

Media Roles in Male-to-Female Transsexual Identity Formation among University Students in Malaysia

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Abstract. This paper discusses the role of media in the production of social identity of the male-to-female transsexuals in Malaysia. The aim is to observe on how media play a role in forming and disseminating this new identity to the youth. Qualitative data were gathered from 30 Malaysian male-to-female transsexual university students, which were chosen using snowball sampling. Data were gathered using in-depth interview, face-to-face discussion, participant observation, chatting through the internet and diary writing from 2007 to 2009. The results suggest that media including magazines, television, dramas, films and the Internet facilitated respondents' identification processes as male-to-female transsexuals in various and significant ways. The media also function as an 'actualizing agent' during the development of respondents' transsexual identity.

Keywords: Media Roles, Male-to-Female Transsexual, Identity Formation, University Students, Malaysia

1. Introduction

Research on media and transsexual conclude that media has the ability to aid in the production of social identities, in which the ability is said to be "most powerful and important effect" (Ringo, 2002). In the West, transsexual subjects have become more prevalent and positively presented in the mass media such as television, radio, film, as well as magazines, newspapers, novels, documentaries and biographies (King, 1993), and especially the internet (Cromwell, 1999). It has been a trend for the media to make film, dramas and articles about this particular group (Ekins and King, 1997). Media texts that validate a gender identity that contradicts the body's sex and offer viable gender constructions that incorporate a body/gender split would very likely be welcomed into the mindsets of audience members in whom these texts resound (Ringo, 2002). When the resonance is strong, media could play a powerful role in the processes of transsexual and transgender identity formation. Ringo (2002) has also suggested that media is an actualizing agent by which it sells and promotes the idea of transsexualism to the modern society.

Developments in communications and media technologies allow knowledge and culture to be shared by the society across nations. The mass media serve to strengthen new social identities into the local culture as they often display the new identities. In a study in the United States, Canada and Britain, King (1993) has explained the term used by the media to classify cross-dressing, sex reassignment surgery and the way this new identities are perceived by the community.

2. Transsexualism as social identity

Transsexualism is an individual's identification with a gender inconsistent or not culturally associated with his or her biological sex, and he or she may experience discomfort as a result of a desire to be a member of the opposite sex; or if a person experiences impaired functioning or distress as a result of that gender identification (American Psychiatric Association, 2000). Generally this condition is called 'gender dysphoria' (gender identity disorder) because those involved usually felt as if they exist in the wrong body

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(Ramli, 1991; Teh, 2002). They will seek medical intervention in order to change their physical appearance to those of the opposite sex, and in extreme cases, commits sex change surgery (Benjamin, 1999; Ekins and King, 1997). Vast literature have discuss psychological and biological causes for transsexualism, which include prenatal and genetic causes (Swaab 2008), and psychic trauma that can grow and develop into a basic conflict that may resulted in deviation like transsexualism (Benjamin, 1999). Without denying the contribution of these factors, our paper will only discuss media contribution in aiding the production of this social identity. Specifically this paper discusses the role of media in disseminating transsexual ideas into Malaysian society, which has encouraged the production of transsexual identity formation among the audience members whom these texts resound.

3. Media and the dissemination of transsexual ideas in Malaysia

The media has helped in the construction of transsexual social identity through films, dramas, documentaries, magazines, books, the internet and mobile phones. The dissemination of this idea by these media have popularized this particular social identity and make it common to the community (Awang et. al. 2004; Kadir, 2007). Research suggested that this has encourage potential youths, especially male university students, to become transsexual (Ramli, 1991; Ghazali et. al. 2011). Popularly known as ‘mak nyah’, ‘pondan’, ‘bapuk’ and many other local terms (Teh, 2002; Ramli, 1991), Malaysian male-to-female transsexuals poses those of the opposite sex in their attire, facial makeup, hairstyles, and the way they walk. Much of these individuals, and the society at large, agree that to dress and act like those of the opposite sex is forbidden (haram) according to their culture and religion (Hassan et. al. 2010). However, with the support of the media, there is a strong tendency for the transsexuals, and also the society, to become more considerate and are ready (and also are forced) to accept this identity, which they considered as ‘fated’ (Ghazali et. al. 2011; Ghazali et. al. 2010). We also argue that the community infrastructure of Malaysia, which portrays the importance of media, has encouraged the production of transsexual social identity (Ghazali et. al. 2011).

