian 🇲🇾🇲🇾 tw在台留学 🏳️‍🌈 LGBTQIA+ 📺 每週三更新Youtube 📧 合作邀約: huanghaocang@gmail.com 🔗 linktr.ee/onghaochan 📱 haochan_1012	Digital creator MYMalaysian Sarawakian TW Studying in Taiwan LGBTQIA+ Updated every Wednesday on YouTube Collaboration inquiries: huanghaocang@gmail.com
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Figure 4.1: P2 (G2) main account Instagram Bio.

Reel creator 🏳️‍🌈 les MY 🏳️‍🌈 🏳️‍🌈 #愛就拉上她 嘉賓 🌱 be kind to every kind, including urself 🐼 🐻 🐰 🐱 🐶 🐙 🦋 🐟 🧑 🧑	Reel creator Les MY #Love Her Then Pull Her In guest Be kind to every kind, including urself
--	---

Figure 4.2: P4 (L2) main account Instagram Bio.

为生命留白 · 常怀期待 📍 KYOTO	Leave space in life, and always hold hope. KYOTO
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Figure 4.3: P1 (G1) Finsta Instagram Bio.

Photographer 05' GIRL 🏳️‍🌈 记录生活和我的照骗	Photographer 05' GIRL Recording my life and my photos
--	---

Figure 4.4: P3 (L1) Secondary account Instagram Bio.

Private acc. Love Life with the person you love. @keryinnn_ @ eightletters0206

Figure 4.5: P5 (L3) Finsta Instagram Bio.

This section examines how participants express their sexual identities through their Instagram bios, focusing on the presence or absence of explicit textual and symbolic markers. As the bio is positioned prominently on a user's profile and is typically one of the first elements viewed by others, it functions not only as a brief self-introduction but also as a key space for expressing personal identity. Therefore, whether participants include references to their sexual identity in their bios provides direct insight into their self-presentation strategies in a publicly visible context.

Based on the bios of the five participants in this study, only two, who are P2 (G2) and P4 (L2), explicitly express their sexual identities. P2 (G2) includes both a rainbow emoji and the term "LGBTQ," which serve as clear and direct indicators of sexual identity. Similarly, P4 (L2) incorporates a rainbow emoji alongside the term "les," an abbreviation of "lesbian." These textual and symbolic elements function as immediate and recognisable markers, allowing audiences to quickly identify their affiliation with the LGBTQ community through their bios. The use of such markers reflects a more open and intentional form of identity expression, where participants actively incorporate their sexual identity into their online self-presentation.

In contrast, the remaining three participants, including P1 (G1), P3 (L1), and P5 (L3), do not include any explicit references to their sexual identities in their bios. Their bios consist mainly of general or neutral descriptions, such as personal interests, daily expressions, or simple self-descriptions, without any LGBTQ-related keywords, labels, or symbols. The absence of such markers suggests a more reserved approach to identity disclosure, where participants choose not to foreground their sexual identity in a publicly visible space.

4.2.2 Managing Identity Visibility through Usernames and Profile Images



Figure 4.6: P1 (G1) Finsta Username and Profile Picture.



Figure 4.7: P5 (L3) Finsta Username and Profile Picture.



Figure 4.8: P3 (L1) Finsta Username and Profile Picture.



Figure 4.9: P2 (G2) Main account Username and Profile Picture.



Figure 4.10: P4 (L2): Main account Username and Profile Picture.

The use of Instagram usernames reflects varying degrees of identity disclosure. In this study, some participants adopted their real names as their Instagram usernames, making their accounts more easily identifiable to people in their offline social circles. This suggests that they do not actively separate their online and offline identities, but

instead maintain a consistent self-presentation across both contexts. Such an approach indicates a lower level of concern regarding anonymity, as their social media presence closely reflects their real-life identity.

For instance, P2 (G2) and P4 (L2) both use their real names, demonstrating a more open form of self-presentation. As illustrated in Figures 9 and 10, their profiles display identifiable personal information, allowing others to easily associate their online accounts with their real-life identities. Notably, both participants also explicitly indicate their LGBTQ identities in their Instagram bios (refer to Figures 1 and 2), yet still choose to retain their real names. This suggests that they are not only open about their sexual identities but also do not actively avoid being recognised by others.

In contrast, other participants adopted pseudonyms or less identifiable usernames. In this study, P1, P3, and P5 all chose not to use their real names, instead opting for more ambiguous or anonymous usernames. This reduces the direct linkage between their online accounts and offline identities, allowing them to share content without fully revealing who they are. Such practices indicate a more cautious approach to self-presentation, where participants balance self-expression with concerns over privacy and recognizability.

Profile pictures further contribute to identity visibility. Participants who use personal photographs present a more identifiable and visible online presence, whereas those who choose non-personal images, such as objects or illustrations, tend to adopt a more cautious approach to self-disclosure. In this study, P1 and P5 do not use their real photos. P1 uses an image of a man holding flowers that partially covers the face, while P5 uses an image of a cat. These types of non-identifiable profile pictures reduce the

likelihood of being recognized and provide a greater sense of privacy and control over self-presentation.

In contrast, P2, P3, and P4 use profile pictures that clearly show their faces, making their accounts more easily identifiable. This higher level of visibility may be related to their coming-out status. Based on interview data, P3 presents an interesting case: although she uses a pseudonym as her username, her profile picture is a real photo of herself. This seemingly contradictory choice reflects a selective self-presentation strategy. P3 explained that this account is followed by many people she does not personally know, which is why she chose to use a pseudonym to prevent strangers from identifying her real name. However, as she is already out in her offline life, she is not concerned about being recognised through her profile picture. This indicates that her identity management is not about complete concealment, but rather about controlling which aspects of her identity are disclosed to different audiences. Specifically, while she is comfortable revealing her physical appearance through her profile picture, she chooses to conceal her real name to prevent strangers from linking her online presence to her offline identity. This suggests that different elements of identity, such as name and visual appearance, are selectively managed depending on the perceived risks associated with different audiences.

Similarly, P2 and P4 are also in an openly out state, which may explain why both their usernames and profile pictures reflect their real identities. This consistency between visual representation and naming further reinforces the connection between their online and offline selves, indicating a higher level of identity visibility.

Further insights from the interview data help explain the variation in posting activity. Although P1 and P5 have relatively few permanent posts, both participants reported

that they frequently use Instagram Stories to share their daily experiences. Rather than indicating low engagement, this pattern reflects a preference for more controlled and temporary forms of self-expression.

This preference appears to be closely related to their coming-out status. As both P1 and P5 are not fully out, they tend to exercise greater caution in managing their online visibility. Their reliance on less permanent forms of content suggests a strategic approach to self-presentation, allowing them to express aspects of their identity while limiting long-term exposure.

A clear pattern emerges when comparing participants across the sample. P1 and P5 appear notably different from the other three participants (P2, P3, and P4) in terms of their self-presentation strategies. While P2, P3, and P4 generally maintain higher levels of visibility through the use of identifiable usernames, personal profile images, and a larger number of permanent posts, P1 and P5 adopt a more cautious approach. Both participants use less identifiable usernames and non-personal profile images, and they have significantly fewer posts on their profiles. This contrast further reinforces the existence of two distinct patterns of identity management: one characterised by openness and visibility, and another by selectivity and controlled disclosure.

A clear connection can be observed between participants' profile choices and their coming-out status. Participants who are more open about their sexual identities, such as P2, P3, and P4, tend to adopt more identifiable forms of self-presentation, including the use of real names and personal profile images. These elements increase their visibility and suggest a lower level of concern regarding being recognised by others.

In contrast, participants who are not fully out, such as P1 and P5, are more likely to adopt less identifiable usernames and non-personal profile images. These choices

reduce the direct linkage between their online and offline identities, allowing them to maintain a degree of anonymity while still participating in the platform. This pattern indicates that coming-out status plays a significant role in shaping how individuals manage their identity visibility on Instagram.

4.2.3 Visual, Caption and Hashtag Strategies in Posts

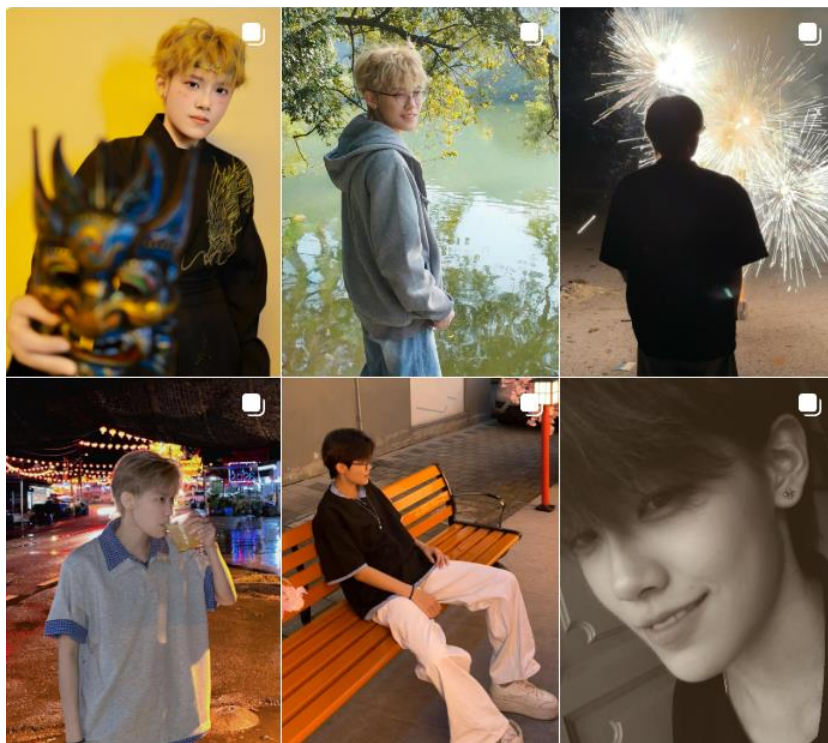


Figure 4.11: P3 (L1) Finsta account post.

 wuming567 幸福一点 顺利一点 7w See translation	A little happier, a little smoother.
 wuming567 其实生命只需要呼吸 6w See translation	Life only needs breathing.

Figure 4.12: P3 (L1) Finsta account post's caption.



