

UC Irvine

UC Irvine Previously Published Works

Title

The Impact of Mobile Devices on Indonesian Men's Sexual Communication

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1rc6h5hk>

Authors

Oetomo, Dédé
Boellstorff, Tom
Suwito, Kandi A
et al.

Publication Date

2018

Peer reviewed

The Impact of Mobile Devices on Indonesian Men's Sexual Communication

Dédé Oetomo¹, Tom Boellstorff², Kandi Aryani Suwito³ and Khanis Suvianita⁴

¹*GAYa NUSANTARA Foundation, Surabaya, Indonesia*

²*Department of Anthropology, University of California Irvine, USA*

³*Communication Department, Universitas Airlangga, Surabaya, Indonesia*

⁴*Indonesian Consortium for Religious Studies, UniversitasGadjahMada, Yogyakarta, Indonesia*

Keywords: sexuality, identity, gay, men who have sex with men, mobile devices, social media

Abstract: This paper aims to explore the impact of mobile devices on Indonesian men's sexual communication. Gay men need to express their homosexual feelings despite resistance from society. The paper is based on qualitative and quantitative research used to describe and assess the current use of social media in Indonesia, paying specific attention to how it is transforming sexual negotiations among gay men and other MSM. Its objective is to gain an understanding of how online social interactions are transforming gay and MSM Indonesians' experience of sexuality, identity and community. The findings demonstrate how the participants are very committed to social media as shown by the degree of openness in declaring their sexual orientation. Specifically, this research discovered that social media is used mostly by youths to find partners and to connect to other gay men as a means to construct a sense of community and belonging. Interestingly, one of the results also revealed the favourable reception of gay men toward women when it comes to sexual relations.

1 INTRODUCTION

As the fourth most populous nation (after China, India, and the United States), it is unsurprising that Indonesia has a sizeable percentage of social media users. Nevertheless, the data on Indonesia is almost absent from the existing literature. The research reported here employed qualitative and quantitative methods to describe and assess the current use of social media in Indonesia, paying specific attention to how it is transforming sexual negotiations among gay men, other men who have sex with men (MSM), and waria (trans women). The aim is to gain an understanding of how online social interactions are transforming gay and MSM Indonesians' experiences of sexuality, identity, and community. The research was conducted primarily using surveys and interviews.

The researchers based in the city of Surabaya (East Java Province) explored how gay, MSM, and waria Indonesians use social media to negotiate their sexual encounters, experiences, identities, and

communities. The research included a survey of the types of devices, apps, and other social media used. Online and offline surveys were used to explore how internet-mediated forms of communication are used in everyday interactions, and their consequences related to their understanding of selfhood, sexuality, and community.

Most of our understandings and theories of the internet are based on data from the United States, Europe, and East Asia (Japan, China, and South Korea). Given Indonesia's size and importance, this research not only gives us a better understanding of contemporary social transformations in the archipelago, but it also gives us a more comprehensive and robust understanding of how the internet can influence social relations worldwide, and how these influences are reworked in specific local contexts. Given that the HIV/AIDS epidemic remains a serious concern in Indonesia, with infection rates among gay, MSM, and waria Indonesians ranging from 15% to over 50%, another primary outcome of this research is insights for use

related to improved HIV prevention interventions that effectively make use of online technologies.

2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The over-arching research questions that guide this research as listed below:

- How are sexual transactions for gay men, MSM, and waria taking place via online cultures?
- How are forms of male sex work being transformed via online cultures?
- How are gay men, MSM, and waria online cultures shaped by differences in age, ethnicity, class, profession, and religion?
- How are the norms of sexuality, friendship, and romance among gay men, MSM, and waria being transformed by online cultures?

(For convenience's sake, in the discussion that follows, we use the phrase "online cultures" to refer broadly to social interactions online via devices like laptops, tablets, and smartphones, via apps, programs, and websites and via social networking sites (like Facebook) and SMS services (like Twitter and WhatsApp).

3 RESEARCH METHODS

The research was designed as a community-based research since it made use of the established connections in Surabaya's gay, MSM and waria communities maintained by the GAYa NUSANTARA (GN) Foundation over the years.

While Boellstorff and Oetomo are academics, they have also been close to community work. The other co-author, Suvianita, also straddles the academic and community worlds as an ally and counsellor to people from the community. Suwito is the only one that is purely academic.

The ideas for the research design, methods and techniques were work-shopped with core activists of GN and other academics and graduate students who are close to the communities in August 2015. Brainstorming sessions were organised to come up with possible issues to research. The rest of 2015 saw the team developing the issues further, continually checking with the realities in the communities that the GN activists know very well.

