

The Concept of Homosexuality and Homosexuals Among Late Adolescents

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Abstract

In India, generally studies on dimensions of alternate sexualities, are rare. The social stigma surrounding sexual minorities often acts as a hindrance in the production of research focusing on alternative sexualities. Kerala is the state with the highest literacy rate in India. But, the people of Kerala are still prejudiced towards homosexuality. Recent incidents, such as the legal fight for freedom by lesbian couples when they were separated by family and tortured (Onmanorama, 2022); the queer person's family's refusal to receive his body (The News Minute, 2022), reflects the highly homophobic attitude of the people. The presented study is qualitative and explores the conceptualization of homosexuality among late adolescents in Kerala. The study utilized semi-structured interviews. Using reflexive thematic analysis, four major themes were extracted: (1) Knowledge about homosexuality and homosexuals, (2) Factors determining the attitude toward homosexuality and homosexuals, (3) Behavior toward homosexuality and homosexuals, and (4) Perceived causes of homosexuality. The non-visibility of the LGBTQIA+ community and lack of authentic sources of knowledge were found to be significant barriers to their understanding of homosexuality. Positive portrayal of the LGBTQIA+ community in media and implementation of comprehensive sex education in institutions are recommended to foster a better understanding of homosexuality.

Keywords: Homosexuality, Late adolescents, Qualitative

Introduction

Sexuality is an essential and integral part of all stages of human life, yet the topic is still taboo in almost every country. Talking openly about sexuality is crucial for understanding sexual behavior, the growth and development of our bodies, how we experience our gender roles, what constitutes a healthy relationship, and so on (Westheimer & Lopater, 2001).

The Alberta Society for the Promotion of Sexual Health (ASPSH) indicates that sexuality means many things: feelings about us, roles we play in society and reproduction. It is not limited to how we behave sexually, rather it is the total of our physical, emotional, and spiritual responses, thoughts, and feelings. Sexuality is about who we are and what we do (ASPSH, 2011).

Masters & Johnson (1979) pointed out that the sexuality of humans comprises a broad range of behavior and processes, including the physiological, psychological, social, cultural, political, philosophical, ethical, moral, theological, legal, and spiritual or religious aspects of sex and human sexual behavior.

The terms “sex” and “gender” are often used interchangeably, even though these two are not the same concepts. But these two terms are deeply interrelated. The distinction made between “sex” and “gender”

typically rests on the demarcation of the “biological” and the “social/cultural” (Capdevila & Lazard, 2014).

Gender identity is defined as "the individual's basic conviction of being male or female (Green, 1974). It is the degree to which our biological sex and gender roles are commensurate. Sexual orientation explicitly involves who we desire to have sex with and whose eroticism we prefer and enjoy most (Westheimer & Lopater, 2002). A person's sexual orientation is a psychological characteristic that concerns the sex (or gender) of people that person is sexually attracted to; Specifically, whether they are sexually attracted to people of the same sex, of a different sex, or both or neither. A person is said to be 'heterosexual' if the person is sexually oriented towards a person of different sex. "Homosexual” individuals are sexually oriented towards members of the same sex. At different times and in different cultures, homosexual behavior has been variously approved of, tolerated, punished, and banned. The very early studies and literature on homosexuality mainly attempted to portray homosexuals as physically abnormal or psychologically unhealthy (Hudson & Ricketts, 1980). These attempts consequently led to the fear, dislike, and distrust of homosexual individuals, which is often termed as 'homophobia'. The American Psychiatric Association declassified "ego-syntonic homosexuality" (the condition of a person content with his or her homosexuality) as a mental illness in 1973. Nonetheless, some religious groups continue to emphasize reparative therapy in an attempt to "cure" homosexuality through prayer, counseling, and behavior modification. In most of Africa, Asia, and Latin America, the subject and the behavior are considered taboo, with some slight exceptions in urban areas. In Western countries, attitudes were somewhat more liberal. Although the topic of homosexuality was little discussed in the public forum during the early part of the 20th century, it became a political issue in many Western countries.

In the relatively conservative cultural climate of India, those belonging to any sexual minority are subject to prejudices in our country. Homophobia tends to be perpetuated by spiritual gurus and community leaders. People across cultures have had negative stereotypes, prejudiced attitude, and discrimination toward homosexuality for many years. The concept is changing. However, very gradually, traditional family values and gender role values, important components of our culture, emphasize the continuity of the family lineage, which is regarded as the most significant duty of the family, and emphasize the cultural standards of femininity and masculinity, respectively. Thus, homosexuality may be seen to jeopardize human reproduction and the maintenance of the family line and to violate traditional standards of what men and women should be.

