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Meaning in Life and Happiness in Coming Out: A Qualitative Study of Malaysian Gay Males

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Abstract

The mental health of Malaysian gay males is affected when they decide to disclose their homosexuality, as it follows by bigotry that diminishes their psychological well-being. This study, henceforth, aims to explore the experience of meaning in life and happiness in coming out of Malaysian gay males. From Kuala Lumpur and Selangor, 22 gay males were recruited with purposive and snowballing sampling techniques in the qualitative study. Findings show that they can ascertain their meaning in life via social engagement in the LGBTQ pride. On that note, they could achieve self-actualization by mingling with people of their community. With the future endeavor and memorable experience, regardless of pleasant or hostile, it can generate happiness in gay males coming out journey, as they will have the attribution of gratitude. The study findings perhaps bring attention to the gay males' parents about proper mannerisms in responding to their son's sexual orientation. In that case, an interceding approach from the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and even the government is offerable to parents. It can ensure that the Malaysian gay males' meaning in life and happiness are not disrupted by disclosing their sexual orientation to their beloved ones.

Keywords: Meaning in Life, Happiness, Coming Out, Gay Males, Malaysia.

Background

Gay males' happiness mainly derives from them being optimistic in foreseeing the future. However, researches on gay males are perceived to be the least among the other LGBTQ community, namely lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and queer (Lindheim et al., 2019). Gay males with positive experiences in coming out have found meaning in their life (Chrisler, 2017). Undoubtedly, meaning in life and happiness for this group of people are associated with one another.

Meaning in life for humans, let alone gay males, generally, are about getting married and living happily ever after (Stavrova & Luhmann, 2015). The most compelling evidence, 27 countries have legalized same-sex civil union, and 21 other nations have even endorsed same-sex marriages (Cheng & Lin, 2017). Nevertheless, as a minority group, gay males are inclined

to be discriminated against and abused upon the coming out process (Boe et al., 2018), and it will directly affect their meaning in life.

Not only do gay males face difficulties in their coming out, but they also have to put up with the unfavorable situation of building a family of their own and reproducing, which is the foremost meaningful life for humankind (Bosley-Smith & Reczek, 2018). This research allowed gay males to express their injustice of being treated unreasonably, which affects their perception towards their livelihood and subsequently enabled them to regain their meaning in life by not living under pressure to gratify others.

On the other hand, happiness is conventional in the psychological field, in which it is one of the factors that contribute to an individual's well-being (Michalos, 2017). Meaning in life of Malaysian gay males is at stake due to social rejection that leads them to deprive their psychological well-being. Pachankis and Branstrom (2018), in their study, explained that the happiness of gay males tends to fall apart because they are a minority group. In that case, discovering gay males' meaning in life and happiness in the current era could help to preserve their emotional quotient, and that would eventually elevate their mental state at the same time.

On the same note, every breakthrough and milestone, such as graduation or marriage, is celebrated significantly for an individual (Whillans et al., 2019). Life transition and satisfaction from those events can boost their happiness, especially for young adults. Even though sexual identity can alter the way an individual perceives their pleasure to be, for gay males, it is circulated in the coming out that provokes happiness in them (Biswas & Chaudhuri, 2018).

Coming out for gay males, mainly accompanied by discrimination and prejudice that can indirectly reduce their peace. Expressively, direct rejections from gay males' parents in the means of their disclosure of sexual orientation will eventually diminish their happiness (de Vries et al., 2019). This research has determined the happiness factor in coming out of Malaysian gay males. Solely because in the long run, the suppression of emotions would cause these people to be psychologically distress and ultimately lead them to attempt suicide (Turban et al., 2020).

Method

Study Design

The application of the qualitative research method in this study concerned the course of action for gay males in coming out. Information obtained from an extensive interview with a qualitative research method is feasible to interpret from the complex reality, such as religious beliefs and cultural factors that gay males encounter in their daily lives (Wilkinson & Johnson, 2020).

The transcendental phenomenological research design was executed in this study. According to Gigliello and Ackerman (2019), this research design is inclined to develop a deeper understanding of the life experiences of gay males regarding their mechanism to cope with struggles, like human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) stigmatization. In a bias-free perspective, the primary disposition of this study was to obtain their meaning in life and happiness upon coming out.