By April 2016, a final draft survey questionnaire was discussed and tried out on GN volunteers and

community members. This year happened to be one where moral panic type statements from politicians, social and religious leaders were bombarding the "LGBT" communities, so we added a few questions to see how life in online cultures (and offline cultures) may have changed.

In September to October 2016, the survey questionnaire was uploaded onto SurveyMonkey, and its link was announced in all of GN's social media channels. 151 fully answered questionnaires were obtained. In November 2016, the research team decided to also conduct an offline survey using the questionnaire. 50 additional respondents were obtained.

The research team held a workshop in early 2017 to analyse the answers to the questionnaire. Some of this analysis forms the basis of the following findings.

4 FINDINGS

4.1 Gender and Sexuality: Identity, Relationships and Religious Significance

Sexual identity as perceived by the respondents is not a stable category with distinctive qualities. In contrast, most of the respondents believe that identities are always multifaceted as they are constructed as a compound selfhood where different features such as individual preferences, social background and personal beliefs are reworked and performed at once in each human being. Given with four clear options, the vast majority of respondents chose the label 'gay' by 68.85%, whereas less than a fifth (19.12%) opted for 'men who have sex with men' (MSM). This means that the respondents did not automatically identify their sexual orientation as simply being gay, seeing that there are other alternatives selected, even though by only a few, such as under the label of 'bisexual' (22.79%).

Even though this range of identities seems sufficient enough to capture the variety in the sexuality of a gay person, there were diverse answers provided by the respondents when they were offered the opportunity to present any response in addition to the available choices. Surprisingly, there were 11 different answers written in the respondents' own words which were: 1) Gay who still loves and wants to get married to a woman, 2) LSW, 3) Pansexual, 4) Bi-curious, 5) Asexual, 6) Pro-LGBT, 7) Straight, 8) Lesbian, 9) Women who

like men, 10) Normal, and 11) Individuals who like masculine men. Some words are quite familiar and are common terms used when defining one's sexual orientation but several descriptions are a very unique way to reveal an otherwise undetermined label for specific sexual attraction and experiences.

This result clarifies what du Gay and Hall (1996) have said in that the term identity is not a natural in itself, but a constructed form of closure and that identity naming, even if silenced and unspoken, is an act of power. A community is a social unit that stabilises the deep-rooted identity classification with the play of differences as the only point of origin. Identity is a cultural site where particular discourses and practices are entwined and shattered at the same. The historical route taken by LGBT Indonesians shows that the homosexual identity first emerged in urban centre in the early twentieth century. Before then, it was preceded by the LGBT movement in the late 1960s when waria, transgender women, came into view (UNDP, 2014). Considering the fact that homosexuality is a predominantly Western discourse, LGBT Indonesians have persisted in order to secure their local and cultural distinctiveness as a means to acknowledge how sexuality is highly inter-related with race, ethnicity, class and other aspects of identity. The term 'waria' as an Indonesian specific phenomenon demonstrates how language shapes reality. Boellstorff (2005) refers to male-to-female transvestites (best known by the term *banci*) as waria, which he used to name both female (she) and male (he). This means that biological foundation for sexuality is misleading because it is and through language that one's subjectivity is produced across historical and cultural contexts.

Amongst all options, waria scores zero, which means that none of the respondents associated themselves with the characteristics of waria as a specific gender identity. They used another way to describe their identities which can be put into one of the 11 categories above. Since almost all of the respondents are male (92.65%), it is easily understood that sexual orientation represents the interests of those who call themselves male. It explains why only a minority stated 'bi-curious', 'lesbian', and 'individuals who like masculine men' which is language used to represents women's discourse on sexuality. However, the sexual identity of the respondents who says 'pro-LGBT' is hard to properly know as they could only be showing their support for LGBT individuals who are still experiencing discrimination and repressive acts physically, psychologically and verbally. Although the numbers are very small, its significance brings a

great magnitude to the campaign for the human rights of LGBT people in the public sphere and throughout social media.

However, only 80.88% of respondents admit that they had sex with men while only 19.12% say the opposite. The number is greater than the 68.85% respondents who confess that they are gay with a 12.03% difference in percentage. This means that diversity in sexual orientation is becoming more extensive, which breaks the long-established perception that sexual intercourse between men must be labelled 'gay' which leaves no room for other sexual expressions. This explains the prior outcome that highlights the variety of sexual identity as proposed by respondents. The argument that can be brought to light for this observable fact has been explained by Hall (1996), who said that difference matters because it is essential to meaning, and without it, meaning could not exist. The wide range of identities breaks not only the existed binary opposition that separates feminine from masculine in extreme poles, but also defies the 'heteronormativity' as being the ideological force that works behind all prejudices and violent acts against LGBT people who stands for the right to be different. It also dismantles the belief that sexual subjects should fall into one distinct category and cannot transgress the boundary without being marked as deviant, dissonant, disturbing and above all, subversive.