Figure 4.13: P4 (L2) main account post.

 rachel_jiaxuen 我是Rachel 瑞秋 在台灣生活的馬來西亞女同志 TWMMY 來台多年 這裡是我重新學會「做自己」的地方 ❤️ 對我來說 同志遊行不只是慶典 更是一場關於「存在」與「勇氣」的宣言 : 我們走在街頭 是為了讓世界看到 我們不是邊緣人 不是議題 而是真實 活生生的你我 🧑🏻 - 離鄉後 我慢慢學會愛自己 理解自己 也遇到了許多溫暖的人 這份自由 得來不易 也值得珍惜... 希望透過分享這張照片 這段故事 能讓更多人知道: 我們的存在本身 就是一種力量 🏳️‍🌈 那天在人海中看見無數彩虹旗飄揚 笑容閃耀的瞬間 我總會想起那些仍不敢出櫃的馬來西亞同志朋友們 想到他們既心疼 也希望自己能多一點力量 為他們 也為我們發聲 🥺 因此 我開始經營這個帳號 分享關於 LGBTQ+ 的故事與聲音 希望讓更多人了解馬來西亞同志所面對的不容易 也希望更多的大馬人能在這裡 看見希望的模樣 🏳️‍🌈 謝謝台灣 給了我安全感與被擁抱的空間 也希望有朝一日 家鄉也能變成 讓每個人都能自由愛與被愛的地方 ❤️💚💛💜 #女同志 #lgbtq #pride #同志遊行 #愛是自由的樣子 #loveislove	I'm Rachel. A Malaysian lesbian living in Taiwan TW After many years here, this has become the place where I learned how to be myself again. To me, Pride is not just a celebration. It's a declaration of <i>existence</i> and <i>courage</i>. We walk on the streets to be seen — to show the world that we are not outsiders, not just an “issue,” but real, living people — just like you and me. Whenever I stand in the crowd, watching rainbow flags wave and smiles shine, I can't help but think of my Malaysian LGBTQ+ friends who still don't feel safe to come out. I feel both heartache and hope — and a desire to be a little stronger, to speak up for them, and for us.
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	That's why I started this account — to share stories and voices from the LGBTQ+ community, to help more people understand the challenges faced by queer Malaysians, and to let more Malaysians see what hope can look like. Being away from home, I slowly learned to love and understand myself, and I met so many kind and warm people along the way. This freedom is not easily gained — and it's something I deeply cherish. Through this photo and this story, I hope more people will understand this: Our existence itself is a form of strength. Thank you, Taiwan, for giving me a space where I feel safe and embraced. And I hope that one day, my home country can also become a place where everyone is free to love and be loved. #lesbian #lgbtq #pride #prideparade #loveislove #freedomtolove
--	--

Figure 4.14: P4 (L2) main account post's caption.

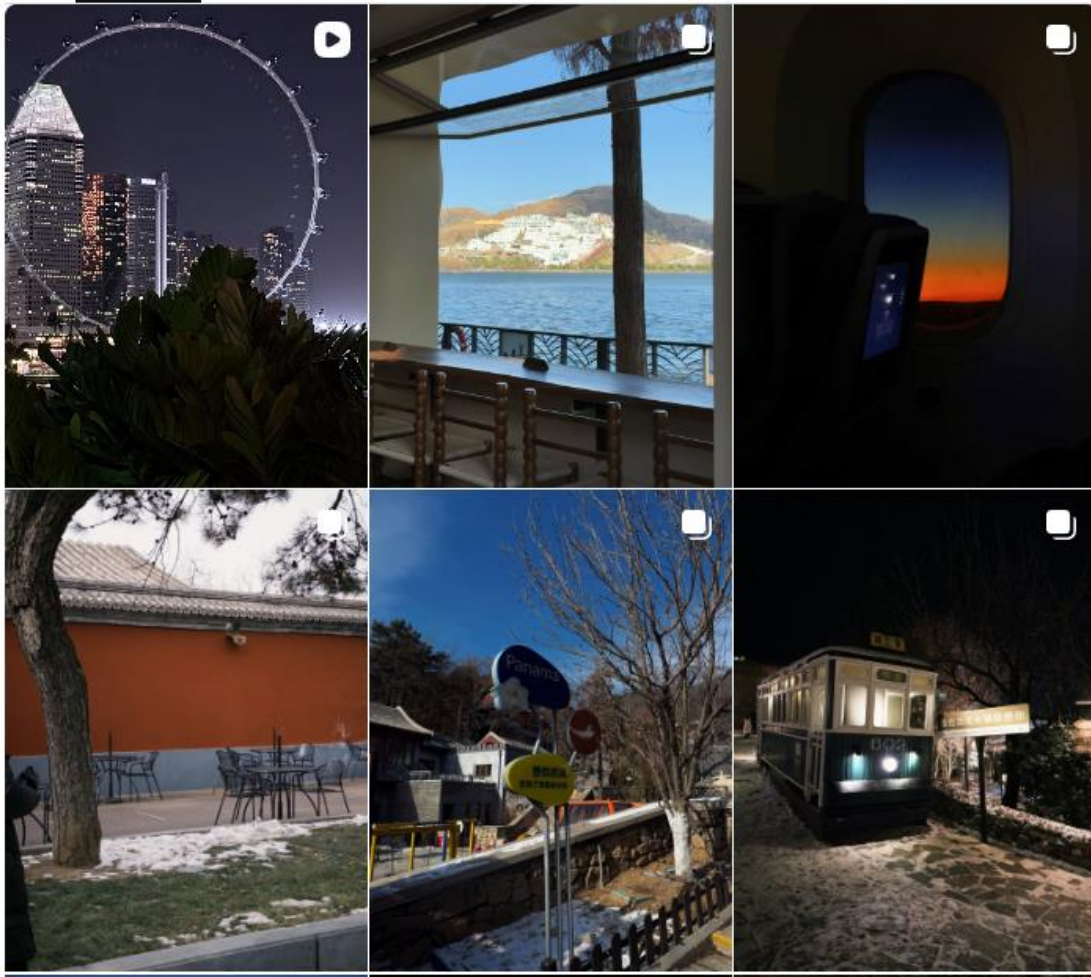


Figure 4.15: P1 (G1) Finsta account post.

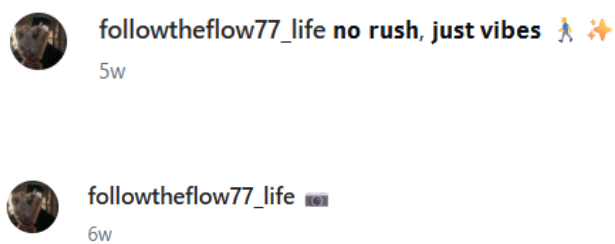


Figure 4.16: P1 (G1) Finsta account post's caption.

This section examines how participants express and construct their sexual identities through visual content, captions, and hashtag usage in their Instagram posts. These elements work together to shape how participants present themselves, communicate meanings, and engage with audiences on the platform.

Among the participants, P2, P3, and P4 actively share image-based posts accompanied by captions, which form the primary focus of this section. P1, while active on Instagram, primarily engages through Reels rather than static posts, while P5 have little to no posts.

P3 (L1), who is openly out, primarily posts selfies that clearly show her face. These images portray her in a confident manner, often highlighting her appearance and personal style. Her presentation reflects a tomboy identity, characterised by short hair and relatively loose, gender-neutral clothing. The visual focus on self-representation indicates a willingness to be visible and recognisable. In terms of captions, P3 tends to use short and simple phrases, such as “A little happier, a little smoother.” (“幸福一点, 顺利一点”), which convey personal emotions rather than explicitly referencing her sexual identity. Despite the absence of direct LGBTQ-related terms, her consistent use of self-images contributes to the construction of identity through visual presence and confidence.

In contrast, P1 (G1), who is not out, adopts a markedly different strategy. His posts consist mainly of landscape photography, without any personal images. The captions are minimal, often limited to a short phrase or a single emoji, such as a camera emoji. This form of content is largely neutral and depersonalised, with no indication of personal identity or sexual orientation. By avoiding self-representation and limiting textual expression, P1 maintains a low level of visibility, which may function as a strategy to reduce the risk of unintended identity disclosure. In this sense, his Instagram account appears to function primarily as a space for sharing aesthetic content rather than for personal identity expression.

P4 (L2), who is openly out, demonstrates the most explicit form of identity expression among the participants. One of the posts included in this study shows her participation in a pride parade in Taiwan. The image captures her holding some small rainbow flags while smiling confidently, with visible rainbow-themed makeup on her eyes. This visual representation strongly signals her identification with the LGBTQ community. In addition, the post is accompanied by a relatively long caption in which she reflects on her experience and shares her thoughts. The caption includes rainbow emojis and multiple hashtags, including #女同志 (#lesbian), #lgbtq, #loveislove, and #同志游行(#prideparade). These hashtags not only reinforce her identity but also connect her post to a broader LGBTQ discourse and community.

4.2.4 Design of Instagram Stories Highlights



Figure 4.17: P3 (L1) main account IG story highlights.



Figure 4.18: P4 (L2) main account IG story highlights.



Figure 4.19: P1 (G1) Finsta IG story highlights.

This section examines how participants utilise Instagram Story Highlights as a space to curate and present aspects of their identity. Unlike Instagram Stories, which disappear after 24 hours, Highlights are permanently displayed on the user's profile, making them a more stable and intentional form of self-presentation. As such, the selection of cover images, titles, and stored content reflects how participants choose to organise and showcase particular aspects of their lives to their audience.

Among the participants, clear differences can be observed in how Story Highlights are designed and whether sexual identity is expressed through them.

P1 (G1) does not display any form of sexual identity through Story Highlights. As shown in Figure 4.18, the highlight covers consist of non-identifiable images, such as generic pictures of a male figure with obscured facial features. The highlight titles are minimal, either labelled simply as "highlights" or represented by a single emoji, such as a leaf symbol. The content stored within these highlights does not relate to sexual identity. This neutral and impersonal presentation suggests a cautious approach, where highlights are not used as a space for identity expression but rather for general or non-personal content.

In contrast, P3 (L1) incorporates elements of her personal and relational identity into her Story Highlights. One of her highlights, taken from her main account, is

dedicated to moments shared with her girlfriend. The cover image is a collage of intimate photos of the couple, featuring affectionate poses and a prominent “爱” (love) character placed at the centre. The highlight title itself is minimal, consisting only of a simple emoji. Despite the lack of explicit textual labelling, the visual content clearly communicates her same-sex relationship. This suggests a more implicit yet visible form of identity expression, where meaning is conveyed primarily through imagery rather than words.

