

Perception of the LGBT Community among Old Age

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the study was to explore how older males aged 60 and above would perceive the LGBT community while taking into consideration the different factors that would affect their perception. Perception towards the LGBT community varies greatly across different cultures and age groups. The data was collected by the qualitative method of a semi-structured telephonic interview and then analysed using thematic analysis. The sample consisted of 7 male participants who were selected depending on their prior knowledge of the LGBT community. A few of the major themes that were reflected in the findings were the overall factors that affected their perception towards the LGBT community: impact of heteronormativity, religiosity and spirituality, level of awareness, personal experiences and encounters. The findings showed that most older individuals had a more biased perception towards the LGBT community which was mostly in accordance with higher religiosity, lack of awareness and the heteronormative culture embedded within them. The study can help psychologists, researchers, doctors, and social activists to acquire a deeper understanding on how prejudice against the LGBT community occurs and come up with ways to resolve them.

Keywords: *Old Age, LGBT Community, Heteronormativity, Gender Perception, Cultural Change*

Age and generational gaps often play a crucial role in the perception of different communities as it affects their understanding and normative beliefs. Especially in India, where homosexuality was only recently legalised in 2018, it could be understandable as to why the generations before could not exactly comprehend the existence of the LGBTQ. This research explores the older generation's perception towards the LGBT community specifically those aged 60 and above. Perception in psychology can be defined as the process of attaining awareness or understanding sensory information. Perception usually occurs through three stages: selection, organization and interpretation. The main role that perception plays in this research is how during the stages of organization, people tend to categorize others into biased boxes of patriarchal gender norms usually influenced by cultural and religious factors. Generational gaps often induce prejudices mainly because of the difference in the way each generation was brought up. A great example would be the instance of how the Boomer generation (ages 57-75) were brought up in contrast to the millennials.

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Several social scientists have attempted to explain where the negativity towards the LGBTQ+ community comes from either through theoretical or empirical data. One instance of a theoretical speculation would be when the individual talked more about their own personal prejudices towards the community rather than the society's perception. William James (1890) deduced from his own personal viewpoint that the images or idea of same sex tends to be repulsive and is more prominent in men than in women. And he proceeded to assume that in cultures where homosexuality was normalised, the instinctual repulsion had been habitually overcome. Psychoanalysts attempted to cover a more socio-psychological approach. Freud (1905) said that the heterosexuality did not arise from biological causes but was rather influenced by the combined fact of homosexuality being prohibited and the individual's early experiences with their parents. He asserted that all men were attracted to the same sex parents, but this attraction was usually repressed to complete the Oedipus Complex. Sandor Ferenczi (1914) built on Freud's theory and stated that men's feelings of repulsion towards homosexuality are basically reaction-formations.

Older individuals tend to adhere to patriarchal gender norms like male dominance, female submission and heteronormative behaviour. Since LGBTQ+ community tend to break these patriarchal gender norms, it induces a negative perspective upon them. People who tend to be more biased or prejudiced are more likely to be conservative and religious. Researchers have concluded that these individuals often manifest negativity or guilt about sexuality and are less sexually permissive. Stereotypes that assume transgenders to be hostile or homosexuals as mentally ill also contribute to the prejudices faced by the LGBTQ+. Then there is the factor of envy that most researchers studied where heterosexuals envy the sexual freedom enjoyed by the homosexuals which is then converted to unconscious hostility. Cory (1959) in his similar study proposed that negativity towards the opposite sex homosexuals arise from them not being potential partners. Then there are those who assume immortality comes from procreation and since homosexuals are stereotyped as those who hate to procreate, it promotes their own irrational fear of extinction.

There is an imminent lack of research on the LGBTQ+ community relating to the perception of older individuals. Though there is sufficient research on the attitudes of individual towards the LGBTQ+ community, there hasn't been any papers that use older individuals for their sample size. This could be either because of them belonging to a more biased age group or the fact that most of them do not really understand the LGBTQ+ community. There is little knowledge about the stigmas and prejudice faced by those who identify as LGBTQ+ especially pertaining to different age groups. This research will thus provide a ground on educating older individuals and creating awareness. By focussing on the perception of older individuals, this would provide a clear-cut answer as to how aware and how educated they really are about the sexual minorities which isn't a field that has been extensively studied. It could also add on to the previous papers that explored the different factors contributing to the attitudes of people towards the LGBTQ+. Whether religion and education actually play a role or whether age is a pivotal factor in determining the prejudice faced by the LGBTQ+ community.

