Stress, Challenges, Discrimination and Sense-Making Processes of Gay University Students: The Social Stigma Approach

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Abstract

On 24th May 2019, the same-sex marriage law took effect, which allowed same-sex couples to marry in Taiwan. About two years after the same-sex marriage law took effect in the community, only a few studies focused on the stress, challenges, discrimination, and sense-making processes of sexual minorities in Taiwan, particularly in the rural communities. Based on the social stigma theory and case study methodology, the researcher collected qualitative data from 16 gay university students who are currently enrolled at one of the Taiwanese universities in rural communities. The results indicated that support of the university administrators, support in the classroom environments, and support in dormitories and roommates were the main findings. The results of this study would fill the research and practical gaps in the fields of same-sex marriage, LGBT rights, and sexual minorities, for the government leaders, non-profit organisations, school administrators, and scholars in the Taiwanese environment.

Keywords: gay, gay students, LGBT, same-sex marriage, sexual minorities, social stigma, Taiwan, university student

1. Introduction

Higher education institutions, colleges, and universities are places where individuals and groups may seek knowledge, vocational practices, critical thinking skills, and ideas from their professors, supervisors, and peers in safe environments. University admissions and enrolment departments do not discriminate against candidates and students based on their background, age, sexual orientation, marital status, place of origin, language, religious practice, etc. (Dolence, 1998; Hossler & Bontrager, 2014; Sanchez & Frank, 2017). However, the topic of sexual orientation has been one of the challenges facing many sexual minorities and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) individuals and groups, particularly in the East Asian region (Capell & Elgebeily, 2019).

Taiwan was the first region to recognise same-sex marriage in Asia. On 24th May 2017, the
Taiwanese Constitutional Court declared that the marriage law exclusively for heterosexual couples, which limited the rights of LGBT individuals and groups, was illegal. More importantly, the Taiwanese Constitutional Court argued for and promised the right of same-sex couples to marry under the Constitution of Taiwan. The Judicial Yuan (i.e. the Judicial branch) expressed that the Legislative Yuan (i.e. the parliament) needed to bring the same-sex marriage interpretation and act (i.e. Judicial Yuan Interpretation No.748) into law. Otherwise, Judicial Yuan Interpretation No.748 would automatically become one of the laws based on the current version and recommendation. As a result, on 24th May 2019, the same-sex marriage law took effect, which allowed same-sex couples to marry in Taiwan (D. T. Chang, 2020; Fell, 2019; Tseng & Sum, 2021).

Although the government and the Judicial Yuan offered legal protection for the rights of LGBT individuals and groups in Taiwan, the concepts and behaviours of members of the general public may or may not be influenced by the decisions of the government (D. T. Chang, 2020; Fell, 2019; Tseng & Sum, 2021). In other words, LGBT individuals and groups may continue to experience stress, challenges, and discrimination due to their sexual orientation, regardless of their location and background (Kuan, 2019).

In university environments, undergraduate students, postgraduate students, researchers, professors, and professional staff may study and work in multicultural environments, as personnel in university environments may come from different cities, countries, and regions internationally (Choudaha, 2016; Dos Santos, 2022a; Soliz, 2018). It is not uncommon for LGBT individuals and groups from different places to continue their voyages in Taiwanese university environments. However, people may argue that LGBT individuals and groups may face problems due to their sexual orientation, particularly in rural regions where members of the general public may not fully understand or accept same-sex marriage and couples (Coley, 2017; Donovan & Barnes, 2020; H. Lee et al., 2019). However, only a few studies have focused on the stress, challenges, and discrimination of university students, particularly in rural communities. Therefore, this research may fill the gaps in this area based on the sharing and stories of a group of LGBT undergraduate students in a rural community in Taiwan.

1.1 Purpose of the Study

This study aims to understand the stress, challenges, and discrimination of LGBT undergraduate students in a Taiwanese university, specifically one located in a rural community. Based on the theoretical framework, one research question guided this study:

1. What stress, challenges, and discrimination are experienced by a group of LGBT undergraduate students in the Taiwanese university environment, and why do they occur?

2. Theoretical Framework and Relevant Literature

2.1 Social Stigma Theory

Social stigma refers to individuals’ social, physical, and psychological backgrounds and characteristics that influence others’ values, concepts, and understanding toward them. The majority of members of the general public disagree with, disapprove of, or discriminate against minority groups due to their characteristics (Dos Santos, 2021b; Goffman, 1963; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). It is not uncommon for sexual orientation, gender, illness, and place of origin to be elements and factors of social stigma and discrimination (Bhanot et al., 2021; Dos Santos, 2021a; Eisenberg et al., 2009; Kwaghe et al., 2021; Livingston et al., 2018).