In spite of the LGBT people's will to challenge the traditional norms that marginalise and put them in an already heterosexual relationship of subordination, they cannot escape from a discursive mechanism that requires them to have a 'husband and wife relationship' as a means of survival. It means that those who are married (13.11%) are not committed to a monogamous relationship but have an open relationship. It appears that a sense of freedom that liberates them from the cultural expectation to be 'normal' conflicts with the need to express their homosexuality. It affects how the respondent will decide on their sexual openness to others and how it brings significance to them.

The degree of sexual openness as illustrated in the diagram below exemplifies identity as a source of worry rather than as a place of belonging. Even though quite a lot of the respondents do not hesitate to declare their sexuality, there are still considerable number of people who show reluctance in revealing their sexual identities for the reason that LGBT are believed to be a type of illness and taboo for Indonesian society. The figure confirms that the community has silenced LGBT people and made

their sexuality a secret. There were 18.18% of respondents hiding their sexuality from view which again strengthens the idea that acceptance is really a luxury. Butler (1995; p.29) argues that transgender and transsexual persons and other LGBT identities make us not only question what is real and what must be, but they also show us how the norms that govern contemporary notions of reality can be questioned and how new modes of reality can become instituted. She ensures that gender and sexual affirmation should be the defining features of the social world in its very intelligibility.

It needs to be rethought how the concepts such as ‘coming out’ and ‘liberation’, which are very Western in orientation, should take the local society into account in view of the fact people are marching against homosexuality in Indonesia. The Pew Research Global Attitudes Project reported on attitudes towards homosexuality and their report showed that 93% of those surveyed in the country reject homosexuality and only 3% accept it. Cultural assumptions on LGBT people are mostly influenced by the dominant discourse in Indonesian society which is religion. Contemporary discourse holds that LGBT sexuality and religion are incompatible, thus LGBT individuals participate less in religion than heterosexuals, which has led to a process of abandonment and being abandoned by their religious traditions (Henrickson, 2007).

While the vast majority of respondents hold as having the traditional religion of Islam as the dominant religious group (56.62%), amongst Christians (8.82%), Catholics (10.29%), Konghucu (0.74%), Buddhists (2.94%), and Hindus (0.74%), it can be perceived that a number of respondents decided on being Agnostic (11.76%) or Atheist (6.62%). Atheism, in the broadest sense, refers to the absence of belief in God(s) by looking for the answer to the question of meaning in ethical and philosophical viewpoints. Agnosticism, strictly speaking, is a doctrine that states that humans cannot know the existence of anything beyond the phenomenon of their experience. The scepticism about religious questions in general and the rejection of traditional Christian beliefs under modern scientific thought has so much to do with the notion of knowing. LGBT people have been objectified and treated as the object of knowledge by the masculine hegemony and the heterosexist power. Communities commonly led by religious conservative clerics that internalise homophobia and transphobia makes LGBT people who live in that surrounding find it hard to fully accept their own sexual orientation and gender identities (UNDP, 2014). At the same time,

the act of uttering an oppressive view toward LGBT people in public has created a sense of social separation. However, there is also a growing movement among progressive religious leaders and believers with the relentless endeavour to offer an alternative reading of the holy text.

4.2 Being Online: Negotiating Sexuality and Performing Identity

Urban areas with visible gay and lesbian communities provide expanded opportunities to meet potential partners. In addition, the internet has rapidly become a way for gay men and lesbians to meet one another. There is some evidence that lesbians and gay men, like their heterosexual counterparts, rely on fairly conventional scripts when they go on dates with a new partner (Klinkenberg & Rose, 1994). This is proven by the diagram below, which shows that gay men are very keen to make use of online media for their social life. There are a considerable number of respondents who find their life-partner online (74.47%) as opposed to others who are still looking for companion in a more traditional way (23.53%). Specifically, the furthest chart distinguishes a life-partner from a sex-partner, wherein the results show that 75% of respondents were looking for a sex-partner online.

