The Push Factor Influencing Lesbians to End Their Involvement in Same-Sex Activity

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Abstract

The issue of lesbians is not new in today's Malaysian society. What is more worrying, this population continues to increase over time, unnoticed. In this country, statistics and accurate information about this group are limited because the social environment does not allow for same-sex activity. In addition, these individuals find it more difficult to comfortably reflect their sexual identity, thus they seek social support because they are aware that they differ from the norms of society while also be at risk to diseases such as HIV/AIDS and other deviant behaviours. Hence, the objective of this study is to analyse the likely factors that influence lesbians to abandon same-sex activity. This study used a qualitative approach and through the snowball sampling technique, 12 lesbians were interviewed from 10 states in Malaysia, namely Johor, Kelantan, Terengganu, Melaka, Sarawak, Negeri Sembilan, Kuala Lumpur, Kedah, Selangor and Pahang. The results were analysed using Nvivo for Mac version 12 and only three respondents stated two factors of rejection, namely concerns about family acceptance and identity comparison.

Keywords: same-sex activity, lesbian, push factor, hidden population, Malaysia.

INTRODUCTION

In Malaysia, gay and lesbian individuals reveal their sexual orientation in various ways, whether directly or indirectly, and will initially look at the reaction of society before deciding whether to continue to hide it or expose it (Cheah & Singaravelu, 2017). This disclosure is not only related to recognition and self-acceptance, but also looks at how individuals manage that identity in the Malaysian context (Cheah & Singaravelu, 2017). In fact, Baba (2001) explained that the social environment in Malaysia is seen as not giving this population the opportunity to openly reveal their sexual identity and has led them to live in isolation. As a result of the fear of being marginalised by their families and society, lesbians are more willing and comfortable to continue hiding their sexual identity because they have been widely denounced, ignored, and discriminated against, in addition to the fact that their sexual practices and identities clearly contradict the cultural norms of Malaysian society (Low, 2009). According to Baba (2001), religious and cultural norms consider same-sex activity to be morally wrong, and Malaysian law prohibits this practice. Other religions in Malaysia such as Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism also do not certify same-sex activity (Baba, 2001; Mohd Rozin et al., 2012).

Furthermore, living in isolation and away from society, especially family is not easy as they no longer have a good social support system; society sees this issue in general without realising the source of support in the individual's social environment can influence their involvement in same-sex activity, particularly for lesbians. Individuals who

choose to live life as lesbians will not run away from the experience of risky behaviorus that affect their social functioning (Ahmad et al., 2015). For example, a study by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (2014) explained that as many as 7% of students who were respondents to their studies had reported that they had attempted suicide as a result of being victims of bullying due to their different sexual orientations. According to Kertzner, Meyer, Frost and Stiratt (2009) in a New York study involving 396 LGB (Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual) adults, women reported having more depressive symptoms than men, and symptoms of depression among lesbians were higher than among gays. Johns, Zimmerman and Bauermeister (2013) in his study reported that lesbian teens reported having symptoms of depression and high levels of stress due to conflicts between identity or behaviour and their sexual attraction.

Subsequently, homosexuals are also associated with risky diseases such as HIV/AIDS and deviant behaviour (Low, 2009). According to the Women's Institute (2009), lesbians who are also injecting drug users (IDU) have a higher risk of contracting HIV than heterosexual women who are IDUs. They also want to feel accepted and live normally but the chance to receive equal rights for those who identify as people with same-sex tendencies in this country is very thin. These people also suffer from discrimination and do not have the opportunity to gain access to social facilities such as employment, healthcare, education and housing (Subhrajit, 2014; Sherriff, Hamilton, Wigmore, & Giambrone, 2011). Thus, the dilemma of whether to disclose or hide their sexual identity will cause stress to these individuals. When they lack confidence and do not feel safe, it may be difficult for them to protect themselves in their weak mental state, resulting in suicidal acts due to poor self-appreciation (Bregman, Malik, Page, Makynen, & Lindahl, 2013); in addition, because of guilt and conflicts with their lesbian partner, these people reportedly frequently change their sexual orientation (Spitzer, 2003). Therefore, this study is important to look at the push factors in the