Adolescents' perception of homosexuality plays a crucial role in the stigmatization of the homosexual. Becoming aware of sexual feelings is a normal development task of adolescence. Sometimes adolescents have same-sex feelings or experiences that produce confusion about their sexual orientation. Some adolescents desire and engage in same-sex behavior but do not identify as Lesbian, Gay, or Bisexual, sometimes because of the stigma associated with a non-heterosexual orientation. Some adolescents experience continuing feelings of same-sex attraction but do not engage in any sexual activity or may engage in heterosexual behavior for varying lengths of time (APA, 2008).

Need and significance of the study

Human sexuality is the way people experience and express themselves sexually. Dailey (1981) proposed the distinct areas of sexuality- Sensuality, Intimacy, Identity, Reproduction, Sexualization, and Value-known as ‘the circles of sexuality’. In these circles, reproduction is the area that is mostly studied. Other areas need to be explored. Most studies on attitudes towards homosexuals and homosexuality done in the

past have adopted a quantitative research paradigm. It had only focused on understanding what the attitude is, rather than how the attitude is formed and the factors involved in it. It gives more importance to numbers and frequency. Hence, there is a need for a qualitative inquiry into this area of research, which the current study tries to address, as it will be going in-depth into the experiences.

In India, generally, studies on dimensions of alternate sexualities are rare, if not almost absent. The social non-acceptance and stigma surrounding homosexuality and other sexual minorities often act as a hindrance in the production of research focusing on alternative sexualities. The area that is mildly explored like this is transgender. When the state Kerala is considered, there is a dearth of studies which have psychologically explored the attitude towards homosexuality and homosexuals. The condition of the homosexual community in a country like India is not so progressive. They are often treated with prejudice and are mostly stigmatized due to their sexual orientation. LGBT people in India report experiences of violence, rejection, and discrimination, including in employment, education, health care, and access to social services. High rates of poverty are found among LGBT people. Public health studies find evidence of health disparities that are linked to stigma and exclusion. Rates of the prevalence of depression, suicidal thinking, and HIV among LGBT people are higher than rates for the general population.

Kerala is the state with the highest literacy rate. But the saddest part is that the people of Kerala are still prejudiced towards homosexuality and homosexuals. Recent incidents that happened in Kerala indicate the highly homophobic nature of the people. When scientific literature concerning attitude towards homosexuality is concerned, there are no published studies that have studied the attitude of people of Kerala towards homosexuality and homosexuals. A qualitative study looking into the attitude towards the homosexual communities will be significant in understanding the factors that contribute to the negative attitudes and will be significant in making changes in the condition of homosexuals of our country.

METHOD

The present study was a qualitative study utilizing a semi-structured interview with late adolescents in the age group of 18-21 years, studying in the Calicut University Campus, Kerala. Semi-structured interviews allow us to control the line of questioning and guide the research more effectively (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Purposive sampling was employed for selecting participants for the study. The interviews were conducted in Malayalam. Malayalam is a widely spoken language in Kerala, and all the participants were permanent residents of Kerala. The interviews were conducted in October 2023.

Reflexivity statement

In qualitative research, the researcher is heavily involved in a sustained experience with the study participants (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Consequently, it becomes vital to reflect on our positionality. Rather than problematizing homosexuality and homosexuals, the study aimed to explore the conceptualization of homosexuality and factors that influence the participants' attitudes towards homosexuality. The author belongs to a cisgender, heterosexual identity. The research team was affirming diverse genders and sexualities. From these perspectives, the study sought to de-pathologize homosexuality throughout this research. The author undertook the analysis of these data as a partial fulfillment of requirements for her Degree of Masters in Psychology. The analysis process was overseen by experienced faculties and researchers familiar with the field.

Participants

Participants (N=8) were recruited from the Calicut University Campus and are aged between 18 and 21 years at the time of the interview. Individual demographics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Participant demographics

Name	Age	Self-described gender	Interview method	Area of residence
P1	18	Male	face-to-face	Rural
P2	21	Female	face-to-face	Rural
P3	19	Female	face-to-face	Urban
P4	20	Female	face-to-face	Rural
P5	21	Female	face-to-face	Rural
P6	21	Male	face-to-face	Rural
P7	20	Male	face-to-face	Rural
P8	21	Male	face-to-face	Rural

Procedure

Late adolescent people were eligible to participate in the study, who were aged between 18 and 21 years (Arnett, 2015), were fluent in Malayalam, and lived in Kerala. A convenient sample of approximately 10-12 late adolescents was anticipated, considering previous research conducted in the field of study. However, as this study was exploratory and analysis was conducted across participant responses, 8 late adolescent people were ultimately interviewed to attain sufficient information. In addition, the researcher didn't identify any new codes pertinent to the study after the seventh interview.