Participants and Locations

In sum, 22 Malaysian gay males between 21–25 years from Kuala Lumpur and Selangor were recruited in this study using the purposive and snowballing techniques. The Malaysian gay males who took part in this study had specific inclusion criteria such as they must be

biological adult males born with penises, self-identified as gay males, and have had an experience of affection towards another male. However, coincidentally, the participants fall under the emerging adulthood stage, in which they range between the ages of 21–25 years old.

A high rate of discrimination is directed towards the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) individuals in the massive urban city, Kuala Lumpur (Vijay et al., 2018). While on the contrary, Selangor is a state with a large population of the LGBTQ community (Ab Rahman et al., 2019). Therefore, this research used the stated sampling techniques to recruit Malaysian gay males in Kuala Lumpur and Selangor, as they are almost inaccessible in Malaysia (Dzulkifli et al., 2018).

Table 1

Summary of Themes

Psychological Experiences	Themes
Meaning in life of the Malaysian gay males	(i) Spirit of kindred relationship
	(ii) Confronting unresolved matter
	(iii) Advancing social engagement
	(iv) Associating in LGBTQ pride
	(v) Get through self-actualization
Happiness of the Malaysian gay males	(i) Reminiscing memorable experience
	(ii) Infuse future endeavor
	(iii) Expressing gratitude mannerism
	(iv) Coming across displeasing circumstances
	(v) Carrying fundamental attribution

Procedure and Instruments

The Life Orientation Test-Revised (LOT-R; Scheier et al., 1994) and the Oxford Happiness Questionnaire (OHQ; Hills & Argyle, 2002) were adopted and restructured into the qualitative form. Therefore, there was an appointment of the qualitative research professionals to perform the validity and reliability tests for the interview questions regarding the language and relevance. There were two pilot studies conducted before undergoing the actual data collection. It examines the feasibility of the research by identifying its limitations and make improvements before the actual study is conducted (Justice et al., 2019), especially concerning the interview questions.

This study obtained approval from the Institutional Ethics Committee (IEC) of UCSI University before commencing the data collection process. Given that the potential participants turn out and admit to being gay males with the set requirements that this research has, there were an information sheet and informed consent to facilitate them in concise detail about the study. Also, gay males were free to withdraw themselves at any given time. By any chance, the participants are triggered or reminisce bittersweet emotions that caused discomfort during the interview.

Ethical Consideration

Prior to the data collection, the study obtained ethical approval from UCSI University's Institutional Ethics Committee (IEC; Reference code: IEC-2020-FoSSLA-050). Before, throughout, and after the data collection, ethical considerations have been attentively

adhered. The participants signed a written consent form before the study began. Participants' confidentiality was protected while deceitful practices were avoided when the study was designed, and ethical considerations were properly enforced.

Data Analysis

In exploring the experience of meaning in life and happiness in coming out of Malaysian gay males, the thematic analysis emphasized in this study. For this reason, after the interview sessions, the data procured were thoroughly analyzed with six steps of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It started with data familiarization, followed by the generalization of systemized coding and classified themes from the transcription. There was a reviewing process for those themes by a qualitative research expert before the themes are defined. In the final stage, the report was done, based on the codes and themes, from which the experience of coming out Malaysian gay males concerning their meaning in life and happiness.

Findings

By exploring the experience of meaning in life and happiness in coming out of Malaysian gay males, with an in-depth interview, a total of ten themes were derived from the data. The deliberation of themes is divided equally into two sections concerning the meaning in life and happiness discussed below.

Table 1 further shows the compiled list of the themes procured from the data analysis acquired from the 22 Malaysian gay males residing in Kuala Lumpur or Selangor.

Meaning in Life

Spirit of Kindred Relationship

The familial bond the Malaysian gay males share has the propensity to result in a direct contribution to their meaningful life in coming out. As a consequence of the cultural perspective, gay males have discovered their meaning in life. They are beyond grateful to be able to inherit the ancient culture solely because of their sexual orientation. Besides, the blood bond relationship under the name of pragma love contributes to the meaning in the life of Malaysian gay males in their coming out. Gay males emphasized that satisfaction in love and relationship life is competent in dominating a long-lasting attachment to the extent of having a marital tie.