involvement in same-sex activity among lesbians especially in Malaysia, although the exact period for ending their involvement is not specified.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the context of this study, the push factor refers to factors that influence women to leave the lesbian world and possibly return to life like other individuals in the heterosexual society. According to Peplau and Amaro (1982), commitment and stability in a relationship is influenced by several aspects of positive rewards such as sexual attraction, compatibility, goals and shared activities. However, lesbians are likely to face a lack of social support, thus are less motivated to save deteriorating relationships. According to Loewenstein (1985), lesbian relationships become very long and turbulent given that some individuals are not able to accept their inclination towards lesbianism and their general involvement in same-sex activity. As a result, deep experiences from past relationships with men encourage individuals to leave the lesbian world. In fact, Loewenstein's study (1985) also described a case where a housewife engaged in a three-month relationship with a lesbian because of boredom with regard to her life with men and her desire to try something new. The relationship ended as the respondent felt guilty, as well as exploited and used by other lesbians.

Family support affects the life of an individual, particularly in the context of the individual's relationships with others. Although individuals are the ones to choose to establish a relationship, social support from the family is important in influencing the well-being of a relationship. According to Rosario, Schrimshaw and Hunter (2008), social support from the family would facilitate the development of optimal sexual identity. Peplau and Amaro (1982) also argued that some lesbians end their relationships with partners because they are not rejected by the family and are not motivated to continue relationships that are considered unstable. In fact, a study by Hill (2008) reported that some lesbians are accepted

back by their families despite taking a long period of time and they receive support from their families to deal with the stress caused by the experience of living as a lesbian.

Peplau and Cochran (1990) think that there is a possibility that lesbians do not want to continue to engage in an unhappy relationship. They are also less motivated to save deteriorating relationships and do not receive social support from the family towards the relationship. In fact, the majority of lesbians also expressed guilt after becoming lesbians and only a lesbian minority considered society's attitude towards same-sex sexual relationships (Peplau & Amaro, 1982). In the study by Loewenstein (1985), respondents could no longer accept their lesbian identity nor commit to relationships with their lesbian partner because they felt that their past relationships with men were more meaningful. There were also respondents who noted the boredom of living as a lesbian, as well as the sense of guilt and the feeling of being used by their lesbian partner. In fact, some of the respondents of the study admitted that they were involved in lesbian relationships because they felt lonely and left the relationship after discovering real happiness. Therefore, this situation is summarised as a push factor in this study; lesbians end same-sex relationships due to the loss factor that leads to a deterioration in the relationship and it is also seen as an opportunity to live a life like other individuals, including being accepted by their family.

Chan (2005) explains that in homosexual relationships, there is also emotional abuse such as being threatened to be abandoned by a partner if they do not reveal their sexual identity to the public. This also impacts the lesbians' emotional well-being with regard to employment status, social relationships and homophobia (Chan, 2005). Thus, this situation is interpreted as a conflict between a lesbian couple that leads to the termination of the relationship.

OBJECTIVE

Analyse the push factors that cause lesbians to no longer engage in same-sex activity.

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

At first glance, this study has revealed a drastic increase in the number of lesbians who actively use social media, in which it has become a free space for lesbians to communicate with each other, as the social environment in Malaysia does not allow open disclosure of lesbian identity. However, this situation should not be underestimated as the consequences of social isolation on the group will increase risky behaviours including depression, alcohol addiction, drug abuse, as well as the potential for HIV/AIDS infection and persecution. As a result, the social functioning of individuals will deteriorate, particularly sources of productive energy such as youths and there would also be an increase in social risks in the country. Therefore, a positive social environment for individuals during the formation phase of sexual identity is very important and it will not be effective without the right social support. Effective sources of social support should not only be present at the beginning of identity formation but are also important when individuals are living life as lesbians, as well as when encouraging them to return to life like other individuals.