Interviews were conducted in October 2023. All participants were interviewed face-to-face. The interview schedule was developed by reviewing prior research in the field of study and with the help of discussions with experts to ensure questions were relevant and appropriately worded. All interviews were audio recorded and the data was stored on a secure digital drive for five months and then deleted. Formal consent for data storage and recording was asked verbally.

Participant information and consent forms were made available online before the interview. Participants provided consent by clicking through and filling out the consent form sent via their official mail ID. At the beginning of each interview, the interviewer ensured that participants understood the research and could complete the interview. The researcher spent considerable time building a rapport with participants, which involved showing genuine interest, empathy, and respect. Although the interviewer took some small notes during interviews, these were not subsequently developed into detailed field notes but were incorporated into the findings.

Participants were given no remunerations for their participation in the study. Interviews ranged from 15-20 minutes in duration. No repeat interviews or member checking of interview data were conducted. No participants withdrew consent during or after their interviews. After completing the interview, the interviewer thanked the participants for their cooperation throughout the study. Clear and respectful communication between the researcher and the participant helped in eliciting detailed and meaningful data. Research findings genuinely reflected the participants' perspectives rather than the researcher's preconceived notions.

Data analysis

Interview data were professionally transcribed into verbatim. Data were qualitatively analyzed using Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analysis informed by a social constructivist framework to gain a deeper understanding of the data to extract themes identified from the participant's responses. Thematic analysis is a flexible, yet rigorous method of qualitative analysis that allows for the discovery of patterns within a set of qualitative data. The researcher undertook the reflexive thematic analysis of the interview data. The researcher initially familiarized the data then coded the data in English without losing the meaning then combined similar codes into themes and generated sub-themes for some of the themes. Codes were revised responsively throughout the analysis. Themes were refined and revised to identify those most pertinent to the conceptualization of homosexuality and homosexuals.

Results

Four major themes were extracted: (1) Knowledge about homosexuality and homosexuals, (2) Factors determining the attitude towards homosexuality and homosexuals, (3) Behaviour towards homosexuality and homosexuals, and (4) Perceived causes of homosexuality. These themes and related subthemes are outlined in Figure 1.

