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2014

Detenber, B. H., Cenite, M., Zhou, S., Malik, S., & Neo, R. L. (2014). Rights Versus Morality: Online Debate About Decriminalization of Gay Sex in Singapore. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 61(9), 1313-1333.

<https://hdl.handle.net/10356/104387>

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2014.926769>

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[DOI:<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2014.926769>].

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RUNNING HEAD: Online Debate about Decriminalizing Gay Sex in Singapore

Rights versus Morality: Online Debate about Decriminalization of Gay Sex in Singapore

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This manuscript is the final accepted version published in the *Journal of Homosexuality* in 2014.

Rights versus Morality: Online Debate about Decriminalization of Gay Sex in Singapore

Abstract

This paper presents a quantitative content analysis of 10,473 comments from two opposing online petitions related to the legal status of a section of the penal code in Singapore used to ban sex between men. Results indicate numerous significant differences in how the two sides discussed the law and its significance. In particular, they used different types of arguments to support their views and expressed different kinds of concerns over the potential impact of changing or maintaining the law. The patterns of language use seem to reflect distinctly different approaches to the debate and suggest the difficulty of finding common ground amid this contentious social issue, but also reveal similarities to how Western cultures have framed the debate.

Rights versus Morality: Online Debate about Decriminalization of Gay Sex in Singapore

This article explores the debate about decriminalization of gay sex in Singapore, a country that mixes Asian and Western culture and democratic and authoritarian politics. To a notable extent, both proponents and opponents of gay rights have adopted discursive strategies that mirror those in Western liberal democracies, seeming to indicate the spread of Western conceptions of sexuality and politics to very different cultural contexts (Altman, 2004; Stychin, 2004).

Political Discourse of Homosexuality in Singapore

In recent decades, many nations have debated and changed laws regarding homosexual conduct and relationships. In the United Kingdom, whose law was the ultimate source of many colonial laws regarding sexual acts, England and Wales legalized private sexual acts between consenting adult males in 1967 (Sexual Offences Act, 1967). In the United States, sodomy was criminalized in some states until the Supreme Court in *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003) invalidated the fourteen remaining state sodomy laws. Now in many societies, gay marriage is recognized, though it remains a contentious issue. Eskridge and Spedale (2006, p. 228) describe an “incremental” path that Scandinavian countries, Canada and some American states have followed, beginning with overturning sodomy laws, proceeding to adoption of laws against discrimination and hate crimes, and culminating in recognition of same-sex unions. Jacobs (1993) argued that analyzing the rhetoric of debates over rights is important in part because a right is generally legally recognized, at least in the United States, only after “a synergistic process in which public rhetoric, media coverage, and legal action by the state create public

awareness and acceptance” of it (p. 724). In the United States, visibility in news and entertainment media has coincided with recognition of gay rights (Gross & Woods, 1999).

Non-western countries have begun debating gay rights, and scholars are examining the debates (see, e.g., Mclelland, 2000; Tan & Lee, 2007; Chan, 2012). India, Malaysia and Singapore are among the countries that legally prohibited homosexual activity based on law with British colonial origins, and many nations in the Middle East and Africa prohibit it (Frank, Camp & Boutcher, 2010; Human Rights Watch, 2008). However, the High Court of Delhi decriminalized private sexual activity between consenting adults in 2009 (*Naz Foundation v. Govt. of NCT of Delhi*, 2009). Organized gay activism is taking root in Asian countries with histories of relative silence on homosexuality, including India and China (Ford, 2009, June 11; Foy, 2010, November 28). This study provides a window on the gay rights debate in Singapore.

In 2007, Singapore’s Parliament undertook many revisions to its penal code. Singapore’s Ministry of Home Affairs recommended that Parliament overturn Singapore’s sodomy law (which applied to anal and oral sex, regardless of gender, and carried a potential life sentence), but recommended retaining §377A of the Penal Code. This section criminalizes “gross indecency” between men—which can include sodomy and a variety of other sexual acts—and imposes a penalty of up to two years in prison. It does not address acts between women or people of the opposite sex. A petition to Singapore’s Parliament signed by 2,341 Singaporeans called for repeal of §377A (Li, 2007, October 25). Singapore’s Parliament followed the Ministry’s recommendations, though the authorities have stated that they would not actively enforce that portion of the Penal Code (Basu, 2007, September 18).