P4 (L2) demonstrates the most explicit and diversified use of Story Highlights for identity expression. One of her highlights features a cover image of herself and her girlfriend standing closely together and smiling at each other, with the ocean as the background. The title of this highlight consists of three emojis, which are roses with two hearts, which symbolically convey affection and emotional connection. In addition, P4 includes a highlight labelled “Podcast,” with a cover image designed as an illustrated version of herself holding a rainbow flag. The content within this highlight focuses on her podcast productions, which centre on LGBTQ-related topics and gender issues. These choices reflect not only her open coming-out status but also her stable relationship with a partner, both of which enable a more explicit form of identity expression. Being based outside of Malaysia further reduces the perceived social risk of visibility, allowing her to incorporate LGBTQ identity more openly into her online presence. In this sense, Instagram functions for P4 not merely as a social platform, but as a space for identity affirmation, community engagement, and content creation. Through the integration of personal relationships and public LGBTQ advocacy, her account reflects a strong alignment between online self-presentation and offline identity.

4.2.5 Showing Same-Sex Relationships on Instagram Stories



Figure 4.20: P3 (L1) main account IG story.



Figure 4.21: P3 (L1) main account IG story.



Figure 4.22: P4 (L2) main account IG story.

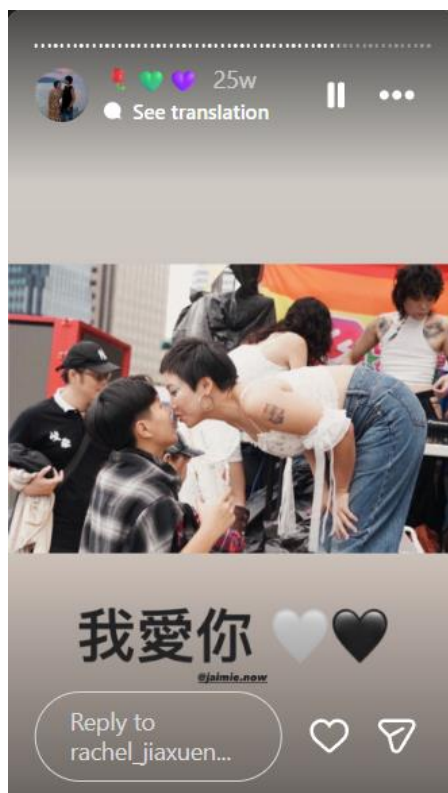


Figure 4.23: P4 (L2) main account IG story.

This section examines how participants utilise Instagram Stories as a space for expressing and negotiating their sexual identities. Unlike posts and highlights, Instagram Stories are temporary in nature, disappearing after 24 hours, which allows for more spontaneous, less curated, and potentially more intimate forms of self-expression.

Among the participants, P3 (L1) and P4 (L2) actively use Instagram Stories to share moments with their partners, providing insight into how same-sex relationships are presented in a more immediate and personal format. Their geographical contexts differ significantly and appear to shape how relationship visibility is negotiated. P3 is based in Malaysia, where sociocultural norms may make same-sex relationship disclosure more sensitive, whereas P4 is based in Taiwan, a context that is generally perceived as more accepting of LGBTQ identities. These contextual differences are reflected in the ways both participants express intimacy and visibility within their Instagram Stories.

P3 (L1), who is openly out, shares Stories that feature close and affectionate moments with her girlfriend. In the selected examples, both images are self-taken photos framed from the chest upwards, focusing on facial expressions and emotional closeness. In one image, her girlfriend leans her head on P3's shoulder from behind, while P3 slightly tilts her body towards her partner; both smile and look directly at the camera. In another image, the couple places their faces closely together, smiling at the camera, with small decorative elements such as heart stickers and the stylised word "love" edited onto their faces. In both Stories, P3 tags her girlfriend's Instagram account and includes a heart symbol. These elements suggest a form of intimate yet relatively subtle identity expression, where affection is clearly communicated, but without overt symbolic or political references to LGBTQ identity.

In comparison, P4 (L2) adopts a more explicit and expressive approach in her use of Instagram Stories. The selected examples depict her and her girlfriend in outdoor settings, including moments of physical affection such as light kissing. In one Story, both individuals hold a large rainbow flag behind them while posing together, accompanied by multiple heart emojis in rainbow colours. P4 is dressed in a brightly coloured outfit, while her girlfriend incorporates rainbow-themed accessories, further reinforcing visual alignment with LGBTQ symbolism. In another Story, taken during a pride event in Taiwan, the couple is captured in a public space surrounded by a crowd, leaning towards each other in an intimate pose. This Story is accompanied by prominent text reading “I love you” along with heart emojis, and also includes a tag to her girlfriend’s account.

Compared to P3, P4’s Stories are not only more visually expressive but also incorporate stronger symbolic elements associated with LGBTQ identity, such as the rainbow flag and pride event context. Furthermore, the public nature of these settings, particularly in a pride parade environment, suggests a higher level of comfort with visibility and public expression. The fact that these Stories were captured in Taiwan may also indicate the influence of a more open social environment on participants’ willingness to express their identities.

Overall, Instagram Stories function as a flexible and dynamic space where participants can share personal and relational aspects of their identities. In relation to RQ1 and RQ2, the findings show that sexual identity is often expressed through everyday interactions, emotional intimacy, and visual cues rather than solely through explicit labels.

4.2.6 Reels and Content Creation

Participant	Reels Title	Like	Share	Repost	Comment
P2 (G2)	Reels 1 A Dialogue Between an LGBTQ and a Christian	2466	1275	72	88
	Reels 2 How can sexual minorities survive in Malaysia?	555	225	34	12
P4 (L2)	Reels 3 The fourth lesbian- friendly hotspot in Taipei.	23.5k	27.5k	56	453
	Reels 4 Seeing if we know each other's heights!!	654	234	8	17
	Reels 5 Is there really hope for LGBTQ issues in Malaysia??	345	56	15	17

Table 4.2: Instagram Reels Engagement Metrics.

Table 2 presents the engagement metrics of five selected Instagram Reels posted by P2 (G2) and P4 (L2), who are the only two participants in this study actively producing LGBTQ-related content on Instagram. Both participants are Malaysian students currently studying in Taiwan and have openly come out about their sexual identities.

Unlike the other participants, they regularly upload Reels and use Instagram not only for personal expression but also as a platform to discuss LGBTQ-related issues and experiences.

Overall, the engagement patterns show that content related to LGBTQ identity, social discussion, and personal experiences received noticeable audience interaction. For P2 (G2), the Reel titled “A Dialogue Between an LGBTQ and a Christian” received the highest engagement among his selected posts, with 2,466 likes, 1,275 shares, 72 reposts, and 88 comments. This suggests that topics involving religion and homosexuality generated stronger public attention and discussion.

Meanwhile, P4 (L2)’s Reel titled “The fourth lesbian-friendly hotspot in Taipei” received significantly higher engagement than all other selected Reels, accumulating 23.5k likes, 27.5k shares, and 453 comments. The exceptionally high number of shares indicates that audiences were highly interested in content related to lesbian-friendly spaces in Taiwan. This may also reflect how Taiwan’s comparatively open social environment allows LGBTQ-related content to be presented more openly and positively. In contrast, P4’s other Reels that focused on lighter or more casual interactions received considerably lower engagement, suggesting that audiences were more responsive to content directly connected to LGBTQ identity and community experiences.

	Reels Title: 同性恋与基督教的对话 A Dialogue Between an LGBTQ and a Christian 同性恋就是一种罪? “Is homosexuality a sin?” 同性恋的头号敌人? “The biggest enemy of the LGBTQ+ community?”
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Figure 4.24: P2(G2) Reels 1 cover image with title.

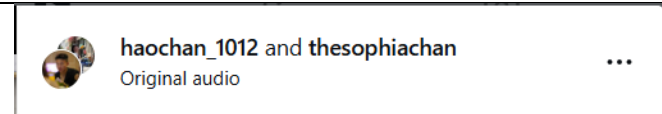
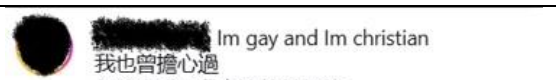
 haochan_1012 and theophiachan Original audio haochan_1012 与基督徒聊天会发生什么火花呢! 赶快到bio点击链接收看我的Youtube 22w See translation	What kind of sparks will happen when chatting with a Christian? Head to the link in my bio to watch my YouTube video!
--	--

Figure 4.25: P2 (G2) Reels 1's caption.

 Im gay and Im christian 我也曾擔心過 但後來發現我身邊的基督徒 還是很愛我 對我很好 目前還沒遇到haters 🙄 雖然很多基督徒認同同性戀是罪 但誰又不是罪人 同性戀的罪也沒有比較大 祇要上帝可以審判人的罪 而人與人之間 只需要愛 每個人都是罪人 而聖經教導我們去愛每一個人 23w 120 likes Reply See translation ***	I'm gay and I'm Christian. I used to worry about it too. But later, I realized that the Christians around me still love me and treat me kindly. I haven't really encountered any haters so far. Although many Christians believe that homosexuality is a sin, no one is without sin, and being gay is not a greater sin than any other. Only God has the right to judge people's sins, while humans are simply called to love one another.
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	Everyone is a sinner, and the Bible teaches us to love every person.
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Figure 4.26: P2 (G2) Reel 1's comment.

 如果你是认真要在马来西亚推动你的运动，并且决定要在媒体分享你的观点，我建议你来听。若你是认真要了解事情的全貌，也是对你的听众负责的解说员。否则你所说的就纯粹是发泄，并没有帮助。用“敌人”这种标题党常用的字眼，简单的二分法，并无助于了解整场运动的轨迹。10块钱，不贵。。 23w 2 likes Reply See translation ***	If you are genuinely serious about promoting your movement in Malaysia and choosing to share your views through the media, I would suggest that you make a sincere effort to understand the full picture of the issue and be a responsible commentator to your audience. Otherwise, what you are saying is merely an emotional outburst and does not contribute anything meaningful. Using sensationalized terms like “enemy” and relying on overly simplistic binary thinking does not help people understand the broader trajectory and complexity of the movement.
 haochan_1012 我觉得你可以看完完整版了再来评价我是不是纯粹发泄或是标题党，不然你这样跟你所说的“标题党、纯粹发泄”没有区别 ~ ^ ^ 23w Reply See translation ***	I think you should watch the full version before judging whether I'm simply venting or being clickbait. Otherwise, what you're doing is no different from the “clickbait” and “purely emotional outbursts” that you mentioned.

Figure 4.27: P2 (G2) Reel 1's comment.

