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Nurul Jannah Mohd Juaini

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Lesbian Community Support for Individual Involvement in Same-sex Activity

Nurul Jannah Mohd Juaini

Faculty of Applied Social Sciences, Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin

Email: nuruljannah@unisza.edu.my

Abstract

Although past studies in Malaysia have explained several factors related to women's involvement in same-sex activity, studies on the role of the lesbian community in Malaysia have been underemphasized despite the presence of some lesbian communities on social media. The existence of this community has given individuals the opportunity to actively engage in same-sex activity. Therefore, the objective of this study was to analyze the support of the lesbian community toward the involvement of individuals in same-sex activity. This study uses a qualitative approach and through the snowball sampling technique, 12 lesbians were contacted from 10 states in Malaysia, namely Johor, Kelantan, Terengganu, Malacca, Sarawak, Negeri Sembilan, Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur, Kedah, Selangor, and Pahang. All the study respondents were interviewed, and the results were analysed using version 12 of the Nvivo for Mac. The findings showed that four respondents had provided feedback on the support of the lesbian community and their active involvement in the community through Facebook, WhatsApp groups, and lesbian club.

Keywords: Lesbian Community, Support, Same-Sex Activity, Lesbian, Malaysia

Introduction

The main source of social support for lesbian individuals is from their own community (Diplacido, 1998). This is also supported by Gabbay and Wahler (2002) who explain that lesbians who experience interpersonal stress often receive support from their communities. The stress emanating from stereotyping and social isolation can be addressed by getting emotional support from the lesbian community (Brooks, 1981). In fact, according to Higa et al. (2014), the community also organizes various formal and informal programs for youths and provides a safe and comfortable place to meet other community members. Community members also feel free to talk about their sexual identity and behavior (Matebani et al., 2013).

In addition, the lesbian community is important because it promotes the development of a positive sexual identity and creates opportunities to discover potential sexual partners (Burke, 2000). Even abroad, the community also provides information on measures to confront issues of daily life, safe neighborhoods to reveal their sexual identity, rights as a homosexual, and medical services that exist for members of the lesbian community (Diplacido, 1998). The importance of this community's influence on lesbians was also agreed

upon by Hill (2008), who explained that bonding and friendship with other members is a priority, especially for individuals who are new to the community and want to know more about same-sex activity.

Next, Higa et al. (2014), explain that while some individuals are unable to participate in LGBTQ community activities due to anti-LBTQ sentiment in the family, they stay connected and follow community forums through Myspace and Facebook. In this regard, there are various online lesbian communities that have been formed to enable members to engage directly to ask questions, get advice, and share experiences. Referring to Juaini et al. (2017) study, eight (8) lesbian communities in Malaysia have been identified on Facebook from December 2015 to July 2016 and the increase in the number of members is constantly increasing during that period. Cooper's study (2010) also explains the online community using the *Self-Help Model* where members in the community help each other through similar experiences, sharing information, suggesting how to find support in the community, and how to reveal their sexual identity to children, husbands, parents, and others.

Methodology

The research design used is a qualitative approach. This approach comprises analysis through primary data, secondary data, and interviews with respondents. In addition, this approach also does not focus on the collection of large amounts of information but places great emphasis on quality information by focusing on a small sample (Jasmi, 2012). It can be defined as a method that incriminates efforts to find and provide evidence as well as *non-numerical* observations despite evidence that refers to statistics (Jasmi, 2012).

The snowball sampling technique is among the main techniques to carry out sampling procedures on hidden populations (Heckathorn, 1997) and is often applied in qualitative research, especially through interviews (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). In this study, the traditional snowball sampling technique was used to select respondents from a community and name other potential candidates to become a sample (Meyer & Wilson, 2009). As the sample for this study is also achieved through social media platforms such as Facebook, virtual snowball sampling was used by the researchers to find those from hard-to-reach populations such as lesbians. According to Baltar and Brunet (2011), the combination of both the traditional and virtual snowball sampling techniques can improve the sampling process. This combination not only eases researchers' access to the online research sample but offline too; 12 respondents were found from 10 states in Malaysia, i.e., Johor, Kelantan, Terengganu, Melaka, Sarawak, Negeri Sembilan, Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur, Kedah, Selangor, and Pahang.

The interview process was carried out in phases and an in-depth interview procedure was started by selecting respondents based on the research sample criteria. Before embarking on the interview process, researchers first built relationships of trust with the respondents, so that they would be more confident in being involved in this study. The researchers took a long time to gather the 12 respondents as they were very sensitive to the confidentiality of the information given to this study. As such, the researchers informed the respondents that the interviews were carried out only with the aim of conducting this research and that all information will be disposed of when the study is completed. Respondents were also given the freedom to withdraw from this study if it invaded their privacy or touched on any sensitivities they may have. Researchers also explained to the respondents why this study was

being carried out, the reason they were chosen as respondents for this study, the duration of the interview, and the use of tape recording during the interview. Adams and Cox (2008) stressed that it is important to ask permission to use any type of recorder and explain to the respondent why the tool is important in the process as well as explain how the information will be stored properly. If the respondent refuses to record the conversation, then only note notes can be used in these situations (Adams & Cox, 2008). Next, the reviewer asked for the respondent's consent to participate in the study after the respondent was clear with the purpose and process of the study. When the respondent agrees, then the researcher asks the respondent to sign the consent form and set the date and method of the interview at the convenience of the respondent.