P18: I would want to move to another country that accept me for being gay and legalize gay marriage. I want to move as soon as possible. The only happiness is I want to get married and have my own husband and move together somewhere safe.

Confronting Unresolved Matter

Being accountable for an action is one of the forms that contribute to the meaning in life for Malaysian gay males, yet there are displeasing situations that tend to disorient their living purpose to the point where they lose their meaningful life. It is since most children take the concept of paying back to their parents into account regardless of materialistic or non-materialistic form, as it comes of the expectations from the society. The improvised regulation then ought to be made on the impression of coming out, and it serves the justice of normalizing the reveal of one's sexual orientation to improve as a person. In the long run, parents will evolve into thinking that their gay son does have a place that was once discriminatory and stereotypical.

P05: I have an obligation umm in terms of you know the people that I have met in my life ummm...my parents obviously you know because they gave birth to me and obviously they will expect something from me so I guess in that sense I think life was important uhh at that stage so it was very much fill with just parents...

Advancing Social Engagement

Malaysian gay males engage themselves in the social world by having an obligation where it is adequate to carry the concern of social approval and judgments from the external parties. Therefore, mutual support from society is crucial to add meaning to their life by preserving the future. Relationship with friends was also highlighted by gay males, as getting the validation from a genuine companion eases the coming out approach on top of making it meaningful because they have the intention and initiative to give back to society with their friends. Surprisingly, some Malaysian gay males were less concerned about the social approval in coming out, as financial security and stability are essential in safeguarding the future.

P22: I'm doing something that add value to the community uhh be it just volunteering uhh for certain organization. Uhh like I currently volunteering for a youth organization called Tenaga Belia powered by Undi 18 as a research volunteer, really I feel like in that sense, even though it's very miniscule and small in my magnitude, I'm contributing my knowledge and my insights and I think this will help in one way or another and also I did internship umm with our national sovereign wealth fund Khazanah else...participating in Webinars you know, gaining more knowledge, yeah those are some things that will have meaning to my life.

Associating in LGBTQ Pride

LGBTQ pride has a significant impact on the Malaysian gay males' meaning in life, and dishearteningly, gay males struggle when it comes to wanting liberty in coming out. Also, the benefits of LGBTQ pride yields to their life purpose in coming out with a collective community battling for a change. Malaysian gay males pointed out that when they decided to reveal their sexual orientation, it positively implies that they represent themselves as one of the members of the gay community. Positive representation involves them being vocal about it, as it can reconstruct an individual's perception of the LGBTQ community.

P17: After coming out, after that whole incident about my family [kicked out by family], my life purpose is to help people and make sure that they have a better life regardless of who they are and my life purpose is right now is focused on my community uhh to make sure that they are included in discussions, conversations, and uhh you know strategies to overcome our challenges, that everyone feels included. That is what my life purpose what is right now.

Get Through Self-Actualization

Through self-reflection, Malaysian gay males endure personal growth while their maturity prospers over time and eventually secure peace of mind, with eternal enlightenment from religion and spiritual belief. Likewise, the process of exploration for meaning in life enables gay males to be more empathetic and resilient, as long as they have long-range planning to establish constructive remarks in their coming out. They would then gain

gratification from people or events they come across, especially involving recreational activity.

P09: Life is unfair but we can't let it push me down. Even if I got hit, I have to stand up and go through it. You've live this far to give so why give up now. My mantra is you've been through worse...To keep an open mind and not let life take your over. People around us are nice so we have to do good. Random act of kindness.

Happiness

Reminiscing Memorable Experience

In the absence of an unpleasant occurrence, an individual would not be aware of what happiness is. Surprisingly, Malaysian gay males have a distressing memorable experience in their coming out with discontented consequences.

P01: My mom was hard on me for the first year, she was very discriminatory, she pushed me to extreme ends that made me take irrelevant decision...My mom will say "Don't come back home with HIV", "Where were you at the dumpsters or were you busy collecting HIV?"...