The official petition provoked heated debate in Singapore's normally staid Parliament. The People's Action Party, which has ruled Singapore since before the nation's independence in 1965, dominates the Parliament and espouses conservative social values. Mr. Siew Kum Hong, a nominated member of parliament (or NMP, who is not directly elected but appointed by the government to add diversity to the parliament), presented the petition to repeal 377A, saying repeal was about "fairness, justice and non-discrimination" (Singapore Parliamentary Debates, Official Report, 2007, October 22). "The continued existence of Section 377A will prejudice the rights and interests of homosexual and bisexual men, in an unconstitutional manner," Mr. Siew said, referring to the Singapore constitution's guarantee of equality for citizens (Singapore Parliamentary Debates, Official Report, 2007, October 22). He argued that "private, consensual sexual acts between adult males do not impact on the safety and security of society" (Singapore Parliamentary Debates, Official Report, 2007, October 22). Another NMP, Thio Li-Ann, argued that §377A did not breach the constitutional guarantee of equality and should remain because homosexuality is immoral and harmful. "While all human persons are of equal worth, not all human behavior is equally worthy. In criminalizing acts, we consider the wrongfulness of the act, the harm caused and how it affects the good of society," she said (Singapore Parliamentary Debates, Official Report, 2007, October 22). In remarks that gained great publicity, and notoriety in the gay community, she compared anal sex to "shoving a straw up your nose to drink" (Singapore Parliamentary Debates, Official Report, 2007, October 22). These excerpts, brief as they are, represent some of the differences in concerns of the two sides.

Public Discourse of Homosexuality in Singapore

In addition to the official petition to Parliament—which is a rarely used channel under Singapore law for airing citizen voices—gay activists created an online petition to repeal §377A

that gained 8,166 signatures. In response, an online petition to keep §377A attracted 15,560 signatures in a shorter time. These two online petitions serve as the sampling frame of the current quantitative content analysis. The petitions did not require that signers leave comments, but rather invited comments in a supplementary text box. Thus, this study is limited to analysis of comments of those who chose to add them when they signed the petitions, and we cannot generalize to trends in Singapore public opinion. However, the petitions are a place for us to analyze the comments of thousands of people systematically, and these comments provide a glimpse of how the public viewed the debate.

In Singapore, freewheeling public debate faces barriers. First, Singapore media operate under strict government regulation and exercise self-censorship (Reporters without Borders, 2008; Rodan, 2000). Second, the Singapore government prohibits most forms of demonstration and public protest, and organizations must register with the government. The government has so far denied applications to register organizations of the gay community (Lim, 2004, July 17). Finally, religious expression in the public sphere is also limited, in a concerted effort to maintain harmony among the diverse public (Tan, 2008). Public opinion polls on sensitive issues are rare, and thus researchers have much to gain by examining commentary from the public whenever and wherever it is available.

In recent years, the boundaries of debate over sensitive issues in Singapore has been more open than in the past. As in other nations that strictly control expressive freedom, online social networking sites are providing more outlets for political activity, such as debate about casino gambling in Singapore, the 2011 parliamentary elections and, more recently, Singapore's immigration policies (Garrett, 2006; Liang & Jaipragas, 2013). On gay rights, users on both sides of the debate created Facebook groups to share their views on the issue. Despite a ban on

political films in Singapore, members of the local theatre community created a YouTube video calling for repeal of §377A. To date, the video has more than 100,000 views and has attracted hundreds of comments (“REPEAL 377A SINGAPORE!,” 2007). Videos of members of Parliament and the Prime Minister speaking about the issue are posted on YouTube, granting Singaporeans access to policy-shaping discourse, as well as a forum to discuss the issue in the comments section. Furthermore, online gay news and lifestyle sites and political news sites provided detailed coverage of the §377A debate in Parliament (e.g., Tan, 2007, October 23; Tan, 2007, October 24), and bloggers on both sides offered commentary. Online media thus provided opportunities for far more participation that would be possible through traditional media.

Debates about permissible sexual behavior are likely to unfold differently and have different themes or emphases in different cultures, political systems and eras (Fassin, 2001; Jacobs, 1993; Stein, 2005), and any attempt to generalize from the gay rights debate in Singapore—a crucible of Asian and Western influences—to another nation would be risky. However, scholars have argued that globalization has led to commonalities in discourse on rights issues. They have used broad, overarching themes to frame gay rights debates in liberal democracies and authoritarian nations alike (Altman, 2004; Frank, Camp, & Boutcher, 2010; Offord & Cantrell, 2001; Stychin, 2004). Hence, the debate in Singapore may include themes from previous debates about gay rights elsewhere and indicate themes that will appear in other societies, especially conservative ones.

Democratic Discourse of Contentious Issues

Many studies on controversial policy debates focus on the mainstream media. Few studies examine the voices in alternative media outlets. Benford (1997) criticized the “elite bias” of many framing studies, which he felt focused too much on activities of movement leaders and

too little on “rank-and-file participants” (p. 421), who he viewed as engaged in active struggle over meanings and strategies (Benford and Snow, 2000). The current study does not consider the effects of framing, per se, but addresses some of these concerns by focusing on ordinary citizens’ comments.

