

Public Support Split on Section 377A of Singapore Penal Code

By Robert McPhedran

One in three Singaporeans say they are more accepting of same-sex relationships than they were five years ago, but 55% of all Singaporeans still support Section 377A of the Singapore Penal Code.

July 22nd, 2018 marked the 10th year of Pink Dot SG, a not-for-profit movement organised to raise awareness of, and support for, the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) community in Singapore¹.

Since the inception of the movement in 2009, interest in and discussion regarding LGBTQ issues in Singapore has gradually increased over time. (See Figure 1).

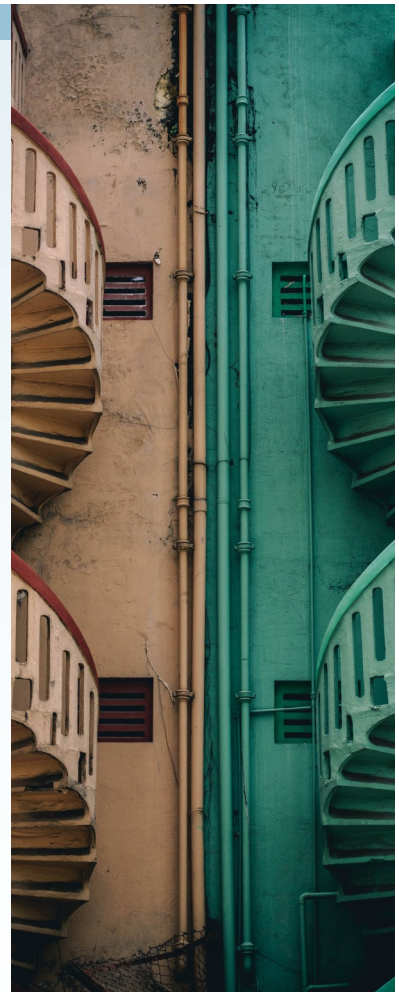


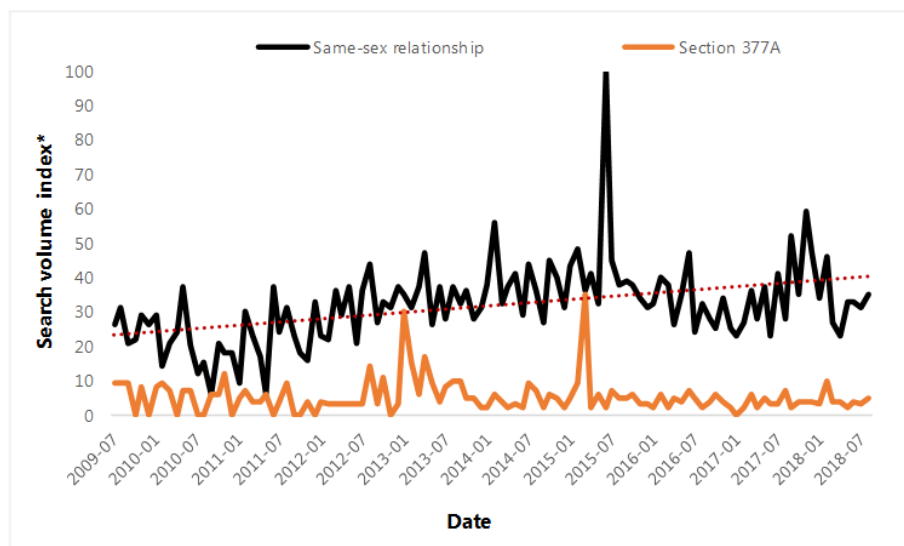
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Key Findings

- 55% of all Singaporeans supported Section 377A of the Singapore Penal Code, while 12% opposed.
- 28% agreed with the statement '*I believe that Singaporeans should be able to participate in same-sex relationships*', while 38% disagreed.
- 33% agreed with the statement '*I am more accepting of same-sex relationships than I was five years ago*', while 35% disagreed.

Figure 1: Google search volume index for the search topic 'Same-sex relationship' and search term 'Section 377A', Singaporeⁱⁱ.