	Reels Title: How can sexual minorities survive in Malaysia?
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Figure 4.28: P2(G2) Reels 2's cover image with title.

 haochan_1012 and isaacwnc Original audio  haochan_1012 性少数群体议题在马来西亚被当作政治斗争筹码与流量密码 欢迎点击Youtube主页收看完整版 9w See translation	LGBTQ+ issues in Malaysia are often used as political bargaining chips and clickbait for attention and traffic. Click the link on my YouTube profile to watch the full video.
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Figure 4.29: P2 (G2) Reels 2's Caption.

	Reels Title: The fourth lesbian-friendly hotspot in Taipei.
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Figure 4.30: P4 (L2) Reel's 3 cover image with title.

 rachel_jiaxuen and romance_ballroom Siuax • beans  rachel_jiaxuen 台北簡直是是女同天堂 🌈❤️ 很喜歡浪漫大舞廳辦的活動 感受到很用心 而且比酒吧多一個層次 就是真的想讓你交到朋友的那種~ (他們的活動超推 更是歡喜見證這一刻 🥰👏) @romance_ballroom 營業時間 2100 - 0300 未來第一週會是低消500 每第一跟第三個星期 都會有安全好玩的女性派對空間 超期待啦~ 🌈 #女同志 #pride #wlw #lgbtq #女性友善	Taipei truly feels like a lesbian paradise. I really love the events hosted by Romance Ballroom. You can feel how thoughtful they are — it's more than just a bar; it feels like a step above that. It genuinely feels like a space where you're meant to meet people and make friends. I'm so happy to witness moments like this. Highly recommend their events! @romance_ballroom Opening hours: 21:00–03:00 Starting from the first week, there will be a minimum spend of 500. In the first and third weeks of each month, they host a safe, fun, women-centred party space. Really looking forward to it~ #Lesbian#pride#wlw#lgbtq
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	#womenfriendly
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Figure 4.31: P4 (L2) Reels 3's Caption.

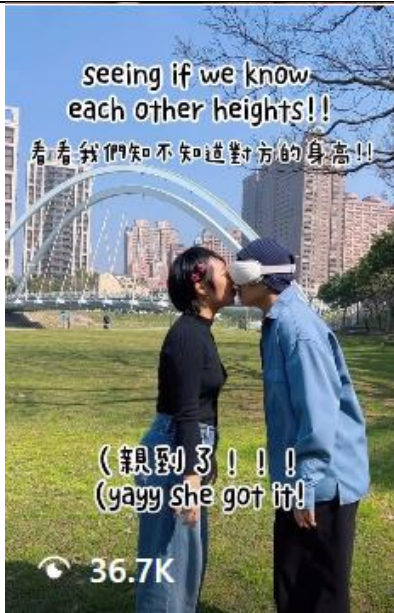
	Reels Title: Seeing if we know each other's heights!!
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Figure 4.32: P4 (L2) Reels 4's cover image with title.

 rachel_jiaxuen and jaimie.now girl in red • we fell in love in october  rachel_jiaxuen 情人節 大家快@伴侶一起玩這個挑戰 「看看我們知不知道對方的身高」 🍷 It's Valentine's, tag your partner and play this challenge tgt "seeing if we know each other heights" 🍷 I luv you @jaimie.now ❤️💛💚💙💜 #wlv #pride #女同志 #lgbtq #lesbian	It's Valentine's, tag your partner and play this challenge together. "seeing if we know each other's heights." I love you @jaimie.now #wlv #pride #lesbian #lgbtq
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Figure 4.33: P4 (L2) Reels 4's Caption.

 Aww you two are so cute together! 🍷 I'm glad you've found someone sweet you deserve it!	
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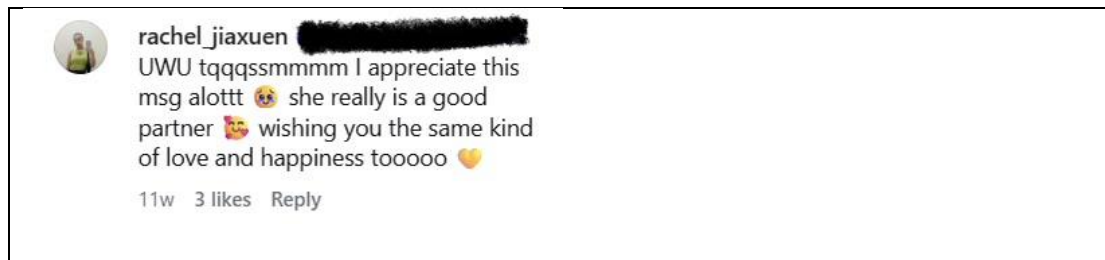


Figure 4.34: P4 (L2) Reels 4's comment.

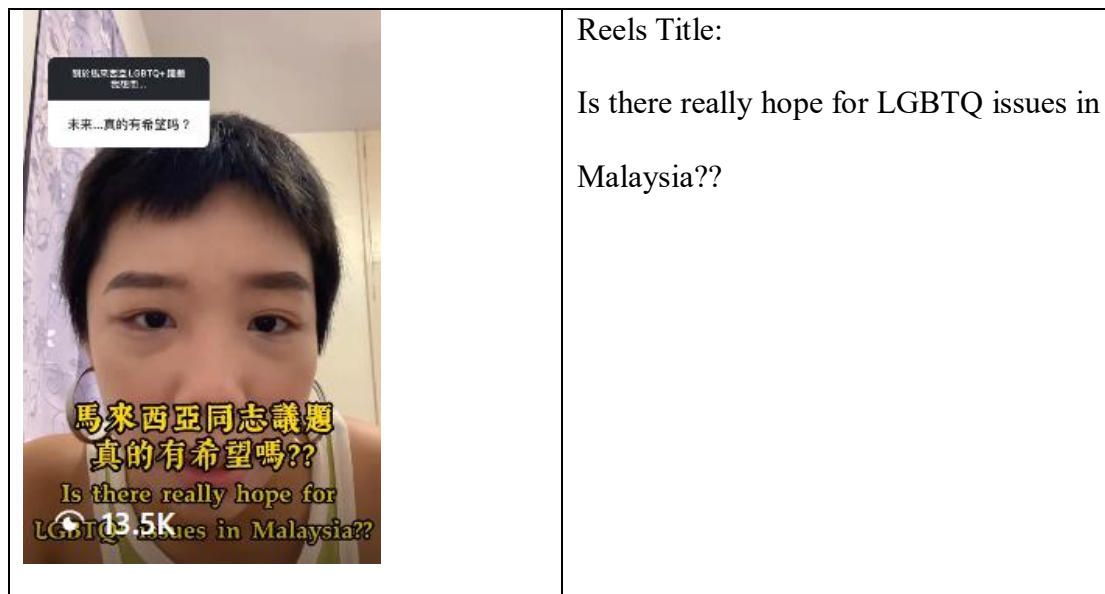


Figure 4.35: P4 (L2) Reels 5's cover image with title.



	continue sharing and raising awareness about LGBTQ+ issues in Malaysia. #lgbtq #malaysia #lesbian #pride #wlw
--	---

Figure 4.36: P4 (L2) Reels 5's Caption.

 马来西亚无法想国外这么开放，毕竟宗教是最大的阻碍... 但是我应该很感谢身边的人看得开放，我觉得已经很好了... 26w 12 likes Reply See translation	Malaysia can't be as open as some other countries, because religion is still one of the biggest barriers. But I'm grateful that the people around me are open-minded and accepting. I think that is already something really meaningful.
 rachel_jiaxuen 很幸福了~ 抱抱妳 我們一起加油 ❤️❤️❤️❤️❤️ 26w 2 likes Reply See translation	Already feel very blessed. Let's keep going together.

Figure 4.37: P4 (L2) Reels 5's comment.

 不必任何任何國家的認同，自己認同自己才是最重要啊，活得開心最重要。平權又如何如果連自己也活得不開心。為大家加油 ❤️❤️❤️ 15w 1 like Reply See translation	You don't need validation from any country — what matters most is accepting yourself. Living happily is the most important thing. What's the point of equality if you still can't live happily as yourself? Wishing everyone strength and happiness.
 rachel_jiaxuen 說得真好 ❤️ 15w Reply See translation — Hide replies	Well said.

Figure 4.38: P4 (L2) Reels 5's comment.

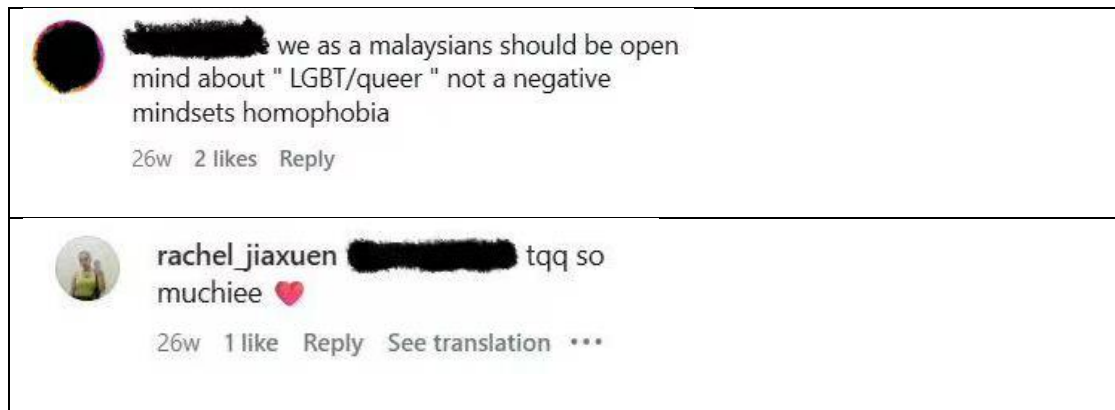


Figure 4.39: P4 (L2) Reels 5's comment.

This section examines how participants utilise Instagram Reels as a platform for content creation, engagement, and the construction of sexual identity. Compared to posts and Stories, Reels allow for short-form video content that can reach a wider audience, making it a more public and interactive space for self-expression.

Among the participants, P2 (G2) and P4 (L2) actively produce Reels, often incorporating LGBTQ-related themes, discussions, and representations into their content. However, their approaches differ in terms of style, focus, and mode of engagement.

P2 (G2) primarily uses Reels as a platform for discussion-based and informational content. His videos typically feature conversations or interviews with invited guests, focusing on social and cultural issues. For example, one Reel explores the topic of “dialogue between homosexuality and Christianity,” while another addresses “how sexual minorities in Malaysia navigate their lives.” The video covers generally feature P2 alongside a guest, both facing the camera in a friendly and approachable manner. The captions often include calls to action, directing viewers to his YouTube channel for full-length discussions. These Reels demonstrate a more structured and issue-oriented approach, where sexual identity is constructed through dialogue, knowledge-sharing, and public discourse. Rather than focusing on personal imagery, P2 positions himself

as a facilitator of conversations surrounding LGBTQ topics, contributing to broader awareness and discussion.