Previous research on gay issues in Singapore has focused on discourse from official sources and from mainstream media. In 2003, then Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong told *Time* magazine that the civil service was not discriminating in hiring of gay men and lesbians, and urged the private sector to follow its example. Around that time, international media reported that Singapore was becoming a gay entertainment hub in Asia, which gave the gay community a new, more powerful voice, but also led to political backlash, according to one commentator (Goh, 2008). The Ministry of Health, through the national media, blamed an increase in HIV infection on gay men and “successfully reestablished homosexuals’ stigmatized identity and peripheral position in society” (Goh, 2008, p. 394). A recent analysis of rhetoric about gay rights in Singapore identified tension between such laws as §377A and official rhetoric that promotes a diverse and liberal society (Tan & Lee, 2007). The authors of that study argue that the Singapore government “only wants enough liberalization to keep the foreign and local creative class satisfied so that the economy will grow, but not the kind of liberalization that amounts to political pluralism” (p. 199) that would challenge the existing socio-political paradigm.

Tan and Lee (2007) also argue that the Singapore government reinforces elite positions on gay issues through references to a conservative majority, which they describe as “imagined” (p. 180) and “mythical” (p. 199), and as “a convenient reason for the government to say that its hands are tied when demands for liberalization go beyond what it is prepared to yield” (p. 199). However, recent public opinion surveys suggest that, at least regarding issues of homosexuality,

the conservative majority is hardly imagined. Recent surveys show that around two-thirds of Singaporeans hold attitudes towards gay men and lesbians that were at least slightly negative, and that intrinsic religiosity (i.e., the extent to which religious teachings guide one's daily life) was the strongest predictor of attitudes (Detenber et al., 2007; 2013).

Themes in Discourse on Homosexuality

Extant research seems to indicate that globalization has fostered similarities in thematic frames used in gay rights debates (Stychin, 2004). In the United Kingdom, a government report recommending decriminalization of gay sex (Committee, 1957) provoked a famous exchange among English jurists on law and morality. Some legal philosophers, notably H.L.A. Hart, argued that law should not prohibit such conduct on the basis of moral offensiveness in the absence of more tangible harm of the conduct to others (e.g., Hart, 1963). Others, including Patrick Devlin (1965), argued that law should enforce common morality that holds society together. Since this debate, themes about individual rights and the effects of laws on society's collective morality have figured prominently in debates about gay issues (see Frank, Camp, & Boutcher, 2010).

Gay Rights and Majority Morality Outside Singapore

Drawing primarily on American examples, Snow and Benford (1992, p. 138) described "master frames," which are generic frames from which social movements derive specific frames on which to base their arguments. A prominent master frame of contemporary social movements is that of civil rights, which emphasizes rights of minority or oppressed groups, and is a frame from which the movements for women's rights, animal rights, disability rights and gay rights draw. From within this paradigm, Jacobs (1993) traced the ascendance of the gay rights frame, and found a brash early stage of debate marked by "scourge rhetoric" about immorality and

alleged harmful impact of homosexuality (p. 729). During this early stage, gay rights advocates countered scourge rhetoric with strong affirmative statements (e.g., “gay is good,” p. 726). However, public opinion at the time showed generally negative attitudes toward homosexuality, thus presenting a significant tactical problem for the pro-gay camp. Later the discourse shifted to frames about rights and equality, as gay men and lesbians presented themselves as victims of discrimination and violence. Jacobs (1993; 1996) describes these rights-based arguments as having been more successful for gay rights advocates historically because they shifted the argument from the moral to the political realm (as in the case of California’s 1990s debate over an antidiscrimination law for gay men and lesbians). In rights-based arguments, the question becomes less about good versus evil and more about such issues as the similarity of gay men and lesbians to other minority groups who have legal protections against discrimination (Schacter, 1993). Hawaii’s debate about same-sex marriage contained similar rights-based arguments, but also arguments for tolerance and acceptance when the former arguments faltered (Hull, 2001). Indeed, research on public will suggests that social movements gain traction when they constantly reframe the issue to resonate with the current social climate and adapt to opposing arguments (Post, Salmon, & Raile, 2008).