*Index represents search volume in Singapore, with numbers indicating interest relative to the highest point on the chart. A score of 100 denotes maximum search volume, while a score of 50 denotes half the maximum search volume.



“any male person who, in public or private, commits, or abets the commission of, or procures or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of, any act of gross indecency with another male person, shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to two years.”

Section 377A of the Penal Code of Singapore



One key topic within many of these discussions is Section 377A of the Penal Code of Singapore. Section 377A reads: “any male person who, in public or private, commits, or abets the commission of, or procures or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of, any act of gross indecency with another male person, shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to two years.”ⁱⁱⁱ

In February 2017, Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong was asked for his personal stance on Section 377A in an interview with BBC journalist Stephen Sackur.

“My personal view is that if I don't have a problem – this is an uneasy compromise – I am prepared to live with it until social attitudes change.”^{iv}

Until now, there has not been any research into the normative attitudes of Singaporeans towards Section 377A. On this basis, in July - August 2018, Ipsos Public Affairs ran a nationally representative online survey of n=750 Singaporean Citizens and Permanent Residents in which respondents were asked about their attitudes.

Results of this survey follow.

Support for Section 377A of the Penal Code

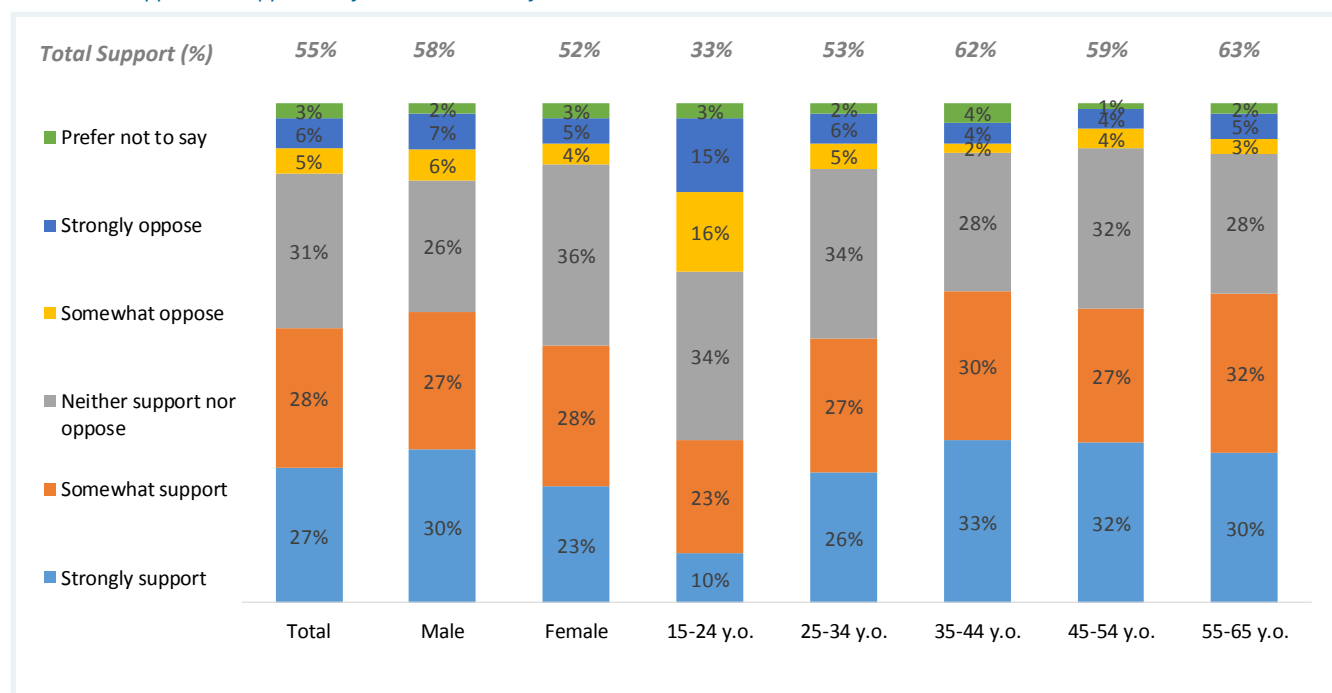
When asked the extent to which they supported or opposed Section 377A of the Penal Code, more than half of all Singaporeans (55%) indicated that they supported the Section, while 12% indicated that they opposed.