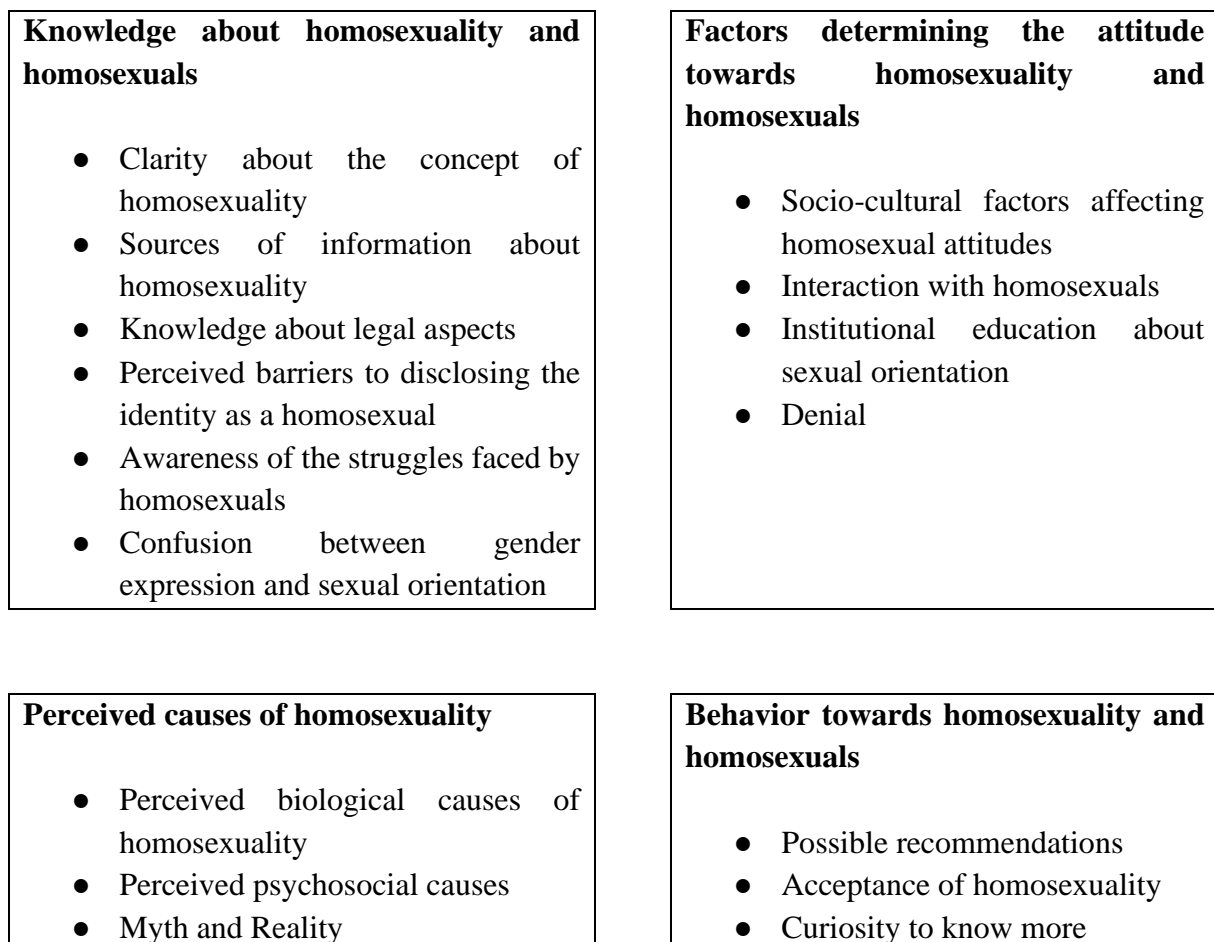


Figure 1. Overview of themes and subthemes

Knowledge about homosexuality and homosexuals

The major theme extracted from the thematic analysis was the knowledge about homosexuality and homosexuals. Knowledge about homosexuality is found to be less among the participants. The participants relied mainly on social media platforms for acquiring information. A lack of authentic information was pointed out. The presented theme had six sub-themes namely clarity about the concept of homosexuality, sources of information about homosexuality, knowledge about legal aspects, perceived barriers to disclosing the identity as a homosexual, awareness of the struggles faced by homosexual individuals, and, confusion between gender expression and sexual orientation.

Clarity about the concept of homosexuality

All the participants were asked about what sexual orientation is and define homosexuality in their terms. Every participant except one responded to the question. The participant who had not responded to the question was a male aged 21, and when asked to define sexual orientation, he was uncomfortable. He had begun laughing and deviated from the question, which indicated his inhibition to talk about sexual orientation in the open. The other participant, who is also male aged 21, had said that he doesn't know what the term 'sexual orientation' means per se.

Three of the participants struggled to define and put forth what they knew about sexual orientation and homosexuality and their lack of knowledge was evident in their statements, even when the investigator was not asking for a very formal definition. Among the other participants, two of the participants had defined homosexuality in terms of the act of physical intercourse only. Three participants had given a better version of the definition of sexuality encompassing some components of sexual orientation and homosexuality. However, the definition was indeed lacking in socio-cultural and psychological aspects. The participants who defined it had given more emphasis to the physical aspect of sexuality. The participants' responses highlight that there was a lack of clarity regarding the concept of sexual orientation among the participants and also an overlap between the different concepts related to sexual orientation. On many occasions, participants used gender in place of sex and vice versa,

Sources of information about homosexuality

The participants were inquired about the sources through which they got to know about the concept of homosexuality. Responses indicated that the major sources through which the participants got to know about homosexuality for the first time were 'media' and peer groups. In the media itself, a major source of information about homosexuality was reported to be social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram. The participants reported that they got to know about physical aspects of sexual orientation like physical attraction, physical intercourse, reproduction, and so on from their peer groups. Participants' responses indicated that they discuss the information they accessed through various media like movies, the internet, and social media platforms with their peers. Other forms of media like the internet, news, magazines, etc. also contributed information regarding homosexuality but were very insignificant compared to movies and social media. One of the participants said the following:

"I heard the term 'homosexuality' for the first time from my friends. During those days, we were in plus two and this kind of talk happens in boy's group discussions. It is not ok to share such talks with girls, right? I think it got clear recently what the term means while I watched the series "SEX EDUCATION".

(P1, Personal communication, October 2023)

It is clear from the participants' responses that there exists stigma and taboo on the topic and participants are reluctant to talk about sexuality in open platforms. Participants also reported their beliefs about avoiding talks related to homosexuals in their family.

Knowledge about legal aspects

None of the participants are aware of the legal aspects of homosexuality. One participant reported that homosexuality is seen as a sexual offense.

"I read the news headline yesterday about decriminalizing homosexuality in India. But I don't know much about it. (silence for 2 seconds). Oh yes, there is a couple A & N, the girls living together... It was a big issue now, right? Don't know what the court finally decided."

(P4, Personal communication, October 2023)

Some of the participants are known about the legalization of homosexuality but no further details are known. The comments illustrate how keenly participants value the legal system and media in sharing knowledge.