In contrast, P4 (L2) adopts a more diverse and expressive content strategy, combining lifestyle content, relationship visibility, and advocacy. One of her Reels introduces a lesbian-friendly bar in Taipei, presenting it as a welcoming social space. The video features her smiling and engaging directly with the camera, accompanied by captions expressing enthusiasm and recommendations. The use of hashtags such as #lesbian, #lgbtq, and #pride further situates the content within a broader LGBTQ community context.

Another Reel follows a popular social media trend, where she participates in a playful couple challenge with her girlfriend. The video captures a moment of physical intimacy in a casual outdoor setting, reinforced by captions that include both English and Chinese text, as well as the tagging of her partner. The use of rainbow-coloured heart emojis and LGBTQ-related hashtags further emphasises her identity and relationship. This type of content reflects how sexual identity can be expressed through everyday interactions, humour, and participation in wider social media trends.

Additionally, P4 also produces more reflective and discussion-oriented content. In one Reel, she directly addresses the topic of “whether there is hope for LGBTQ issues in Malaysia,” responding to questions from her audience. The caption encourages viewers to share their thoughts and experiences, indicating an interactive form of engagement. Through such content, P4 not only expresses her own identity but also positions herself as a voice within the LGBTQ community, advocating for visibility and social awareness.

In Reels 1, “A Dialogue Between an LGBTQ and a Christian,” the comment section demonstrates different forms of audience engagement toward LGBTQ and religious issues. Comment 1 reflects a more supportive and understanding response, where a viewer who identified as both gay and Christian shared their personal experience and emphasized that humans should love one another rather than judge others’ sins. This shows that the Reel created a space for audiences to share personal experiences, emotional support, and discussions related to sexuality and religion.

At the same time, Comment 2 represents a more negative and critical form of engagement. The viewer criticized P2 (G2)’s use of the word “enemy” in the title and described the content as overly emotional and similar to clickbait. During the interview, P2 (G2) mentioned that he had received many negative comments when discussing LGBTQ issues publicly, reflecting the type of criticism he encountered online. Instead of ignoring the comment, P2 (G2) replied directly and defended his content, showing that he actively engaged with audiences and negotiated criticism in the comment section.

Overall, the interactions in this Reel suggest that Instagram Reels function not only as a platform for self-expression, but also as a space where LGBTQ content creators receive both support and criticism from audiences. The comment section becomes an important site of audience engagement, discussion, and identity negotiation.

In Reels 4, “Seeing if we know each other’s heights!!” and Reels 5, “Is there really hope for LGBTQ issues in Malaysia??” posted by P4 (L2), the audience engagement was generally positive and supportive. Unlike P2 (G2)’s Reel, which attracted both supportive and critical discussions surrounding LGBTQ and religion, the comments under P4’s Reels were mainly centered on emotional support, relationship encouragement, self-acceptance, and positive discussions about LGBTQ issues.

For example, in Reels 4, one viewer commented, *“Aww you two are so cute together! I’m glad you’ve found someone sweet, you deserve it!”* This reflects how audiences responded positively to the visibility of P4’s same-sex relationship and expressed emotional support toward the couple. P4 replied warmly by appreciating the message, describing her partner as “a good partner,” and wishing the commenter “the same kind of love and happiness.” Similarly, in Reels 5, audiences expressed supportive views regarding LGBTQ acceptance in Malaysia. One commenter acknowledged that religion remains a major barrier but emphasized feeling grateful for having open-minded people around them. Another highlighted that self-acceptance and happiness are more important than seeking validation from society or the country. There were also comments encouraging Malaysians to become more open-minded toward LGBTQ and queer communities instead of maintaining homophobic mindsets. P4 actively responded to these comments with appreciation and agreement, creating friendly and affirming interactions with audiences.

The interactions in both Reels suggest that Instagram Reels can function as supportive spaces where LGBTQ individuals receive affirmation, encouragement, and emotional validation from audiences. Compared to P4’s relationship-centered and emotionally positive content, P2 (G2)’s Reel generated more mixed engagement due to its discussion of religion and homosexuality, as well as the use of more provocative wording such as “enemy” in the title. These elements may have encouraged greater debate and attracted more critical comments from audiences. In contrast, P4’s content generated engagement mainly through relatability, affection, positivity, and shared emotional support.

Overall, Reels function as a dynamic and highly visible space for identity construction and audience engagement. In relation to RQ1 and RQ2, the findings show

that sexual identity is not only expressed through personal representation but also actively constructed through content creation, discourse, and interaction with audiences. At the same time, these practices also relate to RQ3, as the willingness to engage publicly with LGBTQ topics may be influenced by participants' environment, platform reach, and perceived level of social acceptance.

4.3 Interview Findings and Analysis

This section presents the findings and analysis derived from the semi-structured interviews conducted with the same five Malaysian gay and lesbian youth whose Instagram accounts were analysed in the previous textual analysis section. While the previous textual analysis focused on visible Instagram content, this section shifts attention to participants' lived experiences, perceptions, and practices behind their online self-presentation. The interview data are analysed thematically in relation to RQ2 and RQ3, which are how Malaysian gay and lesbian youth actively construct their sexual identities through Instagram interactions and content curation, and also what challenges and constraints Malaysian gay and lesbian youth face in expressing and constructing their sexual identities on Instagram.

4.3.1 Using Multiple Accounts to Separate Different Sides of the Self

The findings indicate that participants actively utilise multiple Instagram accounts and platform features to segment different aspects of their identities, particularly in managing the visibility of their sexual identity. Across all five participants, a clear pattern emerges, in which each maintains at least two accounts, commonly referred to as a "main account" and a "private account," with some participants additionally managing a "social account" oriented towards specific communities. These accounts serve distinct functions.

For instance, P3 described maintaining three separate accounts, clearly distinguishing their purposes, including a “main account (for family and real-life friends),” a “private account (where I post whatever comes to mind),” and a “social account (for LGBTQ people and very close friends).” This explicit segmentation demonstrates how identity is not expressed uniformly, but rather deliberately distributed across multiple digital spaces.

Similarly, P2 highlighted a shift in account usage following his coming-out process. As he explained, *“after I came out... I gradually stopped using my private account because I felt there was nothing I needed to hide anymore.”* Instead, he began relying on Instagram’s “Close Friends” feature within his main account, noting that *“it became like my private account... whatever I wanted to post on my private account, I could just post it through Close Friends.”* This reflects how platform affordances can be flexibly adapted to replace multi-account structures.

At the same time, some participants adopted stricter forms of segmentation. P1 emphasised that LGBTQ-related content is deliberately confined to a private account, stating that *“I only follow LGBTQ-related accounts on my private account, not my main one, I keep them very separate.”* Likewise, P5 noted that she strictly differentiates between audiences, ensuring that only *“trusted people who understand me”* are able to access more personal or sensitive content. These practices reflect a strong awareness of potential risks, such as unwanted exposure or social judgment, and the use of strategic segmentation as a form of protection.

Through these multi-account strategies, participants effectively construct multiple “versions” of the self across different contexts. The main account typically represents a public-facing identity, while private accounts or curated spaces function as environments where participants can express more intimate, authentic, or identity-

related aspects of themselves. In some cases, participants also create a distinct “queer-oriented” space. For example, P3 explained that her “social account” (the third IG account) was initially used “*to attract LGBTQ people,*” enabling her to engage within a safer community.

4.3.2 Indirect and Ambiguous Expression of Sexual Identity

The findings indicate that participants do not simply navigate between full disclosure and complete concealment of their sexual identities on Instagram. Instead, they engage in a form of selective disclosure in which their sexual identity is neither explicitly articulated nor entirely hidden. This can be understood as implicit visibility or strategic ambiguity, where identity is communicated indirectly and left open to audience interpretation. This approach reflects participants’ awareness of potential social risks, as well as their desire to maintain a degree of control over how and to whom their identity is revealed. By avoiding explicit disclosure, participants are able to express their identity while still retaining a sense of safety and flexibility.

A recurring pattern is that participants allow their sexual identity to be inferred rather than explicitly stated. For instance, P3 explained that she does not directly express her sexual identity on Instagram, stating that “*I am not very explicitly expressing my sexual identity on IG... but because I have short hair and a tomboy appearance, people would naturally think I am a lesbian.*” She further noted that she “*just posts photos*” without intentionally emphasising her sexual identity. This suggests that P3 does not actively seek to openly declare her identity, but is comfortable allowing others to infer it. Such an approach enables her to maintain a balance between visibility and deniability, where her identity can be recognised by some audiences while still leaving room for ambiguity and personal control.

Similarly, P5 demonstrated a more strategic form of ambiguity in managing how her relationship is presented to different audiences. She explained that “*I would let others think we are just friends,*” while simultaneously acknowledging that “*people who are close to me and understand me would know the actual relationship.*” Even when sharing content involving her partner, she avoids explicit labelling, noting that she would post such content “*but not in a very obvious way... others would not guess it, they would just think we are friends.*” This reflects an internal tension between the desire to express affection and the need to avoid unwanted exposure. While P5 wishes to share aspects of her relationship, she simultaneously manages how it is perceived by different audiences. This allows her to engage in selective visibility, where meaningful signals are directed towards trusted viewers while remaining ambiguous to others.

In contrast, P1 represents a more concealed position within the spectrum. He stated that he “*basically never expresses anything about my sexual identity on Instagram.*” However, even in his case, identity is not absent but exists in highly subtle forms. He described posting a photo taken during a date, but emphasised that it was “*just a scenery photo,*” adding that “*people who see it would not know there is anything special.*” The purpose of such posts is not to publicly disclose identity, but to preserve personal meaning within a controlled and limited interpretive space. This allows the participant to maintain privacy while still engaging in self-expression.

Temporal factors also influence disclosure practices. P2 reflected on his pre-coming-out stage, explaining that he would “*intentionally avoid writing anything too related to LGBTQ, especially gay topics, and would not comment that I support it*” to prevent others from associating him with that identity. This demonstrates a cautious form of identity management driven by the fear of being socially judged or stigmatised. The avoidance of LGBTQ-related content reflects a concern about being associated

with a marginalised identity, particularly within a socio-cultural context where such identities may be viewed as deviant or unacceptable.