Levels of support varied according to gender, with males significantly more likely to have 'strongly' supported Section 377A (30%) than females (23%).

Sentiment also differed by respondents' age:

- those aged 15-24 years were significantly more likely to have opposed the Section (30%); and
- those aged 55-65 were significantly more likely to have supported the Section (63%).

Chart 1: Support and opposition for Section 377A of the Penal Code



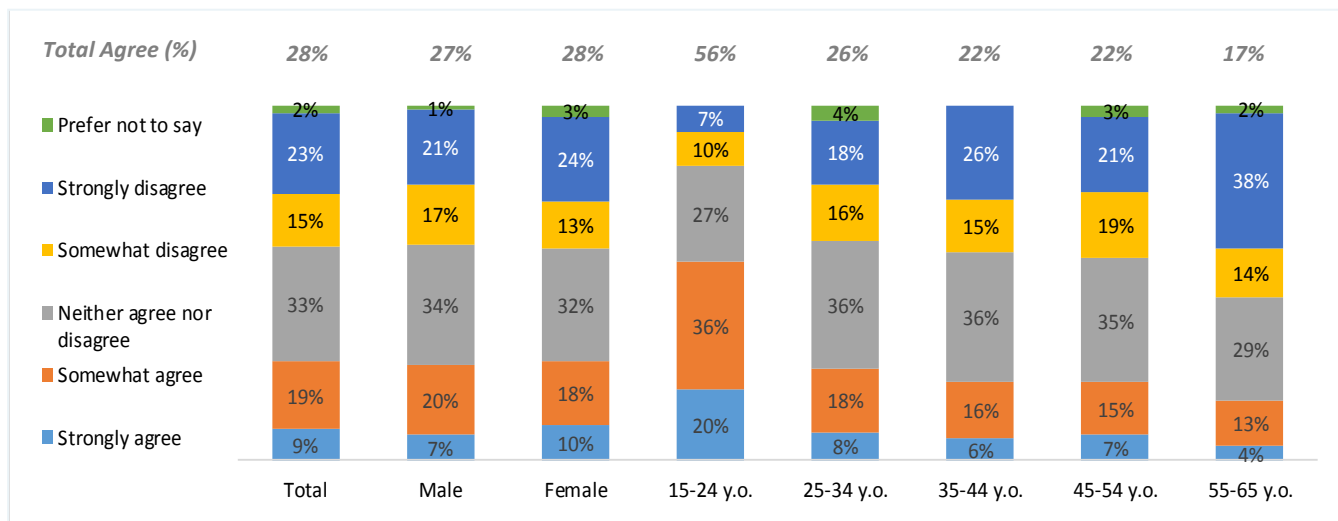
Same-Sex Relationships

Respondents were also asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statement 'I believe that Singaporeans should be able to participate in same-sex relationships'.

Results once again differed according to the age of respondents (see Chart 2):

- those aged 15-24 years were significantly more likely to have agreed with the statement (56%); and
- those aged 55-65 were significantly more likely to have disagreed with the statement (52%).

Chart 2: Agreement and disagreement with the statement 'I believe that Singaporeans should be able to participate in same-sex relationships'