METHODOLOGY

Sample

The sample consisted of 7 male participants aged 60 and above. The data has been collected from various states in India: Andaman, Kerala and Delhi. Purposive sampling technique was used to collect the sample. The participants were selected on a convenience basis. The

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sociodemographic details were collected through Google Forms and the data was collected through a semi-structure telephonic interview.

Description of tools

Socio-demographic form

The socio-demographic form contains social and demographic information about the participants which includes their age, gender, age, phone-no, employment status, occupation, religious affiliation, education and details regarding their children/grandchildren.

Semi-structured interview

A semi-structured interview schedule is prepared by the researcher. The researcher prepared the interview schedule based on review of literature on the topic. The interview schedule was in English.

- How much do you know about the LGBT community?
- Are you aware about homosexuality being legalised in India?
- What is your opinion on same-sex marriages?
- What kind of challenges do you think the LGBT community faces in India?
- What do you think makes someone come out as LGBT?
- What would you do if someone you know came out as LGBT?

Research Ethics followed

- Consent: Obtaining permission from the participant
- Confidentiality: The data collected from the participant will not be disclosed to anyone without the participant's permission and will be used for research purpose only.
- Freedom to withdraw from the study at any point of time: The participant has the freedom to quit the research without completing it.
- Debriefing: The researcher will explain the nature of the study after the participant completes giving data. This is done in order to avoid answers from the participants that can be socially desirable as it could influence the purpose of the study and the results.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overview

This section presents the thematic analysis of the findings which is summarized and described. The summaries of descriptive statistics are collected, and the demographic details of the participants are outlined. The semi-structured interview questions are formulated by the researcher and conducted through a telephonic interview.

The aim of this study was to fill the gap in the literature that assessed the perception of older individuals towards those pertaining to the LGBT community. The data was collected through a semi-structured telephonic interview and analysed by thematic analysis where themes and sub-themes were accumulated.

The themes and sub themes obtained through the semi-structured telephonic interview are: -

- I. Heteronormativity
 - Societal expectations
 - Threat to procreation
 - Concept of marriage

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- II. Comparison to mental disorders
 - Homosexuality as a behavioural disorder
 - Psychotherapy as treatment
- III. Religiosity and spirituality
 - High levels of religiosity
 - Low levels of religiosity
 - Spiritually inclined
- IV. Level of awareness
 - Exposure to the community
 - Workplace and environment
 - Media portrayal of LGBT community
- V. Challenges faced by LGBT community
 - Political issues
 - Class based discrimination
 - Victim blaming
 - Moral obligation

Theme I: Heteronormativity

Heteronormativity is the basic assumption that heterosexuality is the natural or “normal” expression of sexuality. This theme basically encapsulates how people’s perception is altered in a heteronormative society. Under heteronormativity, people are assumed to hold the same gender that aligns with their biological sex and be attracted only to those of the opposite sex. Older individuals are more likely to adhere to heteronormative beliefs and hence have different ideas of how a marriage should be like. For these individuals, the whole concept of marriage is based on procreation and as the existence of the LGBT community threatens the idea of procreation, their beliefs get threatened. This could be one of the main factors as to why older individuals perceive the LGBT community under a negative lighting as opposed to other age groups.

“Society is about procreation so that generations can continue down the long lane. Otherwise, the planet could be extinct. I fear that humans can be extinct because of the LGBT” – Participant 5

Most of the participants had a distorted idea of what exactly is considered normal or natural because of how society perceives homosexuals. It was observed that one of the participants were strongly against the idea of marriage because it wasn’t in his definition considered as normal. Even though he believed they had every right to live together and love, but his concept of marriage collided with how he perceived them.

“Same-sex marriages is not natural. I am against it. People can live together but conducting a marriage, the whole sanctity of the marriage gets lost.” – Participant 2

It was also noted that some of them did not believe in homosexual marriages to the point where they truly believed that divorce rates are higher among homosexual couples. They used the presumed failure of marriage as a reason to be against homosexual marriages.

“I am 200% sure that 50% of them would have separated” – Participant 5

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According to a study conducted by the National Center for Health Statistics(2018), homosexual marriages only have a 2% divorce rates among marriages. Another study conducted by UCLA School of Law Williams Institute in 2014, heterosexual couples are at a higher divorce rate than same-sex couples. Even then same-sex couples divorce mostly because of other factors related to discrimination (employment discrimination, unaccepting families) and not because of unhappy marriages.