In recent years Malaysian films and dramas often focus on male-to-female transsexual and these films and dramas are broadcasted on local television and cinema. Apart from that, open discussions on the issues of this social identity are made in the television programs during premier time and watch by millions of Malaysians (Ghazali et. al. 2011). The objective of the discussion is to seek for a solution on how to help them in getting out of this gender identity disorder. Teh (2002) estimates that there were around 10,000 male-to-female transsexuals in Malaysia, while Winter (2009) estimates 50,000. Zulhizzam (2005) meanwhile predicted the number of male-to-female transsexuals in Malaysian universities had reached 10 percent of all the male university students, and this number is expected to increase (Ghazali et. al. 2010).

4. Transsexual Scenarios in Local Malaysian Films and Dramas

Recently there is a move in Malaysian movies towards highlighting male-to-female transsexual characters. Table 1 shows three favorite local movies that features the life of male-to-female transsexuals as the main character. A pleasant response from the community towards these films and dramas shows the interest and concern of the community to learn more about the transsexuals while being entertained. As the result of the public’s discussion on this issue, transsexualism as a social identity has become more widespread, while movie characters are made as role models by transsexual youths (Ghazali et. al. 2011).

Table 1: The examples of two films and a drama that portrayed male-to-female transsexuals in Malaysia

Films / Drama	Synopsis of the film/drama
Film: Waris Jari Hantu <i>(The Heir of the Ghost Finger)</i> Year: 2007 Director: Suhaimi Baba	This film portrays a male teenager who desires to be a woman. He was confronted by his family and his rural community. As a result he moved to capital Kuala Lumpur to seek work. In Kuala Lumpur he met friends of the same kind and they enjoyed life together, and went to places that accept their social identity, such as night clubs, beauty salons and shopping centers. In the end, he decided to undergo sex change surgery.

<p>Film: Anu dalam Botol (<i>Something in A Bottle</i>) Year 2010 Director: Khir Rahman</p>	<p>Ruby (male-to-female transsexual) is in a same-sex relationship with his boyfriend, Ghaus (homosexual male). Ruby underwent sex change surgery with a hope that this might bring their relationship to marriage. To his surprise, Ghaus could not accept this and left him. Months later Ruby's male hormones start re-reproducing and the desire of being a woman is disappearing. He met a nice girl and fell in love with her. However, he is no longer a 'real' man because his sexuality has already altered.</p>
<p>Drama: Sutun (<i>Sutun</i>) Year 2007 Director: Shahrulzad Mohameddin (Ezad)</p>	<p>This drama portrays the dilemma of a school boy that has the desire to become a woman. He put on make-up, women clothes and walked like a woman. His father and the village community did not approve of this, and he was hit by his father for cross-dressing. At the end of the drama, it was shown that the transsexual character grew up to become a doctor, married and have children.</p>

5. Media Roles in Male-to-Female Transsexual Identity Formation Among University Students in Malaysia

This section examines the role of the media in the formation of transsexual identity among university students in Malaysia. Qualitative methods and case study approach were facilitated in the data collection that involved 30 male-to-female transsexual students in Universiti Sains Malaysia, Pulau Pinang. They were chosen using purposive and snowball sampling. The sample size suits Neutens and Rubinson's (2002) suggestion that a small number of six to fifty respondents are appropriate for an in-depth study as this. Face-to-face discussion, in-depth interviews, internet chatting and diary writing were facilitated throughout the study of three years (2007-2009). The study results were analyzed and interpreted using content analysis and textual strategies. These methods of data collection, analyses and writing of result provide meaningful understanding of subjects and issues being studied, while textual strategies used allow the informants to 'speak for themselves' (Robinson, 1998). All of these create the strength of this study.

Respondents were asked if it was the media that influenced them into becoming a woman. None of the respondents agreed to this. They otherwise said that their desire in being a woman was instinctive, causing them to become a transsexual at an early age. Out of 30 respondents, five (17 percent) realized that they have desires of being a girl at an early age of 5-9 years old, while eight respondents (27 percent) were aware of this desire since they were 10-15 years old. The others said that they were only aware of this instinct after the age of 16. Respondent 1, age 22, Malaysian Muslim, told us in an informant interview:

- "At the age of four, I've already like girl's clothing. I didn't like my own clothes but I wore my sisters' dresses. Therefore my mother had to buy girls' dresses for me, and bought for me baby dolls as well. I also played girly games with my sisters."