Gay Rights and Majority Morality in Singapore

Singapore exemplifies Zakaria’s (2003) description of an illiberal democracy, with democratic institutions (e.g., Westminster-style parliamentary democracy), but without robust protection of rights such as free expression and privacy that liberal democracies have. Singapore’s founding Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, justified Singapore’s mode of governance by arguing that Asian societies, especially in East Asian countries, share “Asian values,” such as valuing loyalty over rights (Chong, 2008; Khoo, 2007). Critics rebutted this argument by noting

Asia's historical and contemporary diversity (Sen, 1997), and the argument seems to have lost some currency in recent decades (Tan & Lee, 2007). One legal scholar describes Singapore as having "Singapore communitarianism" (Lee, 2008), which emphasizes traditional morality and family values, and the "common good" functions to "condition the scope of rights" (p. 351). Proponents of this view resist "the encroachment of the homosexuality [sic] agenda into law and social morality as harming the public good" (Lee, 2008, p. 370).

Singapore may indeed be more communitarian than many nations (Chan, 1993; Khoo, 2007), but because Singapore's influences are diverse and include English legal traditions among many other Western cultural influences, we anticipate some similarities to how such debates proceed in the West. There is a potential conflict between rights related to individual identity and morality related to the common good. The identity politics of Western liberal democracies (i.e., appeals for minority rights), might not translate well in Asian political contexts. Altman (2002, p. 422) suggested that "a political movement [may be] the least likely part of western concepts of homosexual identity to be adopted in many parts of the world," even if some activists emulate their Western counterparts. We expect that in Singapore's debate about criminalization of sex between men, people on each side recognize and employ arguments that seem most likely to succeed in Singapore's conservative climate, and will reflect the rights versus morality theme. As we noted earlier, a public opinion survey near the time of the debate on 377A showed most Singaporeans held negative attitudes towards gay men, including the belief that homosexuality is wrong (Detenber et al., 2007). Thus, we expect that opponents of gay rights will tend to employ morality-based arguments, while proponents of gay rights will tend to employ rights-based arguments.

Specifically, we propose that:

H1: There will be a thematic difference between the types of arguments to keep or repeal §377A of the Singapore Penal Code, such that a) the Keep petitioners will be more likely to present arguments based on morality than other types of arguments, and b) the Repeal petitioners will be more likely to present arguments based on rights than other types of arguments.

H2: There will be a difference between the two petitions such that a) the Keep petitioners will use more arguments based on morality than Repeal petitioners, and b) the Repeal petitioners will use more arguments based on rights than Keep petitioners.

Themes about Impact

Since at least the time of the debate about the UK's law against gay sex (noted above), debates about gay rights have focused not only on themes rights and morality, but also on themes related to the types of harms that law should prohibit, and types of impact that can result from changes in law. Jacobs (1993) described how American opponents of gay rights emphasize alleged harmful impacts on others of changing or retaining laws regarding gay issues. For example, Anita Bryant, the singer and antigay activist who led campaigns against American gay rights ordinances in the 1970s, regularly invoked supposed harms to children that such laws would cause (Jacobs, 1993). In Singapore, antigay rhetoric has featured putative negative impacts of homosexuality in the debate over §377A, as well as in other points of discourse (Peh, 2007, October 23; Goh, 2008). Gay rights proponents seem likely to argue that there will be no negative impacts. Alternately, they can propose different kinds of impact, such as the impact of discriminatory laws, as they did in parliamentary debate (Singapore Parliamentary Debates, Official Report, 2007, October 22). Based on this background, we propose a hypothesis and two research questions that address discourse of impact:

H3: The Keep and Repeal petitioners will assert different kinds of impacts that keeping or repealing s§377A would produce.

RQ1: What kinds of impacts are the Keep petitioners most likely to mention in their comments?

RQ2: What kinds of impacts are the Repeal petitioners most likely to mention in their comments?

Rhetorical Devices and Shouting

We also sought to examine the rhetorical devices that both sides employed in the debate, including the sorts of authority they invoked and the level of emotion.

In debates about gay rights, religious communities often appeal to a divine, sacred morality that can be difficult to reconcile with the secular arguments that gay rights proponents often emphasize (Caramagno, 2002). In America, such irreconcilable differences have sometimes led to stalemates in debates over gay rights (Caramagno, 2002). Mathews (2009, p. 63) argues that Singapore's evangelical Christian community has maintained influence in a secular and tightly regulated society by "carefully negotiate[ing] its appeals" of positions that the government regards favorably, such as promoting sexual abstinence. When the government announced its nondiscrimination policy toward gay men and lesbians in 2003, religious conservatives objected and then-Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong acknowledged their concerns in the annual National Day speech with a statement that he did not "encourage or endorse a gay lifestyle." He thanked them for expressing their views, but he also said that it was time to "move on and focus on more urgent challenges" (quoted in Tan & Lee, 2007, p. 198). Moreover, the government acknowledged but overruled religious communities' appeals when it approved and facilitated building of a casino. The government's handling of these cases suggest religious

influences are somewhat limited. Nonetheless, we expect that petitioners might vary in their invocation of religious and secular authority when engaging in grassroots movements.