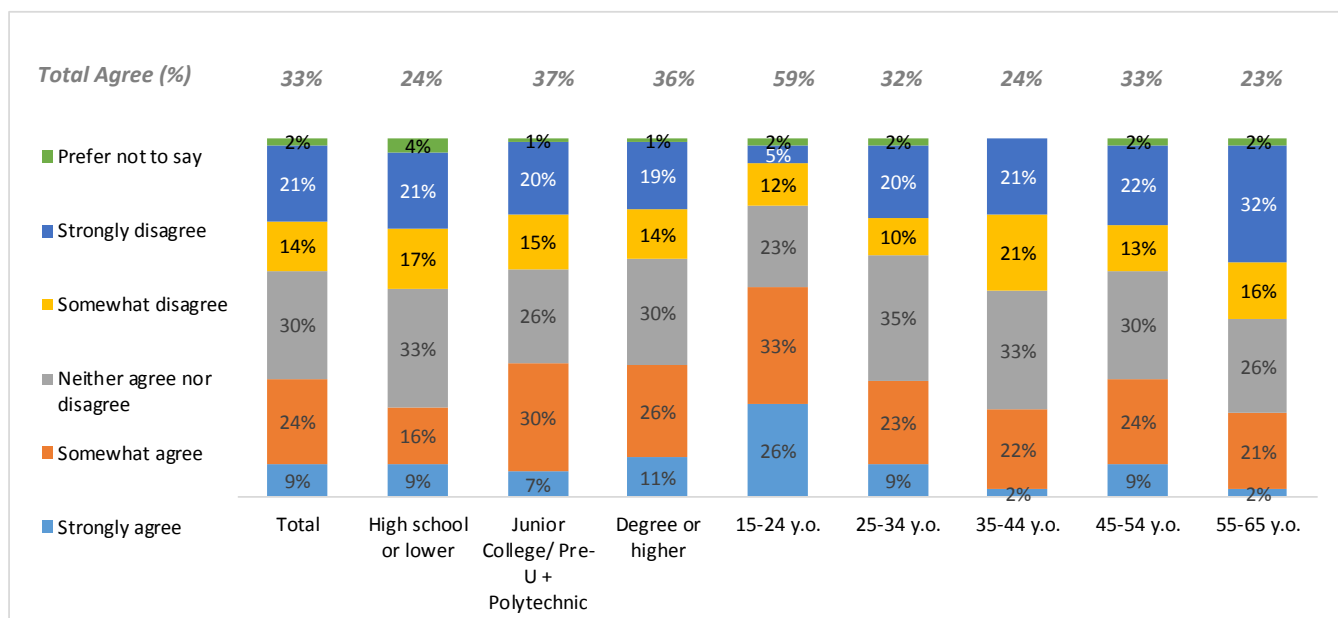


Normative attitudes towards same-sex relationships

In order to determine whether the normative attitudes of Singaporeans towards same-sex relationships are changing over time, respondents were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the statements 'I am more accepting of same-sex relationships than I was five years ago' and 'Most Singaporeans are more accepting of same-sex relationships than they were five years ago'.

As Chart 3 shows, one third (33%) of Singaporeans agreed that they are more accepting of same-sex relationships than they were five years ago, while 35% disagreed. Agreement varied according to respondents' educational attainment and age: those with lower levels of educational attainment (High School education or lower) and older Singaporeans (aged 55-65) were more likely to have disagreed that they are 'more accepting' than they were in the past.

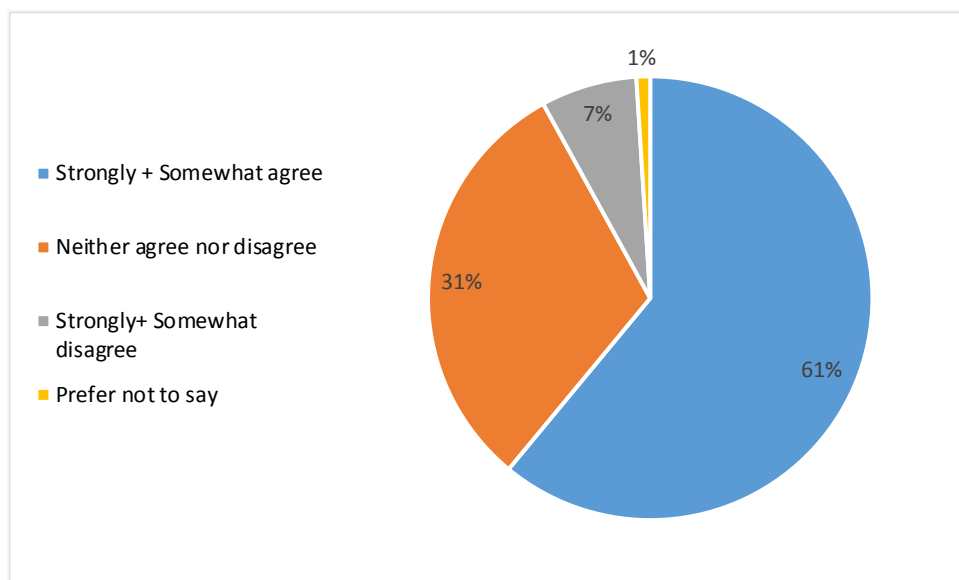
Chart 3: Agreement and disagreement with the statement 'I am more accepting of same-sex relationships than I was five years ago'