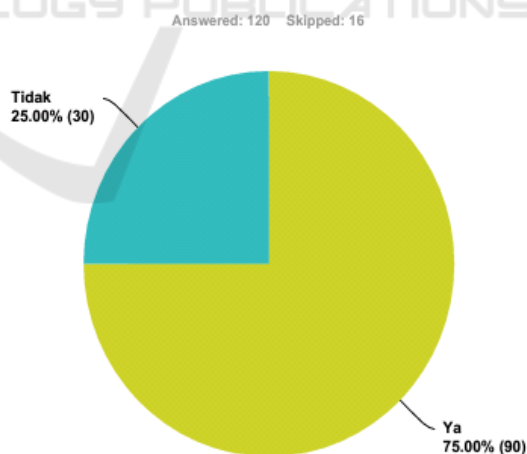


Figure 1: Are you also looking for sexual partners online?

Some scholars have heralded the emergence of ‘the global gay,’ the apparent internationalisation of a certain form of social and cultural identity based upon homosexuality. This “expansion of an existing Western category” is seen to be the result of what

Altman calls 'sexual imperialism', which is the reshaping of local understandings of homosexuality, largely influenced by the development of global media systems and increasing popular access to so-called new media (from mobile-phones to the internet), in order to align them with Western conceptions of what it means to be gay or lesbian (Barry, Martin, Yue, 2003). Almost all respondents use a smart-phone regularly with a reading of 95.08%, followed by laptops and tablets by 72.95% and 32.79% respectively

For those who use their gadgets to do online activities, there is an evenly balanced proportion amongst respondents that go online for 2-4 hours (30%), 5-7 hours (23.33%), 8-10 hours (22.50%) and more than 10 hours (20%) in a day. There are only 4.17% of respondents who said that they accessed the internet for less than an hour a day. This upshot is not unexpected, knowing that the internet which came to Indonesia during the early phase of the political crisis in the 1990s has risen both economically and politically to become an alternative medium that has found its way out of the control of the state (Hill and Sen, 2000; Lim 2002). Even if this medium was initially deemed as elitist due to the unequal access especially amongst the marginal groups, the impacts are believed and forecast to increase in the forthcoming years, considering the advancement of technology in complying with the most fundamental needs of individuals as a part of society, which is about being connected.

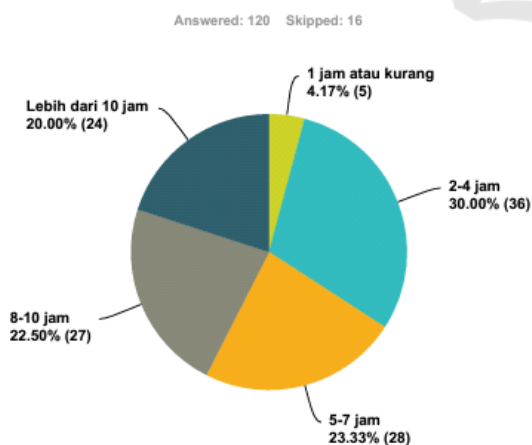


Figure 2: On average, how many hours per day you spend online?

The social space where the access was made is also vital to analyse since it demonstrates the social dynamics that occur in gay communities. It is

worthy noticing that building an intimate relationship, for gay people, can be very problematic because visibility leads to consequences that can potentially put gay people at risk. They are frequently harassed or intimidated and moved on by security forces that do not hesitate to do violence when they appear publicly and hang out to find a sex-partner. Having said this, it is comprehensible that respondents mostly retrieve a website page or their social media account on their leisure time, especially when they are having a walk with their family (48.84%) and friends (41.86%). The number of people that access the internet at home is the lowest, with 18.60% with the difference of 18.61% from the quantity of those who log on to the internet at their office.

This end result suggests that the respondents are comfortable seeking a sex-partner while they are in a public space as long as they do not have to be noticeable physically. The timeline does matter for 61.63% of respondents, but does not make any difference for the rest.

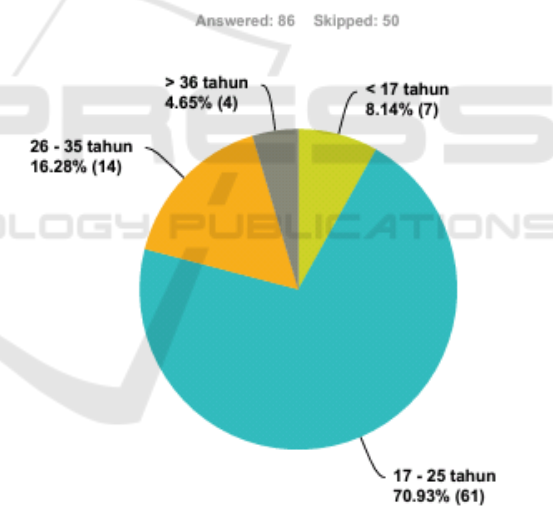


Figure 3: Since what age have you started to look for sexual partner online?