Petitioners' use of other rhetorical devices may also differ. A rhetorical device common among gay rights opponents is the slippery slope argument, which suggests that one outcome will inexorably lead to another that many would reject. For example, Cahill (2009) reported that opponents of gay rights regularly argued that legalizing gay marriage would lead to legalizing incest. Fejes (2008) claims this kind of argument can contribute to a moral panic around homosexuality. We address petitioners' uses of rhetorical devices with the following hypothesis:

H4: There will be differences in the rhetorical devices that the Keep and Repeal petitioners employ such that a) Keep petitioners will invoke religious authority more frequently than will Repeal petitioners and b) Keep petitioners will invoke slippery slope arguments more frequently than will Repeal petitioners.

In Singapore and elsewhere, both sides in debates over gay rights often accuse the other of stridency and baseless emotional appeals (e.g., Nelson, 2007; Lee, 2008). Owing to a lack of visual and non-verbal cues, online environments have less social presence than face-to-face communication (Walther, 1992). Scholars have contended that such reduced social presence emboldens people to make highly charged remarks in online political discourses (Dutton, 1996; Hill & Hughes, 1997, 1998; Papacharissi, 2002). Such textual devices as capital letters and exclamation marks can convey emotional intensity online (Collins, 1992; Krohn, 2004). As such, one way to document emotion in petitioners' comments is to observe the frequency of all capital letters (i.e., ALL CAPS), and use of exclamation points.

RQ3: Will Keep petitioners and Repeal petitioners express different emotional intensity in their use of all caps and exclamation marks?

Method

This study used quantitative content analysis to examine and compare several features of comments that petitioners used in arguments to keep or repeal §377A.

Sample

We obtained the data files of both petitions from the webmasters of the respective websites that hosted the petitions. There were a total of 15,560 signatures on the Keep petition and 8,166 signatures on the Repeal petition. Roughly half of the Keep petitioners left comments ($n = 7,973$, 51.2%), much higher than the 30.6% of the Repeal petitioners who left comments ($n = 2,500$). We analyzed the entire set of 10,473 comments, rather than sample a smaller distribution.

Coding and Measures

We developed a content coding instrument in two stages. In the first stage, we read through a random selection of several hundred posts in order to identify recurring expressions and patterns in the content. After producing a fairly comprehensive list of content characteristics, we identified the most prevalent and meaningful attributes to serve as the basis of our quantitative variables. We made efforts to generate balanced and neutral items that could capture the essence of both petitions.

Next, we grouped attributes by function and type. The preliminary clusters included items related to (a) principled arguments, (b) impact, (c) rhetorical devices, (d) language style, (e) self-identification, (f) attitudes, and (g) understanding of the statute. We measured these variables using binary values of 0 and 1 to denote the absence or presence of a particular attribute in the comments. We also recorded the date, time, and word count of the comments. Although we

identified seven preliminary thematic clusters in the petition comments, our analysis focused on only four: principled arguments, impact, rhetorical devices, and language style.

We further divided the principled arguments category into three types of arguments: rights, morality, and other. We based this classification on previous research that found gay rights proponents tend to frame their arguments in terms of rights, while opponents use morality as one of the ways to frame the issue (Jacobs, 1993, 1996; Hull, 2001). We indexed rights-based arguments in reference to six different terms or phrases: privacy; fairness or justice; equality, (equal) rights, or equal treatment; discrimination; human rights; and freedom, freedom to choose, or choice. Mention of four phrases or terms constituted morality arguments: traditional values; Asian values; family values; and concepts of general morality (e.g., morals, immoral, etc.). The “other” category contained ten different arguments that appeared in the comments but were not related to rights or morality or any other particular theme (e.g., majority rule, norms, progress or advancement, national values, and comparative values).

Next, we coded statements about the impact of retaining or repealing §377A. Nineteen different items gauged the putative impact on such factors as society, self, families, children, public health, the economy, and perception of the nation. The invocation or mention of religious and secular authorities (such as government leaders), was coded for, as were “slippery slope” arguments. Finally, we assessed the presence of exclamation marks and the use of all capital letters (i.e., ALL CAPS) as a way of gauging the intensity of expression.

In the second stage of coding instrument development, we employed and trained several independent coders in order to evaluate instrument reliability in several rounds of coding. The first round of coding involved a random sample of 200 petition comments (without replacement) that the coders evaluated independently. Based on this first round, we identified discrepancies

among coders and corrected sources of potential ambiguity in the coding instructions. Given these improvements to the instrument, coders evaluated a random selection of 400 new comments—200 from each petition—in order to calculate reliability.