Perceived barriers to disclosing the identity as a homosexual

The participant responses indicated a lot of perceived barriers to disclosing the identity as a homosexual. The participants' responses reflected that a major barrier to reduced awareness on homosexuality was the negative portrayal of homosexuals in the media. Participants also reported that fear of societal negligence and isolation has been a reason for staying undisclosed about their identity. Lack of awareness about the concept among educated individuals too impacts negligence. The participants' responses indicated misconceptions about the concept. One of the participants reported that;

"I had a friend at my college. He said that he is a homosexual. But since he belonged to an orthodox family, this was kept secret. Somehow a group in our college came to know about the matter and he was attacked brutally at the time of the college fest by many people outside the college. Our college belonged to a remote religious area. It might be them who attacked him. He couldn't come to college then. He dropped his studies and was sent abroad by his family. I have no contact with him now, not our classmates."

(P7, Personal communication, October 2023)

Hence fear of physical and emotional attacks from society as well as the family kept homosexual individuals from disclosing their identity. Participants reported fear of security to be another major barrier. One of the participants reported an experience of his friend that the fear of being homeless and insecure in society after disclosing his homosexual identity keeps him in the closet. After achieving financial security and better living conditions, he may disclose his identity in public.

Despite having legal affirmations regarding homosexuals, stigma from the side of society still contributes to insecurity in homosexual people.

Awareness of the struggles faced by homosexuals

When participants were inquired about the struggles faced by homosexuals, isolation and rejection were commonly found responses. Emotional abuse they undergo from family, friends, and others was also reported. Victimized homosexual individuals for no reason is common. People as a society consider them as 'the other' and always put an eye on them. The conflict they're undergoing is hardly represented on any media platform. Society's taboo towards homosexuality as a crime usually contributes to creating a negative picture of homosexuals such as generalizing a criminal behavior attributed to all other homosexuals when one has committed a crime. One of the female participants reported that females, who

deviate from the existing gender norms, are often treated more accepted than their male counterparts. The males who deviate from the traditional gender norms are treated with stigma and prejudice. The so-called masculinity is destroyed in gay relations. So, males are more prone to attacks from society.

Confusion between gender expression and sexual orientation

From the participants' responses, a commonly found problem was confusion between gender expression and sexual orientation. They misunderstood transgender people as homosexuals. Their responses reflected more conforming to a transgender rather than homosexual. A lack of awareness about gender identity and sexual orientation spectrum is evident here. The wrong terms and expressions in several parts of the responses also indicate this misunderstanding.

Factors determining the attitude towards homosexuality and homosexuals

The second major theme that had been extracted from the analysis of the data collected from the participants was the factors related to the attitudes towards homosexuals and homosexuality. This theme includes the factors which play a part in the attitude formation of the participants, towards homosexual individuals and homosexuality. The theme had four sub-themes namely socio-cultural factors affecting homosexual attitudes, interaction with homosexuals, institutional education about sexual orientation, and denial.

Socio-cultural factors affecting homosexual attitudes

The participants' responses indicated that societal norms regarding sexuality were identified as a socio-cultural factor affecting the attitudes towards homosexuality. Society views heterosexuality as the 'normal' and homosexuality as the "abnormal". So, homosexuals are viewed as abnormal and often treated with prejudice and stigma. This factor was evident in the responses of the participants.

The social desirability of the individual is another socio-cultural factor affecting the attitudes towards homosexuals and homosexuality. Negative attitudes were seen among the participants who have high social desirability than those having low social desirability. The male participants had higher social desirability than female participants and had shown more negative attitudes towards homosexuals than females. Among the four male participants, only one participant talked about homosexuality in detail. He put a welcoming attitude towards homosexuals while others described it as a sin and inappropriate activity. Those participants showed hesitation while responding.

Attitude of the family is another socio-cultural factor affecting the attitudes towards homosexuals and homosexuality. The participants who belong to families having negative attitudes towards homosexuals and homosexuality endorsed a similar negative attitude. The family of the participants held a negative attitude towards homosexuality. The effect of family's attitude is reflected in the participants' attitude towards homosexuality and homosexuals. Religion of the individual can also be treated as a socio-cultural factor affecting the attitudes towards homosexuals and homosexuality. Two of the participants stated that some religions believe homosexuality is a sin. One participant argued that his religion doesn't view homosexuality as a sin but being transgender is a sin and he views homosexuality as a sin.

Interaction with homosexuals

Interaction with any homosexual individual was identified as another factor which is related to the attitude towards homosexuality and homosexuals. The participants were asked whether they had any friends or

acquaintances who were homosexual. One male participant had direct contact with a homosexual individual. When the participants were asked regarding indirect contact with homosexuals, one of the female participants reported that she had interacted with homosexuals on social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram. The attitude of these participants was more positive towards homosexuality and homosexuals than the other participants. However, one female participant had a negative personal experience with a homosexual, she also reported a negative attitude towards homosexuals. The interaction of the participants with the homosexuals was found to be related to the attitude towards homosexuals and homosexuality. The association made from experience has contributed to developing attitudes toward homosexuals. This finding is supported by many studies such as studies conducted by Ardman, et.al (2020), Calzo and Ward (2009), Heinze and Horn (2009), and Raiz (2006), who found a positive association between contact with homosexuals and positive attitude towards homosexuals and homosexuality.