Still, not all of the respondents who agreed that they were more accepting of same-sex relationships than they were five years ago, are of the opinion that ‘Singaporeans should be able to participate in same-sex relationships’. There were 31% of these respondents who neither agreed nor disagreed, and 7% disagreed to this statement.

These findings indicate that attitudes towards this issue have changed—and are likely to continue to change—albeit at a slow pace.

Chart 4: Agreement and disagreement with the statement ‘I believe that Singaporeans should be able to participate in same-sex relationships’ by those who say ‘I am more accepting of same-sex relationships than I was five years ago’



Respondents who agreed that they are more accepting of same-sex relationships than they were five years ago were also asked to provide the reason(s) for increased acceptance.

For most, their change in mind-set was due to perceptions of: shifts in Singapore’s social norms with respect to this issue; increased conversation on social media; and more direct exposure to same-sex relationships.

Perception of our Fellow Singaporeans

When asked the extent to which they agreed with the statement ‘Most Singaporeans are more accepting of same-sex relationships than they were five years ago’, four in ten respondents (42%) agreed.

Levels of agreement once again differed according to education and age: those with higher levels of educational attainment (Degree or higher) and younger Singaporeans were significantly more likely to have agreed that most Singaporeans are ‘more accepting’.

A few responses to ‘Why are you more accepting of same-sex relationships than you were in the past?’

Shifts in social norms (locally and globally)

“The world is changing and we must learn to adapt along. I feel that regardless of what other people’s sexual preference/orientation is, as long as they mind their own business it is fine.”

Male, 21

Increased discussion on social media

“More people are willing to share their feelings online (which) makes me realise how suffocated they feel being the ‘un-normal’ people. Everyone should have the right to love anyone, sex should not be an issue.”