Theme II: Comparison to mental disorders

This theme focused on how participants who had a biased perception towards the LGBT community often believed that individuals who identify as LGBT had some sort of genetic disorder and compared homosexuality to other mental disorders. Several participants showed disdain because they believed homosexuality was not natural and categorized it as something abnormal. Though the definitions of abnormality can vary, the participants who considered homosexuality as abnormal was because they believed it had some underlying cognitive impairment. It was also observed that participants believed that people accepted homosexuality because it was a genetic disorder.

“It could be that, or maybe a predisposing factor, something weird in the genes that is causing them to be that” – Participant 7

“It is a genetic deviation that got refined over time” – Participant 5

Another predisposing factor that affected their perception of the LGBT community was the belief that homosexuality was a mental disorder. Some of the participants were willing to be more accepting of the community because they compared homosexuality to other mental disorders that needed help or treatment.

“They are not like a normal human being, they are not at ease and therefore they are diseased. You can never blame a diseased person.” – Participant 1

The same participant however was not willing to encourage homosexuality because of the same belief that it is a disorder. The participant was not in favour of legalising homosexuality primarily because of their belief that it was a disorder. They also believed that transgenders are more aggressive by nature unless they receive behavioural therapies and gender affirmation surgeries. This could be mostly arising from the negative stigma surrounding transgender community in India. Especially in the rural parts of India, where transgender folks are more discriminated and are forced to lean towards unethical modes for survival.

“Once they change the gender and all, their mental attitude changes. They will become a little more calm after these surgeries and behavioural therapies and all, otherwise they are very aggressive people” – Participant 1

Theme III: Religiosity and Spirituality

This theme focussed on figuring out how religion and spirituality can influence an individual’s perception towards the LGBT community. It also explored different religions and the value systems of each which factored differently in the individual’s perceptual skills. This theme focussed on figuring out how religion can influence an individual’s perception towards the LGBT community. It also explored different religions and the value systems of each which factored differently in the individual’s perceptual skills. This theme was further

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categorized into two: (i) Strong religious beliefs and (ii) Spiritually inclined and (iii) non-religious as the participants were either strongly religious or spiritual in their nature.

Spirituality in itself without the conduct of religion had surprisingly contradictory results in the study. One of the participants believes that religion has not affected the way they think but being spiritual has given them a higher plane of knowledge enabling them to understand others better. They used spirituality as a reason to justify their negative perception towards the LGBT community. They also believed that spirituality can “fix” those who identify as LGBT by changing how their consciousness.

“I have been into yoga and meditation, and you know once you get into yoga and meditation, then you really know how another person is and how they think. So, with such an experience, I think you know, they are actually a block to the society” – Participant 1

Another participant had less of a biased perception despite being spiritually inclined. A notable point during that interview was the discussion of religion and how being religious would prevent one from being more open about the LGBT community.

“I am spiritual, not religious. When you’re religious, you are bound to follow rules and rituals set by a religious establishment. Religion is like being a hard communist, if you are behind a banner, you cannot express yourself fully. So, the status of not being religious may have helped me to openly say this” – Participant 4

Participant 4 talked about Christian evangelicals and how they are against the concept of Gender X and how they are unable to accept it because of religious reasons. In the study, “Evangelical Elites’ Anti-Homosexuality Narratives as a Resistance Strategy Against Attribution Effects”, they explored attribution theory and found out how homophobia is mostly prevalent in Christian evangelicals where they have negative beliefs concerning the moral acceptability of homosexuality.

“In the case of Christian Evangelicals, which is a strong religious group, for religious reasons, they cannot accept it, even if they are forced to legally. Once religion doesn’t accept it, it becomes very difficult for politicians to attain a consensus” – Participant 4

Theme IV: Level of Awareness

This theme encapsulates how the level of exposure to the LGBT community can play a role in the way individuals perceive them. It focused on both the role of the environment that the individual was exposed to as well as the media representation of the LGBT community. The participants who exhibited a positive perception of the LGBT community spend most of their time in workplaces and communities that embraced openness towards minorities. They also had more knowledge about the LGBT community and hence was able to be more accepting of them.

“I am very much aware about the LGBT community, through educational systems, exposure in workplaces, awareness programs.” – Participant 4

The participants who were non-biased and had a positive perception of the LGBT community believed that since celebrities or prominent people in the media are coming out as homosexual, it influences sexual minorities to feel more comfortable in coming out as well.