4.3.3 The Transition from Concealment to Openness

The findings indicate that sexual identity construction on Instagram is not a static practice, but rather a dynamic and evolving process that changes over time. This transition is closely shaped by participants' coming-out experiences, levels of self-acceptance, and relationship status, all of which influence how they engage with identity expression on the platform.

For participants such as P2, a clear transformation can be observed between the pre-coming-out and post-coming-out stages. Before coming out, he described a highly cautious approach to online expression, explaining that he would *“intentionally avoid writing anything too related to LGBTQ, especially gay topics, and would not comment that I support it”* to prevent others from associating him with that identity. However, after coming out, this restriction was significantly reduced. This shift was not only behavioural but also psychological. Prior to coming out, P2 experienced a strong need for self-monitoring, avoiding LGBTQ-related topics and expressions due to the fear of being associated with a stigmatized identity or being discovered by others, particularly family members. This reflects a heightened sense of anxiety and caution in managing online visibility. After coming out, these constraints were gradually lifted, as he no longer needed to actively conceal his identity. This transition suggests that coming out functions as a key turning point that reduces psychological burden, weakens self-censorship, and allows for greater freedom in identity expression.

A similar progression is evident in P3's experience, where sexual identity expression evolved from concealment to openness over time. In her earlier stage, P3 described feeling constrained and cautious in expressing her sexual identity,

particularly due to the fear of being discovered by her family and facing rejection. Even after entering a relationship, she remained hesitant to express it openly on Instagram, as she had not yet come out and was concerned about negative reactions from her family. However, this situation changed following an unintentional exposure in her school environment, where her close interactions with her partner became noticeable to others and gradually reached her family. This led to a turning point where P3 decided to openly post a photo with her partner on Instagram, effectively coming out. Although her family initially struggled to accept her sexual orientation, their gradual acceptance, along with the continued support from her close friends who had already known about her identity, contributed to her increased sense of comfort. As a result, P3 became more open in expressing her identity online, as the primary source of constraint, which is fear of family rejection, was reduced. She explained that *“now if I want to post anything about my sexual identity, I don’t really have any concerns anymore because I am already in a public relationship and people already know my sexual orientation.”* This demonstrates that feelings of comfort in identity expression are not only internally driven but are also strongly shaped by external acknowledgment and acceptance from both family and close social circles.

P4 also reflects a developmental trajectory from uncertainty to confidence in identity expression. Although initially experiencing hesitation and self-questioning, this gradually shifted as they became more self-assured. This development suggests that increased self-acceptance plays an important role in enabling more open forms of identity expression. However, this process is not solely internal. External validation, such as acceptance from friends and social networks, also contributes to this transition. The combination of internal self-assurance and supportive social responses allows for a more stable and confident form of identity performance on Instagram.

In contrast, P1 represents a more stable pattern with minimal transformation over time. He consistently maintained a private approach to identity expression, stating that *“I basically never express anything about my sexual identity on Instagram.”* His case serves as a contrasting example, highlighting that not all individuals experience significant shifts in online identity presentation. This suggests that identity expression on Instagram does not follow a uniform or linear trajectory towards openness. Instead, some individuals may consistently maintain a clear boundary between their private identity and public digital presence, indicating that concealment can also be a stable and intentional long-term strategy rather than merely a transitional phase.

4.3.4 Sexual Identity Expression Influenced by Audience Feedback

The findings indicate that their sexual identity expression is not only shaped by individual intentions but is also continuously negotiated through audience feedback. Rather than functioning as passive metrics, likes, comments, and overall engagement play a role in influencing how participants adjust the form of their expression over time. Importantly, engagement does not necessarily serve as direct validation, but instead reshapes how it is communicated.

A key finding is that participants respond differently to audience feedback depending on their personal disposition and level of self-confidence. For example, P2 described how negative comments influenced a shift in his expressive approach. He noted that while he initially shared more personal narratives, he gradually adjusted his content after experiencing hostile feedback, explaining that *“there are quite a lot of negative comments... so I gradually changed to talk about other people’s stories instead of my own.”* This change reflects a strategic reduction of personal exposure, as sharing his own stories involved higher emotional and social risk. In contrast,

discussing others' experiences allows him to continue engaging with LGBTQ-related topics while maintaining a degree of distance from direct personal scrutiny. This adjustment not only reduces the emotional impact of negative comments but also suggests an underlying desire to remain socially acceptable while still expressing identity-related views.

Similarly, P4 demonstrated a developmental shift in response to audience engagement. In the earlier stage of identity expression, feedback played a more significant role in shaping his confidence and willingness to post. However, over time, she became more resistant to external opinions, indicating a stronger internalisation of identity. This shift can be understood as a process of empowerment shaped by both internal and external factors. Internally, increased self-acceptance and a more stable sense of identity reduced her reliance on external validation. Externally, her experience studying in Taiwan and participation in LGBTQ-related events, such as pride parades, exposed her to a more open and accepting social environment. This supportive context played a significant role in normalising her identity and strengthening her confidence, enabling her to become less sensitive to negative feedback and more secure in her self-expression.

In contrast, P3 represents a more detached stance toward audience response. She explicitly stated that she is largely unaffected by likes or comments, suggesting a low dependency on external validation. This indicates that for some individuals, identity expression is primarily internally driven rather than socially reinforced, allowing for more consistent and stable forms of self-presentation regardless of audience reaction.

On the other hand, P5 illustrates a more sensitive orientation towards audience perception. She acknowledged that she is “someone who cares a lot about other

people's opinions," indicating that audience feedback plays a more significant role in shaping her comfort level in self-expression. This demonstrates that the influence of engagement is not uniform but varies according to individual personality traits and relational sensitivity.

Overall, these findings suggest that the impact of audience feedback is not uniform but depends on individuals' level of self-acceptance, confidence, and social environment. Those in earlier stages of identity development, or those who place greater importance on social approval, tend to be more affected by audience responses. In contrast, individuals with stronger internalised identities and supportive environments demonstrate greater autonomy and stability in their identity expression.

4.3.5 Self-censorship: Selectively Showing Different Content to Different People

The findings show that participants actively control who can see their content on Instagram as a way of managing the expression of their sexual identity. Most participants distinguish between different types of audiences, such as close friends, general friends, and family members, and adjust their content visibility depending on who the audience is. In this way, audience management becomes a common strategy used when expressing sexual identity on the platform.

For some participants, this form of audience control is especially clear before they come out. For example, P2 explained that before he was open about his sexual identity, he was very careful about what he posted and who could see his activities. He stated, *"I was very careful and didn't dare to follow LGBTQ-related accounts or post anything because I was afraid people would find out I am gay."* This fear was not only about being discovered, but also about the potential social consequences, such as being judged, misunderstood, or rejected by family members. This reflects how uncertainty about

audience reactions, particularly from close social circles, leads to stronger self-censorship in the early stages of identity management.

P3 mainly manages her audience by hiding certain content from her parents. She explained that she would avoid letting her parents see posts related to her sexual identity, saying, *“I only let friends who understand me see certain things, but I don’t let my parents see everything.”* This suggests that her self-censorship is driven by a concern about how her parents may react, including the possibility of disappointment or lack of acceptance. At the same time, it also reflects an awareness of broader social norms, where LGBTQ identities may still be viewed negatively, leading her to selectively reveal her identity only within supportive circles.

P4 uses a more direct form of audience restriction by removing certain people from her IG follower list. She stated, *“I don’t want my family to see these things, so I just remove them from my IG.”* This strategy reflects a compromise between self-expression and familial pressure. While her father strongly disapproves of her sexual identity and views it as inappropriate, P4 does not want to completely suppress her expression. Instead, she chooses to exclude those who are most likely to react negatively. This indicates that the need to manage identity expression is especially heightened in relation to close family members, whose opinions carry greater emotional weight and potential consequences.

It is also important to note that for P2, this strict audience management was more obvious before he came out. During that stage, he avoided direct expression and carefully controlled what could be seen by different groups. However, after coming out, this level of restriction became less strict, and he gradually became more open in sharing content without heavily separating audiences. This suggests that once identity

is disclosed to key audiences, the need for strict audience segmentation may decrease, allowing for more open forms of expression.

4.3.6 Using Instagram for Emotional Support and Self-Understanding

The findings indicate that Instagram is not only a platform for sexual identity expression but also plays an important emotional and psychological role in participants' identity construction processes. Rather than functioning solely as a content-sharing platform, Instagram is often used as a space for emotional processing, self-exploration, and the gradual understanding of one's sexual identity.

For P3, Instagram plays a crucial role as both an emotional outlet and a space for early sexual identity exploration. During the initial stage of recognising her sexual orientation, she described experiencing strong feelings of fear, pressure, and emotional suppression, particularly because she felt unable to share these thoughts with others. As she explained:

“When I first realised my sexual orientation, I would post on Close Friends, but there was actually no one in my Close Friends list—I was just posting it for myself to see. At that time, I felt very scared and stressed, so I used this way to release my emotions.”

This practice reflects how Instagram can function as a highly private and self-directed emotional space, where expression does not necessarily involve an audience, but instead serves as a form of internal coping. In this case, the Close Friends feature is repurposed as a personal diary-like tool, allowing P3 to process emotions without external exposure.

At the same time, she adopted additional strategies to manage the anxiety associated with her sexual identity. She described deliberately modifying her follower structure on her private account in order to safely engage with LGBTQ-related content:

“Early on, I felt a lot of pressure about my sexual orientation, and I didn’t want others to find out that I was following LGBTQ-related accounts and content. So at that time, I removed some followers from my private account and used that account to follow LGBTQ content instead. In this way, I felt less pressure and could tell myself that I’m not the only one like this.”

This highlights how emotional coping is closely linked to platform practices, where technical features such as follower control are used to create a safer environment for identity exploration. Through this process, Instagram becomes not only a space for expression, but also a controlled gateway for accessing identity-related content and community.

Furthermore, exposure to other users’ experiences on Instagram played a significant role in shaping her understanding of sexual identity over time. She noted that observing others who initially concealed their identities but later came out had a strong emotional impact on her:

“During this process, I saw some people who were like me at the beginning, hiding their sexual identity, but later they successfully came out. I felt like, wow, that’s really good... they don’t have to continue living under pressure anymore.”

This demonstrates that Instagram also functions as a site of social learning and identity projection, where users not only find emotional reassurance but also develop a sense of possibility regarding their own identity trajectory.