The desire to be an opposite gender at the young age of four had been discussed by Tambi (2007), who argues that the media is not an influence at this stage, but the genetic and psychological factor, and the way the child had been cared for during their early age. All respondents agreed that the accessibility to media since they were teenagers have caused them to make some ways to bring their instinct to reality, and thus developed their identity as transsexuals. 23 respondents (77 percent) reported that they started cross-dressing and exhibit their new appearance by using light make-up when they were at secondary school. The ideas of making themselves beautiful and stylish were obtained from the printing and electronic media. Despite living in rural areas, most homes have a television and a computer facilitated with internet access. Respondent 2, 21 years old from rural Malaysia, a Malaysian Christian, told us in an in-depth interview:

- "It was just easy to get information from my village. I got the idea to go stylish from the magazines that I bought from a shop not far from home. Furthermore, there are now a lot of homes with an Internet connection. I could just search for it."

Accessibility to information from reading materials of magazines and the Internet allow respondents to obtain the desired information while they were at their hometown. The information had become their sources of ideas to start feminizing their body and dress in style and personality. This finding is in tune with King's (1993) and Ringo's (2002) suggestion on the role of media in the formation of transsexual identity among the youth.

Upon entering the university, the respondents get together in the same locality with more friends that have the same desire. This includes senior students who had already cross-dressed before them, and had even taken some medical intervention to become more ‘women’, such as taking hormone pills and Vitamin C injections. All respondents had given three main reasons for becoming ‘more womanly, more beautiful, and sexier’ in the university, which are: desire, friends and media. According to 60 percent of the respondents, the influence of peers and media is more important than the influence of their own desire. With the presence of friends and media they could share information, thoughts, and feelings, which made them more confident to become male-to-female transsexual openly and significantly. Respondent 1 shared his story:

- “When I was at my hometown I always wanted to be beautiful. I read beauty magazines, but I felt awkward to do so. Besides, I know that my religion and my family would not allow me to do this. But in university, the environment is different. I began to admire my seniors who were brave to be themselves. As the time passed by, I became more interested to drag (wear women dresses) like them. We usually watch TV together - we enjoy watching programs such as Muzik-muzik, Akademi Fantasia, American Next Top Model, American Idol and Project Runaway. Programs like these really influence me to change my appearance (to be like a woman). I learn to make some effort to get the lifestyle I want.”

The respondents named the most important media that helped them to form transsexual identity: magazines, newspapers, television, the Internet and cinema. These media were said to have helped them in practicing their new social identity more confidently. They use these media to get information on beauty, fashion and entertainment. They also compete among each other in order to look prettier and more ‘women’. The more information they get from the media, the higher their chances to appear more ‘womanly’ than their transsexual friends. Respondent 2 wrote down about this competition in the questionnaire form:

- “Why should I ask my seniors about how to become beautiful? Information like these is easy to find in magazines and in the Internet. In there, there are a lot of beauty tips and the latest fashions. Only I knew this – I don’t have to share it with my friends, because I want to be prettier than they are. After they praise my style and beauty and ask me where I got the ideas, then I will tell them.”

The role of media in providing information in order to assist in the formation of the transsexual identity is elaborated by Respondents 3, 22 years old, a Malaysian Muslim. He said:

- “Usually I get the information about these transsexual worlds from magazines and the Internet. Then I share it with my friends and juniors. I will try them first – for example - the newest hair fashion or hormone pills...if they liked it, they’ll praise me. Then I’ll start seeing them imitating what I’ve started.”

Respondent 3 details the importance of magazines to him and his friends, in which the magazines helped them to replicate the styles of their idol female artists. He said:

- “The favourite magazines of mine and the other transsexuals are Cleo, Glam, Maskulin, Female, Remaja, Eh, Intrend. These magazines really suit us. There are a lot of information about beauty and the vogue world of the artists (fashioned and stylish). The most important thing is that we get to imitate the style of our idols. I, who am already vogue, really like Beyonce and Tyra Banks. In Malaysia, I like Erra Fazira and Amber Chia.”