In addition, this study is also important in identifying social support systems influence the formation of sexual identity and lesbians' survival in Malaysia. Past studies have shown that lesbians experience more rejection rather than acceptance by social support systems in their surrounding environment. In fact, these people also face issues of discrimination and are even victims of persecution by some communities. A positive social environment in society is important to promote effective social inclusion of lesbians.

From an educational point of view, this study is especially important in educating individuals, especially lesbians, about the development of sexual identity, particularly during the time

when they are trying to understand such sexual desire, which can be a confusing phase in which they would need information and guidance. According to Baba (2001), effective education will be a tool for these people to be more rational in solving problems and considering the pros and cons of being a homosexual. Furthermore, the influence of the media and life in the city are also social factors that will contribute to their desire to go out and reveal their sexual identity (homosexuality) (Baba, 2001). In fact, education about lesbians is also important for social workers. In this regard, when social workers are provided with the proper education pertaining to social work, there is higher potential for them to have feelings of compassion and be more open in providing accurate information about lesbians (Crabtree & Baba, 2001). In order to reduce homophobia, subjects on lesbians should be introduced in the social work curriculum to facilitate education on human sexuality, and the way of life of homosexuals should also be taught (Crabtree & Baba, 2001).

Furthermore, the importance of this study on social work practices is to build a specific guideline for managing clients, especially lesbians in the Malaysian context. In this regard, Crisp (2006) conducted a study on the Gay Affirmative Practice (GAP) Model, a guideline in terms of beliefs and behaviours in social work with homosexuals. The study also examined the extent to which social work practitioners are bound by the rules set by GAP.

METHODOLOGY

The snowball sampling technique is one of the main techniques for carrying out sampling procedures on hidden populations (Heckathorn, 1997) and is often applied in conducting qualitative studies, especially through interviews (Atkinson & Flint, 2001). In this regard, the traditional snowball sampling technique is used to select respondents from a community and identify other potential candidates to be included in the sample (Meyer & Wilson, 2009). Since the sample of this study was also achieved through social media such as Facebook, then the virtual snowball sampling technique (virtual snowball sampling) was used by researchers to track hard-to-obtain populations such as lesbians. According to Baltar and Brunet (2011), the combination of the virtual snowball sampling technique and traditional snowball sampling technique can improve the sample selection process. The combination of these two sampling techniques not only facilitates the researchers in accessing the research samples that meet the criteria online but also offline, and the sample is made up of 12 people from 10 states in Malaysia, namely Johor, Kelantan, Terengganu, Melaka, Sarawak, Negeri Sembilan, Kuala Lumpur, Kedah, Selangor and Pahang.

The interview process was carried out in stages and the in-depth procedure was initiated by selecting respondents based on the sample criteria of the study. In addition, the researchers explained to the respondents the purpose for which the study was conducted, why they were selected as respondents to this study, the expected duration of the interview, the method of interviewing and the use of tape recordings during the interview session. The data analysis for this study was done using the software Nvivo for Mac version 12. The results showed that out of the 12 respondents to this study, only three (3) respondents responded to the study questions.

FINDINGS

A.   WORRIED   ABOUT   FAMILY ACCEPTANCE

Referring to the results, it was found that two respondents, R1 and R4, expressed their concerns in relation to the level of acceptance and their family's reaction to their involvement in same-sex activity. In fact, R4 stated the difficulty in having a relationship with a lesbian partner in secret so as to prevent the family from becoming aware of this. The following are details of the outcome from the interview:

Schedule 1 Worry Prtaining to Family Acceptance

Respondent	Reference(s)	Interview excerpt
1	1 reference has been encoded (2.18% coverage)	There were many times when I thought about the acceptance by the family but I kept going for as long as I had the opportunity.
4	2 references have been encoded (5.26% coverage)	I feel worried if I think about this because I am the family has placed a lot of hope on me. It will be hard on them if this matter is later found out.
		I think it's a little difficult to maintain this relationship hidden from the family's knowledge. And later the family will ask or encourage me to get married.