Significant adventures leave a pessimistic impact on the gay males' happiness in their disclosure of sexual orientation. The consequences of those events are rather emotional trauma, which defeats their entire life, than physical abuse that leaves an impermanent effect. However, behind every misery, there would be a worthwhile sensation.

P14: When I was with my family...I was outed to them, they beat me up, they physically hit me uhh I think it was from imagine from 7PM until 12AM they were beating me constantly, from that time when they found out that I was gay umm so yeah I was beaten quite badly when I was outed to my family and you know when the police report was made, the police did notice bruises and so on so that was the only time that was physically traumatizing to me just because I was gay.

Malaysian gay males, on the positive side, had a blissful memory in their coming out. Sincere confession brings a life of ease from supportive close friends, siblings, and, most importantly, parents, enables them to attain an individual transformation from the adequate emotional security they received.

P10: I always go out with my twin sister especially this year we always video call because she struggle to accept me and we live far from each other. Parents are supportive even though I'm HIV positive...Coming out to parents [is sweet memory] because they said whatever you are, you are still my son. My mom is not that patience so I felt relieved when they accepted me.

Infuse Future Endeavor

Amidst questioning about the future endeavors of the gay community, there is progression not only in Western countries but also in Southeast Asia. In Southeast Asia, they can step forward and reorganize the prime concern for the marginalized community. They establish a relationship to develop a sense of self-preservation before drawing efforts

together to make any attempts. It includes the same-sex marriage acceptance and even legalization of same-sex marriage or at least venture in comprehending it.

P06: India has demolished their ban against homosexuality, can get married in Taiwan so it's good to see especially in Asian country. Bring brave to open conversations because if no one start then you'll never start. If people start we need help make sure it keeps going on. When we end it, we end it together. People need time to accept. Hopefully people will change in the near future especially in Malaysia. Not only the LGBT community but all minorities.

Expressing Gratitude Mannerism

An attitude of gratitude calls for an individual being appreciative, and with that, the gay males are pleased with themselves, considering they can stand on their own two feet. The gay community commonly encounters heartbreaking discrimination and judgments from external parties. Although a vast majority of the phenomenon involving gay males tends to be thought-provoking, they still feel contented in life. It includes them appraising the even-handed religion that is non-discriminatory towards this vulnerable community.

P13: Everyone will say oh the Bible doesn't like this or the Quran doesn't agree with this. That's the only justification...The prophet said that I think the angel or God they said like don't become this so this religion won't practice homosexuality but they didn't really specify homosexuality, they just said sodomy and cheating on your wives with men. I think when it was further brushed up, it became homosexuality you know but it was actually the ex of the religious, it was more of them raping other men instead of you know having sex with their wives, yeah.

Coming Across Displeasing Circumstances

Gay males tend to decline in the sense of laboring due to the deteriorating community standardization. Their parents could be one of the main factors that contribute to the displeasing of sexual orientation disclosure, as they are afraid of developing a sensual life by restricting their self-expression. In other words, imprudent parents with an absence of knowledge are capable of diminishing their happiness. The Malaysian gay males pointed out that the unsupportive parents probably result from the narrow-minded denomination and even conventional Islamic law.

P03: I came out to my parents this year, it was quite rough as I was in a fight with them and ran away from home for two weeks...Parents don't fully accept and maybe it'll be hard to express myself if I have a boyfriend to my parents because they are religious...They prohibit it because they think Malaysia is Islamic country and use Syariah law...they don't let me do that thing.

Carrying Fundamental Attribution

By acquiring inborn traits such as self-awareness, gay males would be mature and inclusive with self-assurance to assertiveness besides possessing outstanding quality. Gay males have admitted to being attentive to pitfall because of the quality trait that they obtain. They are either trouble-free decision-makers or indecisive individuals, yet they are cautious in selecting their significant other.

P20: I made significant decisions based on number of facts and how much value it can provide that's when my decision is made. I find for information I need from forums...I'm not an indecisive person. Relationship wise, it is a gamble because we are just humans and might get tired of the same person few years down the road. It took me four relationships to get where I am today.