We evaluated reliability using Krippendorff's alpha, which other research has used in the quantification of brief comments (e.g., Kahlor & Rosenthal, 2009). Average reliability for all variables was high (Krippendorff's alpha = .95). Specifically, Krippendorff's alpha averaged .91 for principled argument variables (range = .73 to 1.00), .98 for impact variables (range = .87 to 1.00), and .96 for rhetorical variables (range = .80 to 1.00). One variable, mention of diversity, had a relatively low reliability (Krippendorff's alpha = .73); thus, we excluded that variable from analysis.

Results

Descriptive statistics

The average word count of comments on the Repeal side was significantly larger than that for the Keep side ($M = 26.0$; $Z = -9.83$, $p < .001$). Due to their short length, most comments reflected only a few variables, and thus received scores of 0 for the remaining variables. Consequently, most variables had non-normal distributions, and we thus report the results of nonparametric analyses.

Hypothesis testing

First, we examined the types of principled arguments (i.e., appeals to rights, morality, fairness, values, etc.). We counted the occurrence of each type of argument in each petition, and found that the distribution of arguments differed between the two petitions ($\chi^2 = 1144.9$, $p < .001$). Tables 1 and 2 contain the ten most frequent types of argument in each petition. In order to test H1a and H1b, we conducted two Mann-Whitney tests for each petition, with morality as the

reference category for H1a and rights as the reference category for H1b. Within the Keep petition, mention of morality arguments was more frequent than mention of rights arguments ($Z = -1.82, p < .035$), and “other” arguments ($Z = -1.84, p < .033$). For the Repeal petition, mention of rights arguments was more frequent than mention of morality arguments ($Z = -2.56, p < .006$), and “other” arguments ($Z = -2.82, p < .001$). These findings support H1a and H1b.

Second, we drew comparisons between the two petitions. Results showed that the Keep petitioners used more arguments related to morality than did Repeal petitioners ($Z = -18.28, p < 0.001$); and the Repeal petitioners used more arguments related to rights than did the Keep petitioners ($Z = -53.18, p < 0.001$). These findings support H2a and H2b.

Third, we compared assertions of impact from keeping or repealing s§377A, and found numerous significant differences between the two petitions. Overall, the comments on the Keep petition were much more concerned with possible impact than those in the Repeal petition ($\chi^2 = 241.8, p < .001$), and the difference between the two petitions is significant for the eight most frequently mentioned items (see Table 3). We identified seven “noteworthy” variables that occurred in at least 1% of the posts. The Keep petitioners referenced five of these variables more frequently than did the Repeal petitioners, but the Repeal petition contained more reference to impact on the self and homosexuals. These findings support H3 and give some resolution to RQ1 and RQ2. For further clarification of the research questions, we compared the rank ordering of types of impact between the two petitions. Results show that, in descending order of frequency, the Keep side asserted impact on society, people, or Singaporeans; nation or government; children; families; and public health. In contrast, the Repeal side asserted impact on society, people, or Singaporeans; nation or government; self; and homosexuals. The Repeal comments made little mention of the impact on families (0.8%), children (0.7%), and public health (0.4%).

Although the first and second highest ranked impacts are the same for both Keep and Repeal petitions, their percentages differ significantly as does the rank order (and frequency) of other types of impact.

Fourth, we compared the petitioners' use of rhetorical devices, and found significant differences consistent with our predictions (see Table 4). Specifically, petitioners on both sides invoked both religious and secular authorities; however, the Keep petitioners mentioned religious authorities more frequently than did the Repeal petitioners ($\chi^2 = 127.1, p < .001$); and the Repeal petitioners mentioned secular authorities more frequently than did the Keep petitioners ($\chi^2 = 12.5, p < .001$). Furthermore, the Keep petition contained five times as many slippery-slope arguments as the Repeal petition ($\chi^2 = 31.3, p < .001$). These findings support H4.

Finally, we examined the intensity of expression, or shouting, in the petition comments. About 15% of the posts had exclamation marks, and about 12% used all caps. Comments in the two petitions did not differ in their use of exclamation marks ($\chi^2 = 1.15, p > .1$); however, comments in the Keep petition used all caps more frequently than did comments in the Repeal petition ($\chi^2 = 7.9, p < .05$). These findings speak to RQ3.

Discussion

This study systematically analyzed comments that were part of separate online petitions to repeal and retain the law criminalizing sex between men in Singapore. One of the study's aims was to draw inferences about larger social trends—about how proponents and opponents of such laws use different strategies in framing and debating the issue. This study contributes to the growing literature on debates over gay issues in Asia. As one of few studies that examines debate among members of the general public (as opposed to elite social actors), this study also contributes to scholarly understanding of online interactive media as a venue for and facilitator

of public debate (Norris, 2008; Papacharissi, 2002). Such uses of media may be especially important when they affect the discourse of social movements in countries like Singapore that rank low in expressive freedom (McCaughey & Ayers, 2003; Offord, 2001).