B. IDENTITY COMPARISON

Referring to the results of the study as stated in Schedule 2 below, the researchers found that only R5 stated that it was still trying to understand their same-sex desire before deciding whether to engage in it seriously. In fact, respondents set a period of opportunity to validate this kind of sexual anguish until the end of the year and so far, respondents have not found a lesbian friend who can convince them of such desires. This situation is known as the comparative stage of identity and refers to the theory of the formation of sexual identity by Vivienne Cass in which the individual feels a conflict between homosexual and heterosexual feelings. At the end of this stage, the individual will accept their same-sex identity or leave it. The following are excerpts of the interview on the subject.

Schedule 2 Identity Comparison

Respondent	Reference(s)	Interview excerpts
5	3 references have been encoded (15.55% coverage)	I'm not telling anyone at the moment. I'm just waiting till the end of the year. Next year I will try to keep myself busy with the children's schooling and will try to forget about this. Whatever it is, I want to try first and I'll decide on the rest later.
		I have yet decided whether to get seriously involved. Now I'm in the process of understanding this feeling. So, I need another woman to get through this situation.
		I'm still as normal but I need to confirm this matter first. It's like feeling stuck as long as I don't settle this.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The findings show two (2) factors that influence respondents to end their involvement in same-sex activity, namely fear of family acceptance and identity comparison. In this regard, the respondent did not state that they would refuse outright but mentioned the possibility of ending their lives as lesbians in the future.

According to Hill (2008), for many individuals, parents play the leading position in social networks and good relations with parents are very important to guarantee their social well-being. Parental support will affect the mental and physical health of homosexuals (Ryan, 2009). The researchers found that two respondents expressed their concern over family acceptance, especially parents, regarding their involvement in same-sex activity. In this regard, one of the respondents admitted to regularly thinking about being sidelined by the family if they became aware of changes to her because the respondent's family

was strict about her future planning. Following this, the respondent is trying as best as possible to keep this matter a secret and is continuing with same-sex activity as usual as long as she has the opportunity to do so. Another respondent reported finding it difficult to have a relationship with a lesbian partner in secret, especially beyond her family's knowledge as she anticipates the family will ask about marriage or eventually ask her to marry. Thus, Rostosky et al. (2004) expects lesbians who engage in same-sex relationships to lose family support after revealing their sexual identities that are clearly not accepted in a cultural context.

In addition, Bilodeau and Renn (2005) also explained that sexual minority individuals may have a good sexual identity and partner but context and time do not allow them to reveal this to their family. Referring to the results of the study, one respondent informed that she was still in the process of understanding her feelings for another woman who had just become aware of her sexual tendencies since December last year. Following this, the respondent searched for a lesbian friend on facebook as guidance with the hope to resolve her sense of confusion about her sexual desire and has not yet decided to seriously engage in this type of sexual activity. According to Doty et al. (2010), sexual minority individuals prefer to share regarding sexual-related matters to like-minded friends because they feel more confident in their knowledge and understanding. Furthermore, individuals who wish to get more information about same-sex activity will definitely use online communication to avoid discrimination (Sells, 2013).

The situation of the respondents in this study can be understood through the theory of the formation of sexual identity. Degges-White et al. (2000) explained that in the second stage, namely the comparison of identity, the individual begins to accept their sexual desires towards other women and will share it with people she trusts. In fact, individuals will also be in conflict about their homosexual and heterosexual feelings. Furthermore, Degges-White et al. (2000) also explained that at this

comparative stage, this identity involves only certain cases or is temporary and there will be cognitive contradictions such as suicidal desires at the beginning of the process of awareness of the sexual desire. Only then will the individual focus on understanding and self-acceptance before looking for other lesbians. At the end of this stage, the respondent is likely to accept this sexual identity or try to stop their same-sex desire or behaviour. Although the respondents did not say outright that they would refuse, they gave the impression of the possibility of ending their life as a lesbian in the future and would need social support especially from the family to achieve that goal. The role of stakeholders such as government agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and professionals such as social workers is also important in identifying the importance of social support resources that affect the survival of individuals and is also the basis of individual involvement in same-sex activity.

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