For P2, Instagram plays a role in providing identity validation and reducing feelings of isolation. He noted that exposure to LGBTQ-related content helped him realise that his experience was not unique. He stated, *“Seeing these contents makes me feel like I’m not the only one.”* This sense of shared experience contributes to the construction of sexual identity by offering emotional reassurance and normalisation, which in turn

supports greater acceptance of his own identity. This also reflects the broader role of social media and online LGBTQ-related content in increasing the visibility and accessibility of diverse sexual identities. Through repeated exposure to similar experiences, users may develop a stronger sense of identification, belonging, and awareness regarding their own identities.

Similarly, P1 represents a more indirect form of identity construction. Although he does not actively disclose his sexual identity on Instagram, he engages with LGBTQ-related content, which helps him better understand himself over time. He explained: *“These contents helped me understand the community better and made me clearer about my own sexual identity.”* This suggests that sexual identity construction does not only occur through direct self-expression, but also through continuous exposure to relevant content and internal reflection.

The findings further suggest that social media platforms such as Instagram may significantly reduce the difficulty of sexual identity expression and exploration for LGBTQ individuals. Compared to face-to-face interaction, online expression is often perceived as less confrontational, less emotionally overwhelming, and easier to control. For example, P3 explained that Instagram became an important medium through which she was able to express and gradually disclose her sexual identity. She noted that compared to expressing herself face-to-face, online communication felt less awkward and emotionally difficult. This also implies that, without social media spaces such as Instagram, opportunities for emotional reassurance, identity exploration, and connection with similar others may become more limited, particularly within conservative offline environments where open discussion of LGBTQ identities remains sensitive.

4.3.7 Negotiating Visibility Under Malaysia Context

The findings indicate that participants' sexual identity expression on Instagram is influenced by how they perceive the Malaysian socio-cultural environment. However, these perceptions are not uniform, as participants differ in how strongly they feel constrained by their surrounding context. This suggests that the visibility of sexual identity is not determined solely by external conditions, but also by individuals' subjective interpretation of risk and social acceptance.

For P1, the relatively conservative socio-cultural environment in Malaysia is seen as an influencing factor in how openly sexual identity can be expressed. He described Malaysia as "a relatively conservative country," highlighting the influence of religious and cultural values. This indicates that even in the absence of direct restrictions, perceived societal norms still shape how individuals manage their self-expression on Instagram.

P5 expressed a stronger sense of socio-cultural constraint, describing Malaysia as "*a relatively feudal and not open country.*" This reflects a perception of a more restrictive environment, where traditional values and religious norms are seen as limiting openness in expressing sexual identity. In this sense, socio-cultural factors are directly associated with a reduced willingness to openly disclose sexual identity on social media.

P4 similarly highlighted concerns related to safety and social judgement. She noted that the environment does not feel entirely safe for open expression, particularly due to the possibility of negative reactions from others. This suggests that perceived social risk continues to influence how individuals manage their visibility, even within online spaces where interaction is indirect.

Similarly, P4 reflected on the difference between Malaysia and Taiwan, stating that the Taiwanese environment has a higher level of acceptance towards LGBTQ

individuals. She implied that this comparative experience makes her more aware of the limitations in Malaysia, which in turn affects how openly she expresses her sexual identity on Instagram. This suggests that her sense of safety and visibility is not only shaped locally, but also influenced by her exposure to a more permissive socio-cultural setting abroad.

In contrast, P2 presented a more moderate perception of the Malaysian socio-cultural environment. Although he acknowledged that LGBTQ identities are not officially accepted within the broader socio-political context, he did not perceive the environment as severely restrictive or openly oppressive towards everyday expression on Instagram. As he explained, “although policies do not really accept or allow it, we are not actually being harmed or oppressed... it is not to the extent that LGBTQ people completely cannot show any LGBTQ elements on social media.” He further noted that his daily life was not significantly affected, stating that “our lives still go on normally... we still have LGBTQ friends and our own partners.”

From P2 perspective, sexual identity expression on Instagram remains possible as long as it does not become overly confrontational or politically provocative. Rather than feeling the need to openly advocate or publicly challenge social norms, he described maintaining “a safe distance” in how he expresses himself online. This reflects a more negotiated understanding of visibility, where individuals are neither completely open nor completely concealed, but instead adjust their level of expression according to perceived social boundaries and personal comfort. P2 also provided a comparative perspective between Malaysia and Taiwan, noting that his openness in expressing sexual identity on Instagram is also influenced by his exposure to a more accepting environment abroad. He explained that being in Taiwan has contributed to his increased comfort in expression, suggesting that “*the environment there is more open,*” which

indirectly allows him to be more expressive online. This perception may also be related to the fact that identity presentation occurs primarily within online spaces such as Instagram, where users are able to exercise greater control over visibility, audience, and self-presentation. Compared to offline interaction, online expression may feel less direct and less confrontational, allowing participants like P2 to maintain a sense of safety while still expressing aspects of their sexual identity. In this sense, Instagram does not completely remove socio-cultural constraints, but it may soften or mediate them by providing users with more flexible and controllable forms of identity expression.

Similarly, P3 stated that the Malaysian socio-cultural context does not significantly affect her expression of sexual identity on Instagram. She emphasised that she is not strongly influenced by external environmental factors, suggesting that her expression is primarily driven by personal choice rather than social pressure. This contrasts with participants who perceive stronger external constraints. However, unlike participants who had experience living in more LGBTQ-accepting environments such as Taiwan, P3 did not draw strong comparative distinctions between Malaysia and other socio-cultural contexts. This may suggest that perceptions of restriction and openness are partly shaped by comparative social experience, where individuals who have been exposed to more permissive environments become more aware of the limitations within the Malaysian context.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that the visibility of sexual identity on Instagram is shaped by differing perceptions of the Malaysian socio-cultural environment. Rather than a uniform experience, participants interpret environmental constraints in different ways, ranging from strong restrictions to minimal influence. In addition, comparative experiences with more accepting environments, such as Taiwan, further shape how

participants understand and evaluate the level of constraint in Malaysia. This highlights that sexual identity expression is not only influenced by local socio-cultural conditions, but is continuously negotiated through perceived risk and comparative social reference points.

4.3.8 Controlling Risk Through Privacy and Self-Censorship

The findings show that participants adopt various risk management strategies on Instagram in response to perceived risks associated with sexual identity expression. These strategies include privacy settings, selective audience control, and self-censorship, reflecting how participants continuously negotiate between visibility and personal safety.

One of the most common strategies is the use of private accounts, which is adopted by multiple participants, including P1, P2, P3, and P5. P1 explained that setting his account to private allows him to control who can access his content, particularly because he does not intend to openly disclose his sexual identity to a broader audience. He implied that this setting helps him maintain boundaries over his personal information and reduces unwanted exposure. Similarly, P5 highlighted the importance of privacy control, suggesting that limiting access to his account helps him avoid external judgement and maintain a safer online environment.

In addition to private accounts, the Close Friends feature is widely used as a key protective mechanism. Both P2 and P3 reported using this function to restrict the visibility of certain content to a trusted audience. P3 specifically noted that Close Friends is mainly used for more personal or emotionally sensitive posts rather than

general content. This demonstrates that content visibility is actively segmented within the same platform, depending on the perceived sensitivity of the material being shared.

Self-censorship is also evident in participants' content creation practices. P3 mentioned that she sometimes avoids using captions or hashtags, particularly when the content relates to her personal feelings or sexual identity. This indicates a deliberate reduction of identifiable markers, in order to minimise the risk of unwanted attention or interpretation. Her approach shows that expression is not entirely unrestricted, but carefully filtered before being shared.

Overall, the findings suggest that participants do not completely avoid expressing their sexual identity on Instagram. Instead, they actively manage how such identity is presented through a combination of privacy settings, audience segmentation, and selective self-censorship. These strategies function as protective mechanisms that allow participants to maintain a balance between expression and safety, ensuring that sexual identity can still be expressed in a controlled and context-dependent manner.

Chapter 5 Discussion and Conclusion

This chapter discusses the key findings of the study on how Malaysian gay and lesbian youth express and construct their sexual identities on Instagram. The analysis reveals that sexual identity expression on Instagram is a complex and multi-layered process, shaped by platform affordances, audience management strategies, and broader socio-cultural conditions. Rather than being a straightforward act of self-disclosure, identity expression is continuously negotiated through different modes of visibility, ranging from explicit identification to highly implicit and contextual forms of presentation.

The findings show that participants do not use Instagram in a uniform way. Instead, they actively differentiate their identity presentation across various features such as multiple accounts, bios, posts, Stories, Highlights, Close Friends, and Reels. These tools allow participants to manage different audiences and control the level of visibility of their sexual identity. At the same time, participants also engage in various risk management strategies, including privacy control, selective disclosure, and self-censorship, to reduce potential social risks while maintaining a certain degree of self-expression.

In addition, the study highlights the significant influence of the Malaysian socio-cultural context, which is largely perceived as conservative. In this study, “safety” is not understood as a single or fixed condition, but as a combination of perceived risks and protective factors in participants’ everyday and online experiences. These include concerns about potential social judgement, family disapproval, religious or moral criticism, and the possibility of being identified or exposed within their offline social networks. At the same time, feelings of safety are also shaped by platform-based affordances such as privacy settings, anonymous or secondary accounts, and the use of features like Close Friends, which allow participants to selectively control visibility and audience access. This context shapes how openly participants are willing to express their sexual identities online, although individual experiences and levels of self-acceptance lead to different interpretations of the same environment. Comparative exposure to more accepting contexts, such as Taiwan, further influences participants’ understanding of visibility and safety, where reduced perceived social judgment and greater public acceptance contribute to a stronger sense of expressive freedom. As a result, participants’ openness becomes highly situational and conditional rather than fixed.

The findings suggest that Instagram is not simply a platform for expressing sexual identity, but also a space where identity is actively constructed, managed, and negotiated over time. The following sections will further discuss these findings in relation to identity expression patterns, platform affordances, risk management strategies, socio-cultural influences, and the temporal development of sexual identity among participants.

5.1 Sexual Identity is Not Expressed Uniformly on Instagram

The findings indicate that sexual identity expression among Malaysian gay and lesbian youth on Instagram is not uniform, but exists along a continuum ranging from explicit to implicit forms of visibility. This supports Ruberg and Ruelos (2020), who argue that queer identities are fluid and context-dependent rather than fixed categories.

From a broader perspective, this variability is not only a matter of individual preference, but is shaped by the social and platform environments in which expression takes place. On the one hand, participants who express their identity explicitly through LGBTQ-related hashtags, emojis, or captions demonstrate intentional visibility. This reflects Hillier and Harrison (2007), who argue that LGBTQ youth are active agents in constructing their online identities, particularly when conditions of perceived safety are present.