Institutional education about sexual orientation

Institutional education can impact the attitude towards homosexuals. The institutions considered here were home and educational institutions like school, and college. Most of the participants reported that they did not receive proper scientific education or awareness about sexuality at their homes. They expressed that they had never discussed and would never find it comfortable to discuss matters related to sexuality with their parents. The school curriculum per se didn't address educating the students about sexual orientation. The high school curriculum has topics such as changes in puberty among boys and girls and the human reproduction system but has inadequate information regarding sexual orientation and gender expressions. The participants indicated that most of their teachers had difficulties taking those classes and had skipped those portions or didn't teach properly.

“We had chapters regarding sexual reproduction and secondary and primary changes in males and females and menstruation during our school days. Back then teachers were in a hurry to complete that chapter. We didn't receive any clear explanations or clarity regarding those topics. And when we asked, the teacher sarcastically said that we are more knowledgeable than her in those topics and didn't explain.”

(P1, Personal communication, October 2023)

Denial

Denial of existence of different sexual orientations other than heterosexuality can be an influencing factor. Two of the participants reported that homosexuality is a constructed concept. It is an imaginary concept and doesn't exist. Some participants reported that it is Individuals' thoughts that play a role in choosing to be a homosexual: being homosexual is a choice. This indicates acceptance of heterosexual acceptance and ignorance towards homosexuality.

Perceived causes of homosexuality

The third theme extracted from the obtained data includes perceived causes of homosexuality. These perceptions have significant implications for how homosexuality is viewed socially, legally, and morally, influencing attitudes, acceptance, and rights for homosexual individuals. Understanding these perceptions helps explain the shifting societal attitudes toward homosexuality. This includes sub-themes such as **perceived biological causes, perceived psychosocial causes, and myths and reality.**

Perceived biological causes of homosexuality

The participant reported that homosexuality can be caused due to either biological causes alone or psycho-social causes or due to the interaction of these. The analysis of the participant responses showed that there are mainly two perceived biological causes of homosexuality. Participants reported that one of the perceived biological causes of homosexuality is that homosexuality is an inborn trait. The other biological cause of homosexuality perceived by the participants was hormonal variations. Cook, C.H. (2020) research on the causes of human sexual orientation has been marshaled in support of predetermined and opposing theological viewpoints. While acknowledging that there is still much that is not known, Cook, C.H. (2000) clearly shows that a combination of genetic and environmental factors contributes to sexual orientation. However, these two perceived biological causes seem to be a myth. The exact cause of homosexuality is still under scientific study.

Perceived psychosocial causes

As per participants' responses, a person can be homosexual as a result of certain psycho-social causes. The perceived psycho-social causes, the participants reported need not be causing homosexuality all the time. The participants' responses indicated that the interaction of certain psycho-social factors or interaction between certain psycho-social factors and already existing biological causes can be causes of homosexuality. Lack of interaction with the opposite sex was reported as one perceived cause of homosexuality, by the participants. Another perceived cause included the exposure to negative personal experiences with opposite-sex individuals. A participant had reported one scenario which can cause hatred towards individuals of the opposite sex, which can gradually become a cause for homosexual orientation in people. One case reported by the participants which can lead to hatred towards the opposite sex was related to parenting. The participants reported that abusive parenting, toxic parenting, or lack of warmth and love by the parent of the opposite sex will lead the child to have negative feelings like hatred towards that parent. The child may at times generalize that hatred towards the whole individuals of opposite sex and thus the child in their adulthood or adolescence may become a homosexual person.

Myth and Reality

Participants reported a lot of myths related to homosexuality. Many myth conceptions are reported as the perceived cause of homosexuality. A long-standing misconception reported by the participants is that people choose to be homosexual, often influenced by environmental or social factors such as peer pressure, media exposure, or even rebellious tendencies. Cultural denial of homosexuals and labeling it as a mental disorder are myth-conceptions. Most of the participants believe that any deviation from societal norms can be abnormal. Family's negligence attitude and isolation are myth concepts still followed. Some participants indicated that being homosexual is a Western influence. In some non-Western cultures, homosexuality is viewed as a modern Western phenomenon, introduced through media or foreign influence, and is often rejected as incompatible with traditional values. In reality, homosexuals are to be accepted and normalized. The sense of satisfaction, love, pleasure, and relief they obtain from their relationship as with any heterosexual relationship needs to be normalized.