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“Since famous people come out as gay, they will feel safer and more open towards coming out” – Participant 6

“Nowadays since there is a lot of famous people, actors and CEOs being openly gay, it becomes more common and people are more accepting of it” – Participant 6

And likewise, people who exhibited a strong dislike towards the LGBT community had less awareness about what the community entails. This was clear from the initial questions that revolved around where their source of information was from. In the case of the first participant, them exhibiting negative views about the LGBT community could be because of their lack of knowledge about them.

“Nothing at all, frankly speaking, I don’t really know anything of them except from these talk shows and channels. I don’t have any close contact with them” – Participant 1

It was also noted that participants who knew someone personal from the LGBT community exhibited positive attitude and perception towards them. This could indicate that good interpersonal relationships can have a positive influence on how an individual perceives the LGBT community.

“The gay community is pretty big and strong. Personally, I know colleagues and my kids’ friends” – Participant 3

The source of information about the LGBT community also plays a major role in forming non-biased perception of sexual minorities. It was noted that those who were exposed to media that had a positive representation of the LGBT community exhibited a non-biased perception. Whereas participants who were exposed to a negative lighting of the LGBT community often formed a biased perception of the community. This could be because of how media is a major source of information for people and if media itself portrays a certain minority community in a bad lighting, this can also influence the targeted audience.

“Some news and views from you know, these channels and talk shows and how they get into these bad influences of drugs” – Participant 1

Theme V: Challenges of the LGBT community

This theme encapsulates the various challenges faced by the LGBT community especially pertaining to discrimination from older age groups. A common observation noted among the participants were their belief that the LGBT community faced challenges mostly because of their own doing. Victim blaming was mostly used to justify their negative attitude towards the LGBT community. One of the participants claimed that the problems faced by the LGBT community was mostly because of their own attitude.

“Even if they are a lesbian or gay, if they keep that to themselves and do not come out with it in the society, they would not face problems. It is only because of their own actions that they face challenges” – Participant 1

Under political aspect of LGBT community, one of the participants recognized how it is a political issue as politicians often use the LGBT rights as a weapon to gain people’s support. The same participant also believed that the LGBT community would face caste-based

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discrimination, where the lower castes would be facing more of a discrimination as opposed to upper caste individuals of the LGBT community.

“In India, the discrimination that a higher caste homosexuals face would be less compared to a lower caste. This can also apply to religion, as religious minorities would face more backlash” – Participant 4

It is important to understand that caste-based discrimination happens across all social roles and in the case of the LGBT community, most of the safe spaces provided by the community were typically for the upper caste members. These safe spaces were made inaccessible to those from a less privileged backgrounds and even if it was made accessible, it was mostly exclusive for the elite.

Even among the few participants who had comparatively a more positive attitude towards the LGBT community, they held positive attitude because they felt morally obligated to and not because of they actually favour them. This was seen in the way they explained how they would be accepting homosexuality.

“I would TRY and accept them” – Participant 2

“I would help them out because there is no way to straighten them out, and we have to come to terms with it” – Participant 3

“I may not harm them but I will not like them. I will socially distance from them” – Participant 7

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, age and other related factors (like religion, social roles etc) can affect how individuals perceive others. This study has explored how age can be a predisposing factor in biased perception towards other communities especially since older individuals have a more concrete belief system that is invincible towards change and hence biasness prevails more in older individuals. The paper also provided substantial findings for the prejudice that marginalised communities in a heteronormative society faces on the daily. By focussing on different factors that affects people’s biased perception, it provides additional knowledge on how generational gaps and other related factors can play a major role in homophobia and social acceptance.

LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Limitations

Following are the limitations of the current study:

- The study was limited only to men and could have been extended towards both men and women.
- The semi-structured interview was restricted to English speaking population
- It lacked a quantitative investigation on this topic
- The sample size was restricted to 7
- The extraneous variables like educational background, personal biases might have played a role

Implications

Following are some of the implications of the study and how it can be taken forward:

- The study will help social activists to understand how prejudice occurs towards sexual minorities
- The results can be used to educate older individuals and change biasness
- A quantitative tool can be used to have a better understanding of the concept
- Follow up study can be done on a larger sample focussing on both males and females to have a better understanding of the study

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Conflict of Interest

The author(s) declared no conflict of interest.

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