However, the findings show that explicit expression is not the dominant practice. Most participants instead engage in implicit expression, where identity is communicated through indirect cues such as images, interactions, and contextual signals. This aligns with Haimson et al. (2021), who describe this as selective disclosure, where users actively regulate what is visible in order to manage potential social risks.

Importantly, this implicitness is not a passive lack of expression, but a strategic response to multiple layers of social conditions. On one level, it reflects the presence of imagined audiences and potential surveillance, where participants anticipate judgment from family members, peers, or broader social networks. On another level, it is reinforced by Instagram's visual and context-collapsed environment, where content is simultaneously exposed to multiple audiences with different levels of familiarity.

In this sense, ambiguity becomes a functional strategy rather than a limitation. It allows participants to maintain what can be understood as "contextual readability," where the same content can carry different meanings depending on the viewer's knowledge. This resonates with Choi and Sung (2018), who argue that Instagram's visual and curated structure encourages indirect self-presentation, particularly in contexts where direct disclosure may be socially risky.

From a Co-Cultural Theory perspective (Orbe, 1998), this pattern reflects a combination of non-assertive and strategic communication practices. However, more importantly, it demonstrates how marginalized individuals actively negotiate visibility within a heteronormative social structure. Rather than choosing between visibility and invisibility, participants continuously adjust the degree of disclosure based on perceived safety, audience composition, and social consequences.

Overall, these findings suggest that sexual identity expression on Instagram should be understood not as a fixed mode of self-presentation, but as a negotiated process shaped by intersecting social expectations, platform affordances, and risk awareness.

5.2 Multi-Account and Platform Affordances in Sexual Identity Construction

The findings indicate that Malaysian gay and lesbian youth actively construct their sexual identities through the use of multiple Instagram accounts and platform

affordances, rather than maintaining a single coherent online identity. This supports Ruberg and Ruelos (2020), who argue that queer identities are fluid, fragmented, and continuously negotiated across different contexts.

Participants differentiate their identities across main accounts, private accounts (Finsta), and in some cases LGBTQ-oriented or social accounts. This practice reflects what Fox and Ralston (2016) describe as a non-linear identity trajectory among LGBTQ youth, where identity development involves deliberate management of visibility and disclosure across different social spaces.

However, beyond identity development, the findings suggest that multi-account usage is also a response to audience segmentation under conditions of context collapse. Unlike traditional offline environments, Instagram merges multiple audiences (family, peers, colleagues) into a single space. As Haimson et al. (2021) argue, this collapses contextual boundaries and forces users to strategically redistribute self-presentation across different accounts to reduce social risk.

From a Co-Cultural Theory perspective (Orbe, 1998), multi-account practices represent a combination of separation and accommodation strategies. Private or secondary accounts allow separation from dominant heteronormative audiences, while main accounts reflect partial accommodation to mainstream expectations. This indicates that identity management is not simply expressive, but fundamentally strategic and structurally constrained.

In addition, Instagram affordances such as Close Friends, Stories, and Highlights further reinforce this segmented identity construction. As Treem and Leonardi's (2013) suggests, visibility and editability enable users to actively curate which version of the self becomes socially accessible. Therefore, identity on Instagram is not only performed

but technologically structured, where platform design directly shapes the boundaries of self-expression.

5.3 Negotiating Risk: Privacy, Audience Control and Self-Censorship

The findings show that participants continuously engage in risk negotiation when expressing their sexual identities on Instagram. Rather than full disclosure or complete concealment, identity expression is shaped by ongoing assessments of potential social consequences. This aligns with Craig and McInroy (2014), who argue that LGBTQ youth use selective disclosure as a protective strategy in environments where offline consequences may exist.

Privacy mechanisms such as private accounts, follower approval, and restricted viewing are not simply technical choices but forms of risk management behaviour. Participants actively construct “safe audiences” by filtering followers.

Furthermore, self-censorship emerges as a key strategy. Participants deliberately avoid explicit LGBTQ hashtags, emotional disclosures, or identity markers. This supports Haimson et al. (2021), who found that selective disclosure is often shaped by platform norms that reward curated positivity while discouraging vulnerability.

Importantly, the findings suggest that risk perception is not static but socially produced. Even in the absence of direct negative experiences, participants anticipate potential judgement, gossip, or exposure. This demonstrates that identity management is driven not only by actual threats but also by anticipated social surveillance, reinforcing the idea that Instagram functions as a socially monitored space.

From Co-Cultural Theory (Orbe, 1998), these practices reflect predominantly non-assertive and strategic communication approaches, where participants prioritize safety and social harmony over direct identity assertion. However, the gradual reduction of

self-censorship after coming out suggests a shift toward more assertive communication, indicating that risk negotiation is dynamic and developmental.

5.4 Sexual Identity Expression in Different Socio-Cultural Contexts

The findings indicate that sexual identity expression on Instagram is strongly shaped by socio-cultural context, particularly the perceived conservatism of Malaysian society. This supports Choi and Sung (2018), who argue that identity expression on Instagram is not purely platform-driven but deeply embedded within offline cultural norms.

Participants perceive Malaysia as a relatively conservative environment where religious and cultural values may restrict open LGBTQ expression. However, this perception is not uniform but varies according to individual interpretation, supporting Hillier et al. (2012), who emphasize that LGBTQ youth actively assess environmental safety when deciding how openly to express their identities.

A key finding is the role of comparative context, particularly participants' experiences in Taiwan. Taiwan is perceived as a more open and supportive environment, which reshapes how participants evaluate their own expression in Malaysia. This comparative awareness aligns with Coker et al. (2023), who argue that exposure to supportive digital or physical environments can enhance identity confidence and visibility.

More importantly, this comparison produces what can be understood as relational identity calibration. Participants do not simply switch between openness and concealment, but adjust their expressive boundaries based on perceived cultural safety. This demonstrates that identity expression is relational rather than absolute.

From a Co-Cultural Theory perspective (Orbe, 1998), Malaysia represents a dominant cultural structure that encourages assimilation or partial accommodation, while experiences in Taiwan provide an alternative reference point that enables participants to imagine more accommodating or expressive possibilities. This highlights how co-cultural strategies are not only locally constrained but also shaped by transnational experiences.

5.5 From Concealment to Confidence

The findings demonstrate that sexual identity expression on Instagram evolves over time, moving from concealment to increased confidence and openness. This supports Ruberg and Ruelos (2020), who emphasize that queer identities are not static but develop through ongoing negotiation and lived experience.

In the initial stage, participants engage in concealment strategies such as avoiding LGBTQ-related content, limiting interaction, and maintaining strict control over visibility. This aligns with Hillier and Harrison (2007), who argue that early-stage LGBTQ identity formation often involves cautious experimentation within perceived safe boundaries.

However, after coming out or gaining self-acceptance, participants demonstrate increased willingness to express their identities. This shift reflects Harper et al. (2016), who found that online environments can facilitate identity exploration and eventual self-acceptance through repeated exposure and interaction.

Importantly, this transformation is not solely triggered by coming out events but is also influenced by relational and experiential factors, such as supportive relationships or being in a public partnership. These factors contribute to what can be understood as identity stabilization through social validation (Noon et al., 2024).

From Co-Cultural Theory (Orbe, 1998), this trajectory reflects a movement from predominantly non-assertive strategies (concealment) toward more assertive strategies (open expression). However, this progression is not linear for all participants, indicating that identity development remains uneven and context-dependent.

Overall, Instagram functions not only as a space of representation but also as a temporal site of identity becoming, where users gradually negotiate visibility, confidence, and self-acceptance over time.

5.6 Conclusion and Recommendations

5.6.1 Conclusion

This study examines how Malaysian gay and lesbian youth express and manage their sexual identities on Instagram, as well as the factors that influence these practices. Overall, the findings show that sexual identity expression is not simply about being open or hidden, but a process that changes depending on context, audience, and feelings of safety.

First, the study finds that participants express their sexual identity in different ways. Some use direct signs such as LGBTQ-related terms, emojis, or hashtags, while others express their identity in more indirect ways, such as through daily posts, appearance, or relationships. This shows that sexual identity is often expressed through how people present themselves, rather than direct statements.

Second, Instagram is not only used for posting content, but also for managing identity. Participants use different accounts (main, private, or social accounts) and platform features like Close Friends and Stories to separate different parts of their identity. This helps them control who can see their content and allows them to present different sides of themselves to different audiences.

Third, the study finds that risk management is an important part of identity expression. Participants use privacy settings, follower control, and self-censorship to avoid judgment, misunderstanding, or unwanted attention. This shows that identity expression is carefully managed rather than completely spontaneous.

Fourth, the Malaysian socio-cultural environment also influences how participants express their identity. Most participants see Malaysia as relatively conservative, so they tend to be more careful online. However, experiences differ from person to person. Some feel strong limitations, while others feel less affected. Exposure to more open environments, such as Taiwan, also helps some participants become more aware of different levels of acceptance, which affects their online behaviour.

Finally, the study shows that sexual identity expression can change over time. Some participants become more open after coming out, building self-acceptance, or entering relationships, while others remain private. This shows that identity development is different for each person and depends on their personal experiences.

5.6.2 Research Limitation

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size is relatively small, involving only five participants. Although the qualitative approach allows for in-depth understanding of participants' experiences, the findings may not be generalisable to all Malaysian gay and lesbian youth.

Second, the study focuses only on Instagram as the main platform. While Instagram provides multiple features for identity expression, participants may behave differently on other social media platforms such as TikTok, Twitter, or Facebook. Therefore, the findings are limited to the specific affordances of Instagram.

Third, the study relies on self-reported interview data and selected Instagram content. This means that participants' responses may be influenced by memory, self-presentation, or selective disclosure, which could affect the completeness of the data.

Finally, the study focuses only on gay and lesbian youth, and does not include other LGBTQ identities such as bisexual or transgender individuals. As a result, the findings reflect only a specific segment of the LGBTQ community.

5.6.3 Recommendations for Future Research

Future research is recommended to expand the scope of LGBTQ identities by including other groups such as bisexual, transgender, and non-binary individuals. This would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how different identities experience and express sexual identity in digital spaces.

In addition, future studies could compare multiple social media platforms, such as TikTok, Twitter, and Instagram, in order to explore how different platform designs and affordances influence identity expression and management strategies.

Furthermore, future research could adopt a larger and more diverse sample size, including participants from different age groups, ethnic backgrounds, and geographical regions in Malaysia. This would help to improve the generalisability of findings.

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