The accessibility of getting magazines around the university had helped the male-to-female transsexual students to appear stylish, beautiful and replicate their favorite artists. Respondent 4, (22 years old, Malaysian Christian) explains this in his notes on the questionnaire form:

- “In this university it is just so easy to get magazine coz (because) there are plenty of bookshops. Among the magazines are Glam, Cleo, Female, Vogue and Women Weekly. The fashions of the artists are ‘explosive’ (beautiful) - the way they makeup and style themselves. Then we’ll try to copy whichever style we like. As for me, it is a MUST for me to see Nasha Aziz, Ziana Zain, Camelia and Posh Beckham. They are, after all, my idols.”

It was interesting to note that most respondents mentioned female artists as their idols and role models. Most of these artists are symbolized as “sexy, stylish, beautiful, of great personality, diva, and popular” - the images in which they wanted to have if they were born to be women. They usually replicate the styles of their idols to themselves. These artists have been close to their heart, becoming their image and inspiration to be as great, beautiful, diva, and popular as their role models. Respondents reported that they usually arrange photographic sessions among themselves, usually in their bedrooms at their hostel, and styling themselves like their role models. Their pictures will then be uploaded into the Internet to be shared with their Internet friends. About this matter, Respondent 4 explained:

- “We always copy our models’ styles. We would makeup and pose like our models. We would upload the beautiful pictures into Friendster or MySpace to expose (show) them to the people out there. It is fun to know what people will say when they look at our vogue (beautiful) pictures.”
- Respondent 5 (22, Malaysian Muslim) explained the similar in an in-depth interview:
- “I’ll makeup beautifully, take pictures and upload them to Facebook. When people see them, they will comment. The newbies (the juniors) would be the ones that always comment. And I would answer them....from there, we became friends.”

Chat rooms in the internet will be the space where male-to-female transsexual students know each other and follow each other’s development. Facebook, Friendster and MySpace are among the social websites that are mostly used by the respondents. They constantly exchange information about the coming activities suitable for them, and about beauty tips and fashion. Information and reading materials around fashion and lifestyles are always distributed to friends in the social websites through attachments.

Evidently, Internet has become the media that possess the major role in the dissemination of new ideas, including transsexual social identity. 29 out of 30 respondents told us that they access through the Internet at the cybercafé premises almost every day. Respondent 3 comments: “I go to the CC (cybercafé) almost every day. There are lots of CCs around, it’s not a wonder, and I could go online every day. If it is about all this queer stuffs, I could just go online at www.gayboy.com, Youtube and many more.” This shows that cybercafés became an important medium that aid the transsexual identity formation. This is also consistent with Wincapaw (2000) who suggested that connecting virtually through the Internet had supported the formation and the diffusion of transsexual identity.

The influence of films and dramas in the formation of this social identity are also remarkable. Our study found that films and dramas that portray transsexual characters have been in the heart of the respondents. For example, Respondent 5 wrote in his diary: “...then we went to watch the movie Waris Jari Hantu at Queensbay. That story was the best and was really sad. I feel like crying, because it was about a transsexual like us.” Respondent 6 (23, Malaysian Muslim) also wrote in his diary: “...at 11 p.m. we went back to our room and bathe...then we watched the CD that I just bought at BJ...it was a Thailand’s queer ghost story, and it was so funny. We laughed a lot”.

Apparently, the dramas and films that are thought as showing the concern and sympathy to the transsexuals had become a pride to them, and some of the characters in the drama have become role models for them. Respondent 1 confessed in an in-depth interview, “...like the drama Sutun, that’s my favourite. Each time I watch it I always feel sad...but I’m happy because that story understands us and defend our kind. The main character was kind, clever, and successful, and could be an example to us”.

The respondents' views discussed above undoubtedly support those of Ringo (2002), King (1993), Cromwell (1999), and Ekins and King (1997) on the ability of the media in aiding the production of social identities, in this case, transsexualism.

6. Conclusion

This study concludes that media is influential in spreading information on transsexual identity, and aiding the production of transsexualism as one of the new social identity in social space. The result is the reworking of social space and landscape while 'allowing' this new social identity to probe into the space, place and culture that have already established. The reworking of the space, place and culture is something that had to be experienced with conflict and contestation, especially in the established culture that forbids transsexualism. In much of the society including Malaysia, the role of media in promoting new ideas is persuasive and is always unavoidable, and thus media is the actualizing agent that promotes such new ideas and social identities. Therefore, this study contributes to the knowledge on the importance of media in the construction of transsexual social identity in Malaysia.

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