Behavior towards homosexuality and homosexuals

The fourth and final theme extracted from the obtained data is the behavior of individuals towards homosexuals. This included sub-themes such as possible recommendations, acceptance of homosexuals,

and curiosity to know more.

Possible recommendations

The possible recommendations from the participant responses indicate an accepting behavior towards the homosexual individuals. The need for strong legal support and institutional awareness reported the participants' desire to accept and support homosexuals. Inclusion of accurate and authentic content in classrooms can help increase teenage awareness of sexual orientation and related concepts. Participants reported that individual abilities and creativities are to be appreciated more rather than their sexual orientation.

Acceptance of homosexuality

Most of the participants, when asked about their reaction to a homosexual friend or a family member, came up with many reactions. One of the female participants reported that she will ask their friend for explanations for her homosexual orientation. The responses of three of the participants indicated that since they have no idea about the concept, they are not bothered about it. Three of the participants were accepted completely. They won't have any issues with the friend's homosexual identity and will be accepting that. They will be supportive of the friend and will help the friend whenever the need arises.

Curiosity to know more

Participants' reports of curiosity to know more about homosexuality can be seen as a positive acceptance. Their initiative to ask related questions and curiosity to seek more information and support systems are also to be appreciated. All these responses call for a need for sex education during adolescence or young adulthood. By providing sex education, a lot of information and facts can be understood, such as; homosexuality is normal; homosexuality is not problematic; society must be inclusive; and do not isolate or reject homosexuals. Participants report that, by providing sex education society will be able to attain a wider positive growth through sensitivity. Thereby, it will be helpful to identify if any problem exists and intervene through it effectively. Gradually individuals with various sexual orientations and gender expressions can cohabit as healthy individuals in the same society. While having such a healthy cohabitation, society will be able to utilize every individual's resources effectively.

Discussion

The study aimed to explore the extent of awareness and understanding of the concept of homosexuality and homosexuals among late adolescents. The conceptualization of homosexuality may vary with the acquired information from family, peers, and society. Several factors affect the formation of the concept of homosexuality. Late adolescents mainly engage with peers to share and gain information. The major aim of the study was to understand the conceptualization of homosexuality and homosexuals among the late adolescents studying in university campus. However, due to the stigma and taboo existing in society regarding homosexuality, the researcher had to initiate the interview with 'sexual orientation' and sequentially move to 'homosexuality'. The participants were asked questions regarding their understanding of 'homosexuality' and 'homosexuals' and their awareness regarding those terms. The participants' response holds important potential on sources of information that play a major role in forming concepts. Authentic and pure information is hardly known. Since modern media and technologies run towards financial gains, the contents they deliver to the public require to be reasoned and evaluated. Within the

limited participants of the study, many adolescents are unaware of the concept of homosexuality and many are curious to know more clear and valid information about homosexuality.

The researcher observed that participants who had less awareness of homosexuality hesitated to respond to the study initially, they consciously avoided using the terms like ‘sexuality’, ‘sex’, and similar terms. Among the participants, female participants had a better understanding of the concept of homosexuality when compared to the male participants. The better understanding of homosexuality in female participants indicated an affirmative attitude toward homosexuals. Some of the previous studies support the idea that females are less homophobic than males. Women generally endorse fewer homophobic attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors compared to men (James et al., 2014). Mark et al. (1997) revealed that women endorsed fewer homophobic attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors than men. Julie (2008) has shown that women have more positive attitudes towards homosexuals than men. Participants who had pursued their studies in biology, literature, and humanities-related fields had a better understanding of homosexuality than the participants from science and technology-related fields. This may be due to the non-visibility and under-representation of the LGBTQIA+ community as well as the lack of content in the curriculum. Existing studies have highlighted how sexual minority, transgender, or gender non-conforming individuals face significant barriers to inclusion in STEM including hostility, homophobia, and transphobia (Bilimoria & Stewart, 2009; Freeman, 2020; Mattheis et al., 2019).

The findings of the present study indicate that knowledge about homosexuality is related to the attitude towards homosexuals and homosexuality. Those who knew about homosexuality tended to have a more positive attitude towards homosexuals. This finding is similar to that of Ardman, et.al (2020) and Harris et.al (1995). Some of the participants responded that there should be more sexuality-related content added to the curriculum. Media is found to be a major source of knowledge about homosexuality and affects the attitude towards homosexuality and homosexuals. This finding is supported by the previous findings of Calzo and Ward (2009), and Raiz (2006) in their studies. They found that attitudes towards homosexuality are influenced by the media.