The most visited social media platforms are Grindr, Facebook and Blued, which are believed to be advantageous for the respondents to get a preferable sexual experience. They start to seek out a sexual partner at the age of 17-25 with the most notable figure of 70.93%. This number is followed by the category of 26-35 years old (16.28%), under 17 years old (8.14%) and over 36 years old (4.65%).

In terms of ease, the majority (72.09%) agree that social media is the best medium to use to find a

sex-partner instantly and 52.33% of respondents think that the idea of staying hidden and being unseen is a critical point for them. There were 16.28% persons surveyed who have other answers to offer. Some says that they can identify people nearby that are suitable either as a sex-partner or as a companion. They can also be certain that the intended persons have the same sexual orientation. The adequate information can also be collected from the online account before they actually get involved with other social media users.

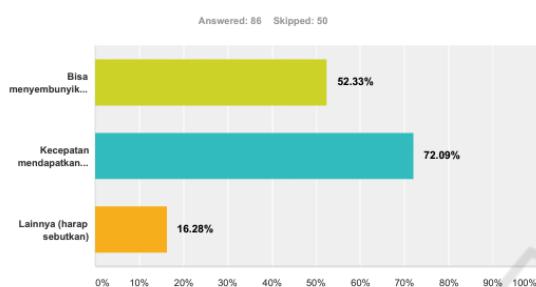


Figure 3: What kind of conveniences that you get from using online media in looking for sexual partners?

5 CONCLUSIONS

Many of the findings of the research confirm what is already stated in the literature on topics such as gender and sexual diversity. The interconnection with the dominant heteronormative culture of Indonesian society is also apparent from the findings.

Regarding online cultures, they have made a difference in the ease of finding sexual partners or friends, and serve as a safe space for gay men and MSM to interact with each other. It is such a safe space that many respondents are quite open about their identities and desires, which means that online cultures are becoming sub-cultures in Indonesia. In future research, it would be interesting to compare the issue of subversive sexual identity to other subversive online cultures or sub-cultures such as punk, child-free, erotic animation and the like.

Another finding that is worth noting is the fact that young gay men and MSM form a significant percentage of the respondents. This corroborates with surveys on sexual behaviour conducted within HIV programs that found that increasingly younger gay men and MSM start their sexual experiences early and some are diagnosed with HIV at an early age (in their teens).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors would like to thank the core activists at GAYa NUSANTARA Foundation who took part in the discussions on the issues to be explored, on the questions to be included in the questionnaire and on the try out of the draft questionnaire. We particularly thank Rafael H. Da Costs (Vera Cruz), (Sam) Slamet, SardjonoSigit and PurbaWidnyana. Along the way we were joined by Astrid Wiratna, LastikoEndiRahmantyo, Kathleen Azali, the late MaimunahMunir. We thank the community members who readily filled in both the online and the offline questionnaires and thereby shared their lives. We finally thank volunteers and staff of GAYa NUSANTARA Foundation who have been involved in the different steps of the research.

REFERENCES

- Berry, C, Martin, F and Yue, A, 2003. Mobile Cultures: New Media in Queer Asia. In *Canadian Journal of Communication*, Vol. 29 (2) NC: Duke University Press
- Boellstorff, T, 2005. *The Gay Archipelago: Sexuality and Nation in Indonesia*, Princeton University Press. Princeton and Oxford.
- Butler, J. 2004. *Undoing Gender*, Routledge. New York & London
- Hall, S & du Gay, P (eds), 1996. *Questions of Cultural Identity*, SAGE Publications. London, New Delhi
- Hill, D.T & Sen, K, 2005. *The Internet in Indonesia's New Democracy*, Routledge. London & New York
- Henrickson, M, 2007. A queer kind of faith: Religion and spirituality in lesbian, gay and bisexual New Zealanders, *Aotearoa Ethnic Network Journal*
- Klinkenberg D & Rose S, 1994. Dating scripts of gay men and lesbians. *Journal Homosex*. 26:23-35
- Lim, M, 2002. CyberCivic Space in Indonesia: From Panopticon to Pandemonium?. In *International Development and Planning Review Journal*, special edition, November
- UNDP. 2014. *Being LGBT in Asia: Indonesia Report*. Bangkok.