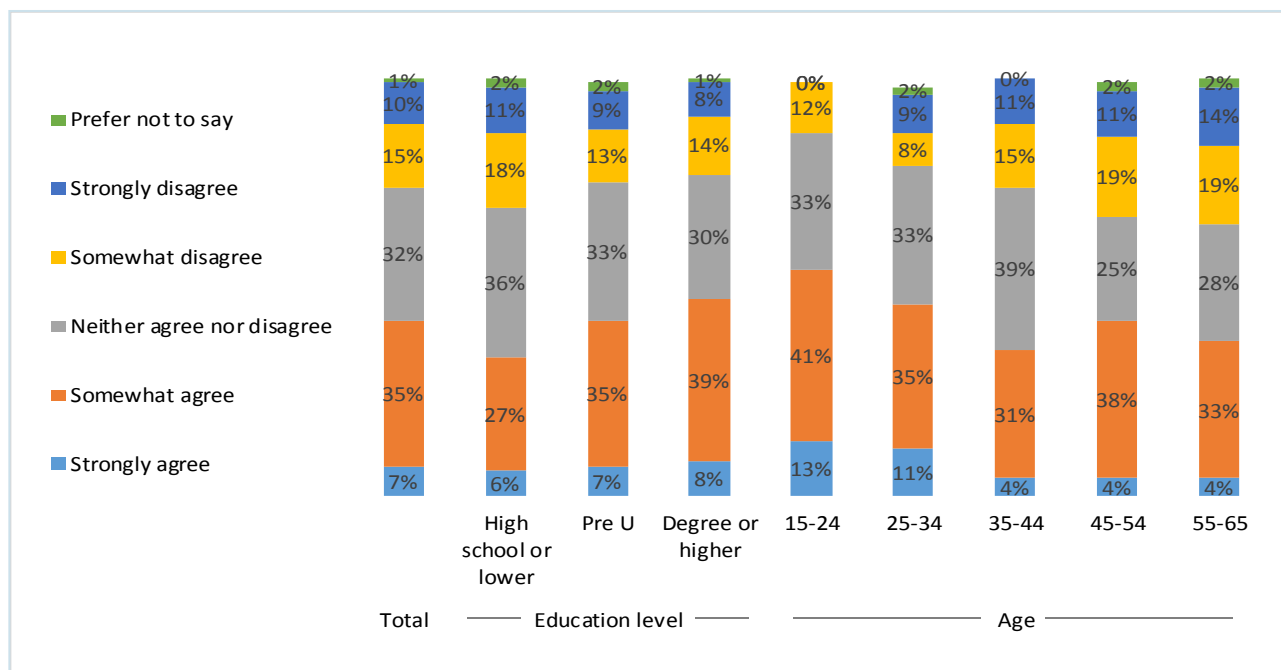
Female, 23

More exposure to same-sex relationships

“I see more of the people I know coming out of the closet, and I have come to accept genetically that’s the way they are, not by choice at birth.”

Male, 45

Chart 5: Agreement with the statement 'Most Singaporeans are more accepting of same-sex relationships than they were five years ago'



This research indicates that the normative values of Singaporeans with respect to LGBTQ issues are gradually shifting. As has occurred in other countries globally, increased dialogue regarding same-sex relationships has contributed to higher acceptance among Singaporeans. This is particularly the case for the younger generation. Nonetheless, as PM Lee has previously noted, a social consensus remains far from being reached.

A few responses to 'Why are you more accepting of same-sex relationships than you were in the past?'

Shifts in social norms (locally and globally)

"In the past, it was very much a taboo and because of the older generations constantly mentioning about the negatives of same-sex relationship. But across the years, I've come to know people in this category, and they are like every other normal human being, seeking their happiness and (they are) really nice and sociable people. So why should we deny them their happiness and shun them away just because they are slightly different? That's what changed my thoughts and made me more accepting of them."

Male, 27

More exposure to same-sex relationships

"I have been exposed to the inequality faced by the LGBT community during my tertiary education as well as meeting people from the community makes me feel that there isn't anything inherently wrong except that it opposed the social norm"

Female, 24

Increased discussion on social media

"I've heard more about same-sex relationships since a few years ago (e.g. learning about Pink Dot), and it made me empathise with them more, as it is often frowned upon, despite homosexuality/bisexuality being completely normal."

Female, 18

About the Study

Questions:

C1. Section 377A of the Singapore penal code states that:

“Any male person who, in public or private, commits, or abets the commission of, or procures or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of, any act of gross indecency with another male person, shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to 2 years.”

To what extent do you support or oppose this Section?

C2. And to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements ...

- I believe that Singaporeans should be able to participate in same-sex relationships
- I am more accepting of same-sex relationships than I was five years ago
- Most Singaporeans are more accepting of same-sex relationships than they were five years ago

C2b. Why are you more accepting of same-sex relationships than you were in the past?

Methodology:

Fieldwork dates: 30 July 2018 – 2 August 2018

Sample size: n=750 respondents

Sample: Singapore Citizens and Permanent Residents, aged 15-65

Method: Online

Statistical reliability: ±4.1% is the maximum margin of sampling error that might apply to this sample (based on a Bayesian Credible Interval)

Analysis: The data has been weighted by age, gender and ethnicity to reflect the population distribution

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References:

ⁱ Pink Dot SG (2018). *About Pink Dot SG*; accessed 25/8/2018 at <https://pinkdot.sg/about-pink-dot-sg/>.

ⁱⁱ Google (2018). *Google Trends*; accessed 23/8/2018 at <https://trends.google.com/trends/>

ⁱⁱⁱ National Library Board (2010). *Penal Code section 377A*; accessed 23/8/2018 at http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_1639_2010-01-31.html

^{iv} Prime Minister's Office (2017). PM Lee Hsien Loong was interviewed by Mr Stephen Sackur for BBC's HARDtalk on 23 February 2017; accessed 24/8/2018 at <https://www.pmo.gov.sg/newsroom/pm-lee-hsien-loongs-interview-bbc-hardtalk>