Filtering of data is very important to ensure that data analysed are correct and to determine the existence of the missing value that might occur from the respondents' failure to answer any of the interview questions, which would affect the data analysis to be carried out. Data analysis for this study was conducted using the Nvivo for Mac version 12 software. The use of Nvivo software in the process of analyzing qualitative data is aimed at facilitating and speeding up the process of managing, analyzing, and interpreting qualitative data (Hamid et al., 2005).

Results

The researchers found that the active participation of respondents in the lesbian community was not only online communication such as Facebook and WhatsApp groups as well as physical encounters such as lesbian clubs.

a. Facebook

This medium of communication is the focus for respondents as this communication is faster and involves the participation of more members to get emotional support such as the opportunity to chat with other community members and share the same experience and information support. This makes two respondents, R1 and R4, feel more confident and comfortable in the group. Table 1 below is an excerpt from an interview related to this subject.

Table 1

Facebook

Respondent	Reference(s)	Interview excerpts
1	1 reference has been encoded (2.18% coverage)	I've joined a community on Facebook like PLU Lesbian, and I admit to getting a lot of contacts there.
4	1 reference has been encoded (3.53% coverage)	I searched for a lot of information on this including chatting with other lesbian friends and joining the community on Facebook. To feel comfortable and accepted and to be in that community makes me more confident and stronger.

b. WhatsApp Group

Referring to the findings of the study, it was found that only R10 stated that the participation of respondents in WhatsApp groups allows for privacy and more comfortable conversations as it is only for lesbians only. Table 2 follows, are excerpts of interviews related to this matter.

Table 2

WhatsApp Group

Respondent	Reference(s)	Interview excerpt
10	1 reference has been encoded (1.67% coverage)	If it's a community, I just join and be active with that WhatsApp group. It's just lesbians and more privacy.

c. Lesbian Club

Based on the results of the interview, it was found that only R12 expressed her participation in the lesbian club due to receiving an invitation from a lesbian friend. As it has been too frequent to participate in activities organized by the club, it has encouraged respondents to accept same-sex identities. Table 3 follows, is an excerpt from an interview related to this matter.

Table 3

Lesbian Club

Respondent	Reference(s)	Interview excerpt
12	1 reference has been encoded (1.13% coverage)	I joined their group at the time. I agree and just want to have fun trying something new. But it's been a long time since I've been in the group's activities so much that I can accept it.

Discussion

Lesbians often receive support from the lesbian community at a time when they are facing interpersonal stress (Gabbay & Wahler, 2002). Similarly, in the results of this study, researchers identified most respondents as participating in the lesbian community either on Facebook, WhatsApp groups, or private lesbian clubs for emotional support, friendship, and information. According to the respondents, the lesbian community made room for them such as Facebook pages to get to know other members of the community such as chatting, sharing information, sharing experiences with other members, and anything related to their sexual identity. From there, the respondents felt good because they felt belonging and did not feel alone in the community. Along with the results of the Higa et al. (2014) study which showed respondents remained active with the community through Myspace and Facebook, despite not participating in outside community activities due to anti-sex minority sentiment.

Cooper's study (2010) also explained that online communities use the Self-Help Model where individuals support each other through sharing similar experiences, information, and tips on sexual identity exposure to those around them. In fact, Chong et al (2015) think that the use of social media can foster the development of identity and group cohesion as well as build the social resilience of sexual minority individuals to social marginalization and stigma by

society and improve their well-being. Additionally, respondents reported that the lesbian community does not only provide emotional and informational support but also friendship support i.e., by organizing various activities in privacy as an arrangement for meeting members and fostering relationships between members.

Respondents also admitted to feeling very comfortable and enjoying being in a group with the same sexual desires and their bond became stronger as they supported each other and were quicker to understand each other's situation. What's more, respondents can share freely about their identity as lesbians and the opportunity also found potential sexual partners for them. Burke (2000) also sees the lesbian community as providing good support to promote the formation of sexual identity and create opportunities to discover potential sexual partners. Therefore, it is clear the existence of a lesbian community on Facebook, WhatsApp groups, and lesbian clubs Private and strong alliances among members are also attractive for respondents to engage in same-sex activity because behind them there is strong support from the community.

Conclusion

The support of the lesbian community in offering emotional support and high levels of acceptance keeps individuals afloat to cope with the pressure of those around them. The existence of communities on Facebook, WhatsApp groups, and clubs makes respondents feel comfortable, confident, strong in the face of challenges, free to share information and experiences related to same-sex identity, get to know other community members, and can find a suitable sexual partner. Therefore, respondents made the lesbian community a platform for them to get social support and continue living as lesbians with positivity. Referring to the findings, respondents used Facebook as the main access to join the lesbian community. Typically, lesbian participation on this platform is to avoid anti-LGBTQ sentiment in the family and can connect with members of the lesbian community (Higa et al., 2014). The number of individual participants in this community on Facebook is constantly increasing and various communities related to the lesbian population have been formed on the platform (Juaini et al., 2017). It clearly shows that the support of the lesbian community strongly influences the involvement of individuals in same-sex activity. This study will implicate the role of social workers as educators to convey clearer and more accurate information to individuals to understand the same-sex desire and the risks and challenges of living a life as a lesbian. This is because, individuals are more comfortable making the lesbian community the main reference because they are aware that same-sex activities violate Malaysia's values, culture, religion, and laws. Thus, effective education will make individuals more rational and develop positive coping skills for sexual orientation.

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