Our findings reveal that Singaporeans on both sides of the gay rights debate use similar argument strategies as do people in other parts of the world. As we expected, petitioners who favor the law that prohibits homosexual activity tended to use morality-based arguments, while petitioners who opposed the law tended to use rights-based arguments, suggesting that public debate over gay issues in Singapore shares similarities with debates in Western contexts. Our findings regarding the putative impact of keeping or repealing §377A provide insights into the nature of the debate. Interestingly, comments in both petitions mentioned most frequently impacts on society, people, or Singaporeans and impact on nation or government. However, Keep petitioners referenced both of these impacts more frequently than did Repeal petitioners. This finding alone suggests that Keep petitioners are more apt to focus on the impacts of gay rights in Singapore, while the Repeal petitioners might focus their comments on other aspects of the debate. Further analyses showed that Keep petitioners asserted impacts on children and families more often than did Repeal petitioners, and Repeal petitioners asserted impacts on self and homosexuals more often than did Keep petitioners. These findings further clarify the ways in which the two sides framed the issue, and also reveal patterns of discourse that other research has identified in Western contexts (e.g., Jacobs, 1993).

Our findings also revealed differences in the rhetorical devices that Keep and Repeal petitioners used. Specifically, Keep petitioners were more likely to invoke religious authority and use slippery slope arguments, whereas Repeal petitioners were more likely to invoke secular authority, such as government authority. Invocation of religion seems to play a role in gay rights

debates, as it has elsewhere (Caramagno, 2002), and its juxtaposition with appeals to secular authority suggests further that the division between religious and non-religious principles of morality and rights plays a key role in discussions of gay rights.

In our final analysis, we examined emotional expressions in petitioner comments. We found that Keep petitioners used all caps more frequently than did Repeal petitioners. However, only a minority of posts used such expressive elements, which suggests that the debate, at least in Singapore at that time, was rather level-headed and civil.

Of course, whether the general Singapore population is more receptive to the morality-based arguments of the Keep petitioners or the rights-based arguments of the Repeal petitioners is a matter beyond the scope of this study. Singapore's generally negative public opinion on gay rights (Detenber et al., 2007; 2012) may undercut the ability of gay rights advocates to use simple appeals (e.g., "gay is good"). Rights-based arguments may also be less successful in Singapore than they would elsewhere, and communitarian arguments may predominate, as some suggest (Lee, 2008; Zakaria, 2003).

So far, Singapore's gay community and supporters have taken a nonconfrontational approach that simply emphasizes the existence of a community of gay people and their supporters. Since 2009, they have organized an annual event, "Pink Dot," in which people dress in pink and gather in a park to form a giant pink mass for aerial photography. Attendance has grown to an estimated 21,000 in 2013 ("Pretty in pink," 2013, June 30). The event garners mainstream media attention that is non-critical, and has generated no discernable public backlash, possibly due to the nonconfrontational tone of the event and its publicity emphasizing acceptance (Wong, 2013, July 13). This contrasts to the confrontational, political tone and approaches of some gay rights protests in the United States and elsewhere (Markwell, 2002), but

is consistent with the tenor of gay pride marches and other public gay pride events in Asia (Laurent, 2005). Though it is premature to reach conclusions, grassroots activity in Singapore seems to emphasize acceptance more, as it did in Hawaii (Hull, 2001).

We suggest that, though caution in interpretation is required, one might infer from the pattern of results that a wide chasm exists between opposing sides that may be difficult to bridge. With the two sides arguing from potentially irreconcilable positions (morality versus rights), the debate may stalemate, as it did at least for a time in the United States (Caramagno, 2002). The trajectory of achieving gay rights need not follow a clearly-defined and consistently progressive trajectory. However, the process of securing gay rights may, as Eskridge and Spedale (2006) describe, follow a general pattern that includes decriminalization of homosexuality, criminalization of discrimination, and recognition of specific rights. Assuming these broad stages are followed, change in Singapore is just beginning. At this time, it is unclear whether arguments based on progress and advancement made by some Repeal petitioners will prove convincing and catalyze recognition of gay rights. Gross & Woods (1999) note that public attention to gay issues in the mainstream media indicated that social change was underway; attention in online forums, like those studied here, here may also serve as such indicators.

This study aims to provide a window on public debate, but it is possible that public opinion and debate may ultimately have little impact in Singapore. The government may take the lead on further developments in gay rights, regardless of public opinion, as it did with other issues, such as employment nondiscrimination policy for homosexuals in the civil service (which was implemented without much public debate); the development of casinos despite public outcry (Arnold, 2005, April 19); and adopting English as its lingua franca decades ago, despite the predominance of other first languages (Pakir & Low, 1995).