The findings of the study indicate that social norms of the participants’ society influenced the attitude towards homosexuality and homosexuals. Attitudes of the family towards homosexuality and homosexuals are found to be related to the participants’ responses. The family of the participants held a negative attitude towards homosexuality. The effect of the family’s attitude is reflected in the participants’ attitudes towards homosexuality and homosexuals. This finding is aligned with the findings of Raiz (2006) who found that attitudes towards homosexuality are influenced by family.

Participants reflected on different perceived barriers to disclosing the identity of homosexuals. The major ones were societal norms and negligence that impacted the coming-out of homosexuals. The heteronormative society and stereotypic culture created a prejudice towards homosexuals. Sánchez et al. (2023) aligned with these findings which pointed out many barriers to discussing sexuality with parents and others. Participants’ responses indicated that one’s religion can influence his/her/their attitude towards homosexuality. This finding is supported by research studies that showed that religious persons are generally more prejudiced against homosexuals than non-religious persons (Schulte & Battle, 2004; Adamczyk & Pitt, 2009).

Misconceptions about the origins of sexual orientation have fueled stigma and discrimination, while modern research provides a clearer, more factual understanding of homosexuality. Many participants reported that homosexuality is a Western influence. But in reality, homosexuality has existed in all cultures and historical periods. Records of same-sex relationships and diverse sexual identities can be found in

ancient civilizations. The idea that it is a "Western import" is a cultural myth that ignores the universal presence of homosexuality throughout human history. Some believe that being exposed to LGBTQIA+ individuals or media representation of homosexuality might "spread" or influence others to become homosexual. Sexual orientation is not contagious, nor can it be learned by exposure. Gonta et al. (2017) show that LGBTQIA+ representations in media promote acceptance and understanding of diverse sexual identities. Greater exposure to positive homosexual content in media will lead to more positive attitudes towards the subject among audience members.

From the participants' responses, it is indicated that there is a need to improve institutional education on sexual orientation among adolescents. There is a need to break the stigma and to popularize open conversations regarding sexual orientation. A recent UNESCO global report (UNESCO, 2022) provided a panoramic view of countries regarding their relative progress in the implementation of sex education. India lags behind many other underdeveloped and small countries, such as Congo, Kenya, Ghana, and Sudan, to name a few. Interestingly, in the majority of these countries, sex education begins at the primary level of schooling whereas, in India, the concept of sex education is considered only from secondary school (Pandey & Rao, 2023).

Implementing comprehensive sex education in schools that includes LGBTQIA+ topics, and teaching respect for diversity and inclusivity can foster awareness of gender and sexual diversities. Public figures and influencers can play a role in normalizing LGBTQ+ acceptance by publicly supporting LGBTQIA+ rights and equality. Highlighting stories of LGBTQIA+ individuals and their contributions to society can humanize the issue and dispel stereotypes. Since media play a major role in society, increasing positive representation of LGBTQIA+ individuals in media, such as TV shows, films, and advertising, may help to normalize diverse sexual orientations and relationships. With these measures, it might be possible to foster inclusivity, understanding, and acceptance in society, creating a more positive attitude toward homosexuality.

Strengths and Limitations

As the study aimed to deeply explore the conceptualization of homosexuality and homosexuals among a limited number of participants, these findings cannot be taken as representative of all late adolescents in Kerala. The geographic location was limited to Kerala. Consequently, the extent to which these findings may be transferable to culturally or linguistically diverse populations is unknown. Findings from the study provide insight that social media plays a significant role in providing information related to homosexuality. Hence the authenticity of information should be assured. The findings reflected on the existing myths and misconceptions in society about the LGBTQIA+ community. Future studies can focus on deeply understanding the myths and reflecting on reality. Awareness programs should be implemented to create awareness among the public. Multiple other data collection and analysis methods could have been employed for this study. Future research separately exploring the conceptualization of homosexuality among LGBTQIA+ can effectively reflect on the awareness among them. Exploring measures to convey authentic information about the LGBTQIA+ community could impact public awareness and attitude towards the community.

Conclusion

The present study attempted to explore the conceptualization of homosexuality and homosexuals among late adolescents. The findings revealed that the knowledge and awareness about homosexuality and

homosexuals among late adolescence is found to be less. It is highlighted that there exists a lack of clarity among the different terms related to sexual orientation and gender identity reflected in the participants' responses, which may be due to a lack of related knowledge. The participants' responses indicate a lack of authentic sources of information. There is a need to improve institutional education on sexual orientation among adolescents. The participants' responses call for breaking the stigma and a need to popularize open conversations regarding sexual orientation. There are differences among participants in understanding concepts of sexual orientation and gender identity, concerning their education field. Participants in the science field are less aware of sexual orientation while participants from literature and humanities are comparatively more knowledgeable. Lack of sex education among adolescents was found to be a major concern. Inclusion of the authentic content and proper and effective teaching of sex education must be added to the curriculum.

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