Discussion

In gay males' sexual orientation reveal, having a stable familial bond and sufficient pragma love with one another could provide a sense of meaning in life for them. The classical civilization, particularly in Sarawak, provides a life purpose for Malaysian gay males. The acceptance or rejection in coming out accompanies the parental and interpersonal contexts, whereby it regulates the meaning in life for them (Fuller, 2017). Discrimination towards gay males in Malaysia is not a new phenomenon, as Malaysia to date prohibits same-sex union, and this unresolved matter disoriented the life purpose of gay males. They urge to improvise the regulations, as these displeasing situations are often followed by their parents, who are against the concept of LGBTQ. Also, due to their fears and uncertainty, communication regarding sexuality between parents and children is limited (Eunice & Zhooriyati, 2022). According to Lovelock (2017), gay males would anticipate their acceptance, yet more than half of the parents would reject on top of refusing the fact that their son is under the LGBTQ community.

To unravel the unresolved matter, the Malaysian gay males count on expectations to improve as an individual. They are accountable for their meaning in life, although they tend to be depressed, which causes them to lose life satisfaction (Chow, 2017). However, Bacon et al. (2017) accentuates that when an individual has a life purpose, they are likely to adjust to the daily stressors by socializing. As can be seen, the initiative to give back can foster mutual support between the ordinary community and the LGBTQ community by progressing as a person. Gay males must hold this obligation as their mission in life under those circumstances. An individual will achieve their aspiration to elevate their meaning in life in the long-term goal, and it is via accomplishing life satisfaction (Park et al., 2019).

A significant influence between finances and meaning in life for Malaysian gay males in their coming out whereby endeavor to perseverance pushes them to be career-oriented, who work hard for eternity. Safeguarding the future cost, involving financial stability and security, would drive their life to be meaningful consequently. LGBTQ pride provides a beneficial influence among the minority, as well as the ordinary community. Although Malaysian gay males struggle for equality, they can seek their life purpose when they work together collectively for a better change (Gany & Subhi, 2018). As a matter of fact, for gay males, the negative experiences and traumatic life events can generate their self-acceptance before they figure out their meaning in life, as it is a lifelong journey (Vohs et al., 2019).

Personal growth is crucial in the way for Malaysian gay males to achieve self-actualization. Through the long-range plan on top of the constructive remark, gay males can find their living purpose. Shenkman et al (2020) acknowledged that gay males, who have descendent of their own, are at the peak or have discovered their meaning in life to reach their self-actualization. Also, Malaysian gay males described their meaning in life in the eternal enlightenment. LGBTQ community, including gay males, could obtain peace of mind by exploring the delightful journey with multiple religious and spiritual beliefs (Zhooriyati & Hashimah, 2014). This discrepancy perhaps is attributed to the recreational activity that they

perform to foster their self-actualization process, which will eventually lead to their meaningful life in coming out.

Memories, regardless, of positive or negative, in one way or another, will contribute to the Malaysian gay males' happiness. Once the gay males uttered their sincere confession, they will have a great sensation to possess a life of ease. Oishi et al (2020) pointed out that self-transcendence is a personality trait that involves personal boundaries expansion, and it corresponds with a happy lifestyle for gay males. On the other hand, the unpleasant occurrence, surrounded by discontented consequences after coming out, will leave a pessimistic impact on Malaysian gay males. It flips the switch for them to view the contradictory experiences to generate their happiness, surprisingly when they reveal their sexual orientation. Li et al (2019) discovered that joy is indirectly associated with mental health, and they are significant to entirely attain a pleasurable and gratifying life for an individual to come across the transitory in the life of rupture.

Malaysian gay males have the intention to reorganize the prime concern of the marginalized community to move forward progressively with a sense of self-preservation. They can, therefore, draw the effort together with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that prioritize the LGBTQ community to fight in ensuing endeavors. Ang (2019) expressed that future-oriented individuals will intensely engage their life to establish social expectations and eventually achieve a happy relationship that promotes a sight of humanity. The attribution of being thankful provokes Malaysian gay males to have a sensation of contentment in their life after coming out. They are pleased with themselves without depending on others, even though they often face discrimination and judgment from society in general (Bubić & Erceg, 2016). By standing on their own two feet, the gay males would carry the gratitude mannerism in their coming out, as it is a notable milestone they achieve.