Finally, our findings seem to comport with Stychin's (2004) argument that globalization has led to thematic similarities in gay rights discourses around the world. However, our suggestion of cross-cultural similarities does not account for a variety of cultural differences that scholars of queer theory have emphasized (see Adam, 2002, p. 20). Even such basic conceptions of identity as "gay" and "lesbian" have long been points of contention within cultures (Epstein, 1987), and across cultures. Without engaging critical scholarship of these issues, our quantitative analyses only reveal part of the picture, but we hope the current findings can assist further analyses of gay rights issues in Asia and around the world.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The primary limitation is that our findings do not necessarily generalize to the Singapore public. Although the comments we analyzed reveal debate strategies that some Singaporeans employ, it is also important to note that online petitioners probably felt relatively high involvement in the issue. Since comments from these online petitions cannot capture the essence of the debate in its entirety, subsequent analyses of online public discourse might consider other online sources and mainstream media coverage as supplementary data. Still, it is worth noting that the petitions were open to all, internet access in Singapore is quite high, and participation in online forums widespread (Nielsen Company, 2011).

Furthermore, our specific use of content analysis uncovered rather broad thematic elements. For example, we coded most variables using a binary scheme to indicate the presence or absence of a theme, without further context. Thus, for example, such statements as "this issue is about rights" and "this issue is *not* about rights" would both be coded as mentions of rights. Future research might seek to provide additional clarity.

Specific arguments and the richness of individual comments can be examined using qualitative research, including discourse or rhetorical analysis, and more interpretative, critical approaches may draw upon queer theory, which has been a dominant paradigm in the study of gay and lesbian issues.

In conclusion, this study revealed that debates about gay issues in Singapore appear to be polarized in ways that it is in Western nations, suggesting that they may be similarly difficult to resolve. As debates about gay issues emerge worldwide, including non-Western countries, understanding of shared themes, as well as points of divergence, can benefit actors of change and real progress. Future research can track the complexities of these debates, compare them across societies, and provide specific guidance to participants.

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Table 1: Top 10 arguments mentioned by Keep petitioners

Rank	Item	%
1	Mention morals	11.3%
2	Family values	9.2%
3	Norms	4.9%
4	Comparative values	3.9%
5	Majority rule	2.6%
6	Equality, (equal) rights, equal treatment	2.4%
7	Traditional values	1.6%
8	Freedom, freedom to choose, choice	1.4%
9	Progress, advancement	0.9%
10	Discrimination	0.8%

Table 2: Top 10 arguments mentioned by Repeal petitioners

Rank	Item	%
1	Equality, (equal) rights, equal treatment	27.4%
2	Discrimination	14.6%
3	Progress, advancement	12.6%
4	Fairness, justice	10.8%
5	Freedom, freedom to choose, choice	5.9%
6	Privacy	5.8%
7	Human rights	5.6%
8	Common humanity	4.9%
9	National values	4.6%
10	Democratic values	3.9%
10	Mention morals	3.9%

Table 3: Mentions of impact of keeping or repealing §377A on the Keep and Repeal petitions

Item (Impact on)	Keep n = 7973			Repeal n = 2500			Chi-Square	Cramer's V
	Rank	n	%	Rank	n	%		
Society, people, Singaporeans	1	1406	17.6%	1	200	8.0%	182.9***	0.132***
Nation, government	2	940	11.8%	2	185	7.4%	45.8***	0.066***
Children	3	815	10.2%	6	19	0.8%	235.0***	0.150***
Families	4	770	9.7%	5	21	0.8%	211.9***	0.142***
Self	5	154	1.9%	3	136	5.4%	91.3***	0.093***
Homosexuals	7	111	1.4%	4	96	3.8%	59.4***	0.075***
Public health	6	113	1.4%	7	10	0.4%	17.0***	0.040***

*** $p < 0.001$

Table 4: Rhetorical devices and “shouting” in the Keep and Repeal petitions

Item	Keep n = 7973		Repeal n = 2500		Chi-Square	Cramer's V
	n	%	n	%		
<u>Rhetorical Devices</u>						
Invoke religious authority	833	10.4%	79	3.2%	127.1***	-0.110***
Invoke secular authority	91	1.1%	52	2.1%	12.5***	0.034***
Slippery slope	156	2.0%	9	0.4%	31.3***	-0.055***
<u>Shouting</u>						
Use exclamation mark	1188	14.9%	354	14.2%	1.1	0.010
Use all caps	929	11.7%	246	9.8%	7.9*	0.027*

* $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.001$