

Much ado about phrasing of question on gays

By TESSA WONG

THE Our Singapore Conversation survey was wide-ranging in nature, covering issues from the economy to education to press freedom, but in the end, much of the online discussion on its findings centred on how a question on gays was phrased.

Gay rights activists objected to Singaporeans being asked if they accepted "gay lifestyles". The term is commonly used by conservatives to imply that homosexuality is a choice.

The researchers who led the survey do not believe the phrasing unduly affected people's responses.

The survey found that 47 per cent reject gay lifestyles while 26 per cent accept them; 55 per cent reject gay marriage while 21 per cent accept it. The rest are neutral.

Sociologist Tan Ern Ser, one of the survey researchers, said they used "lifestyle" in the sociological sense of differences in "social relationship and ways of behaving which distinguish one group from others".

"We use the term in good faith, believing that it is something understood by most Singaporeans within the Singapore context," he said, adding "the question focuses on social relationships and social behaviours, rather than sexuality or sexual orientation".

The survey also shed light on the broad middle ground who remain neutral on this highly divisive issue. The biggest share of those neither accepting nor rejecting homosexuality is those

aged between 20 and 49. They tend to have attended polytechnics, universities, or the Institute of Technical Education.

Take Mr Amar Mahesh Kumar, 23, who is studying electrical engineering at the National University of Singapore. He says: "I'm really undecided about it. It's not something I've really thought about, I'm more concerned about things like my schooling

and my future."

Those who do accept homosexuality tend to be younger and more educated, particularly those aged 15 to 34 and with post-graduate, polytechnic or university education. Those rejecting it are likely to be older and less educated, especially those aged 50 and above with little or no formal education.

It is within the neutral group where "contestation will occur

for sure", and where the debate will be framed as one of basic rights and moral values, says Mr Eugene Tan, associate professor of law at Singapore Management University.

Observers say it is too early to say for sure whether Singapore society will become more gay-friendly over time.

Dr Tan Ern Ser personally believes acceptance of homosexuality is a value that will not change with age, and with a significant number already accepting of gays, in time "most Singaporeans would come to see homosexuals as different in terms of their sexual orientation, rather than as deviants".

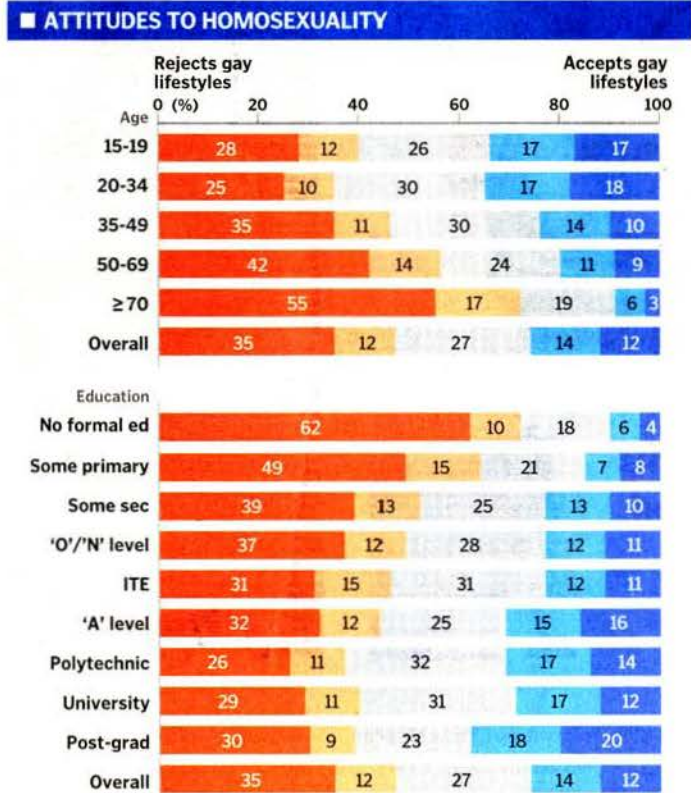
Some believe that once a tipping point is reached, society could move fast in granting gay people more rights.

Former nominated MP Siew Kum Hong points to the United States where in 2008, Californians voted in a piece of legislation called Proposition 8 which banned gay marriage.

Five years later, in June this year, the Supreme Court made decisions that effectively allowed gay marriage in California and allowed gay married couples to receive federal benefits.

But others such as Dr Benjamin Detenber, chair of the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information, believe acceptance here will be a gradual evolution.

Past studies led by Dr Detenber have shown that Singaporeans' attitudes to homosexuals are incrementally becoming more positive.



Source: OUR SINGAPORE CONVERSATION SURVEY

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