LGBTQ community will ultimately experience happiness upon coming out solely because it is a notable turning point that hinders them from having a pattern of thinking, which is behind in times (Berggren et al., 2016). Be that as it may, they would be afraid to reveal their sexual orientations, which will eventually make them contemplate and denote being unhappy, given that there is an absence of gratitude. The happiness of Malaysian gay males is disrupted, causing them to have constrained fulfillment, especially in their sensual life. The Malaysian gay males revealed that narrow-minded denominations produce a displeasing sense among them, especially from parents of a gay son (Cassar & Sultana, 2018). It is since the conventional holy book drives their imprudence parents to be disagreeable to their sexual orientation.

The state of happiness is fosterable through life satisfaction and subjective well-being (Hornsey et al., 2018). Nonetheless, given that there is a lack of freedom in their life, they tend to adhere to the cultural norms and social expectations, which leave them feeling guilty. The absence of knowledge also causes the deterioration of community standardization. The matter that reduces Malaysian gay males' happiness in their coming out is the decline in laboring, as there is an exploitation of salary. Watkins et al (2019) disagreed and stressed that one could feel happy as long as they have gratitude while adapting to their lifetime of displeasing episodes, especially in their workplace setting.

Coming out is a commencement of misery because there is less possibility for a same-sex union. Based on Kim and Atanasoski (2017), as a vulnerable individual who have gone through a lot, coming out often links with discrimination, which leads them to distress instead of happiness. On the contrary, the desirable causes of a human's action frequently motivate them to strive for the better, let alone for Malaysian gay males. With the inborn trait and

outstanding quality they possess, they could experience happiness in the coming out. It is for this reason that self-awareness and self-assurance of assertiveness take place in this action. Therefore, they always are attentive to the pitfall to see the light when revealing their sexual orientation (Jhang, 2018).

Conclusions

The major findings of this study include maintaining the presence of familial bonds through pragma love demonstrated by gay males' partners could improve their thinking patterns about society. Yet, the unpleasant position they found themselves in may have contributed to a muddled meaning in life in addition to interfering with their personal growth. They will be resilient in their future endeavors as long as they acquire an adequate obligation. Gay males will not have to fight for their freedom; in fact, the collective community battle they have established entitles them to motivate other helpless and closeted individuals to come out. Also, eternal enlightenment derived from religious and spiritual beliefs aids in the road to discovering one's life purpose and, eventually, attaining a meaningful life.

Malaysian gay males received sincere confessions from their loved ones during their sexual orientation reveal, allowing them to experience happiness that promotes their ease of life. They put out their best efforts to build a relationship and restructure the primary focus of enhancing maturity and awareness within the marginalized community. They expressed feeling more content in their daily life merely because they could stand on their own two feet, which also contributes to their happiness, although attaining acceptance in coming out has been challenging for them. Gay males frequently face adversity, with their imprudent parents, who are members of a narrow-minded denomination, restricting their satisfaction. Fortunately, their inborn traits and outstanding qualities enable them to be attentive to the pitfalls.

The findings of this study suggest several significant changes to imply among the parents of Malaysian gay males. There is a milestone for gay males to achieve their meaning in life given that they can be comfortable in their skin. Gay males' happiness, for this reason, descends from their coming out. However, it is almost redundant, solely because they have built the courage to reveal their sexual orientation to their parents, only to have them completely turn down their biological son. It leaves the gay males with a feeling as if there is no meaning in their life.

In that sense, management to enhance the interaction between gay males and their parents would perhaps be a great concept by involving the findings of this study. It can be done by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or government authorities through launching the interceding approach. It is, therefore, a definite need for development to deliver an intervention program, provided that it takes place to buffer the negative effect of experiences in the Malaysian gay males' coming out due to the direct rejection from their parents.

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perspectives to form an extensive and sensible critique. It is not only for the LGBTQ community but for Malaysians as a whole.

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