Students and professional staff may face social stigma in university environments due to their backgrounds and characteristics. A recent study (Dos Santos, 2021a) investigated the social stigma problems of female mechanical engineering students, particularly regarding career decisions and developments in the university environment. Although there are no gender requirements for any
university programmes or courses, members of the general public usually argue that engineering is a male-oriented academic programme and career pathway. Another study (Eisenberg et al., 2009) also indicated that college students might face mental health problems during their university voyage. However, the views of members of the public and personal stigmas such as skin colour, age, nationality, religious practice, economic background, and self-discrimination could limit the help-seeking behaviours of affected individuals and groups. Another study (Christie, 2021) compared the social support, psychological health, and anxiety of LGB and heterosexual students in a university environment. The results indicated that the LGB students usually faced low levels of social support and psychological well-being due to their sexual orientation. In fact, gender and sexual orientation are important factors in the field of social stigma. Therefore, the current study used the social stigma theory to investigate the stress, challenges, and discrimination of LGBT undergraduate students in a Taiwanese university, specifically one located in a rural community (McCarty-Caplan, 2018; Worthen, 2012).

A recent study (Dos Santos, 2022b) investigated the experiences of returning Korean-Chinese students in university environments in South Korea. Although the Korean-Chinese individuals and groups shared the same skin colour and cultural backgrounds as the local Korean students, many indicated that cultural characteristics, place of origin, and spoken languages were major factors due to which they faced social stigma. Another study (Dos Santos, 2022c) also indicated that international students might face problems, social stigma, and difficulties due to their unique status in host countries and regions. The results indicated that nationality and language learning experiences were the major challenges. One study (J. Lee, 2007) also argued that although universities and government departments offered opportunities for international students to study in host countries and regions, international students faced problems beyond their skin colour, particularly people from other continents and cultural regions.

3. Methodology

3.1 Case Study

The case study methodology (Yin, 2012) was used to investigate the current study and the social problems. The case study methodology was useful because the researcher wanted to understand the comments and qualitative sharing from a group of participants in a designated site, in this case, a Taiwanese university. The case study methodology allowed the researcher to collect voices in a targeted site which might provide the reflections and recommendations to targeted audiences and readers. The current university and research site could reflect and provide recommendations, so the case study approach was used.

3.2 Participants and Recruitment

The purposive sampling strategy was used to collect qualitative data from 16 participants at a Taiwanese university, particularly in rural communities. First, the researcher contacted the university student affairs office for the discussions and research activities. The officers agreed and forwarded the information to the appropriate leaders and student club managers. Second, the school leaders forwarded the invitation flyers to their students for discussions and further inquiries. Interested parties might contact the researcher via the email address and telephone number. Third, 16 participants contacted the researcher and agreed to join the study. The researcher forwarded the unsigned content forms, protocol, risk statements, and procedure statements to all participants. All signed the content form and agreed to join the study. During the data collection procedure, no participants decided to quit the study.
3.3 Data Collection

Three data collection tools were used, including semi-structured interviews, focus group activities, and member checking interviews. First, the individual, private, and semi-structured interview tool was useful because the researcher tended to collect rich and engaging data and stories from the participants, particularly the stories before they joined the university and during their university voyage. Second, after the interview sessions, the researcher invited all participants to join a focus group activity. As there were 16 participants, two focus group activities (i.e. eight participants per group) were hosted to collect the group-oriented messages. Third, after the interview sessions and focus group activities, the researcher categorised the data based on each participant’s file. The researcher sent the individual qualitative data to the participants for the member checking interview and confirmation. During the member checking interview, the participants confirmed their own qualitative data and agreed with the data. Please note, due to the travelling restriction, the abovementioned data collection procedure was conducted online.

3.4 Data Analysis

Two-step tool was employed, including the open-coding and axial-coding techniques (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). First, the open-coding technique was used to categorise the massive materials into meaningful groups and themes. The researcher re-read the materials multiple times to find out the connections. By using the open-coding technique, the researcher merged stories and data as the first-level themes and subthemes. Based on the first-level themes and subthemes, the researcher further employed the axial-coding technique to categorise the themes to the final version (i.e. second-level themes and subthemes). As a result, three themes and two subthemes were yielded.

3.5 Human Subject Protection

Privacy is the most important factor in this study. Therefore, the researcher stored the signed consent forms, voiced messages, transcripts, contact information, and personal information in a password-protected locker. Only the researcher could read the information. After the study was completed, the researcher deleted and destroyed the information immediately. The study was supported by the Woosong University Academic Research Funding 2022.

4. Findings and Discussions

Table 1 outlines the themes and subthemes of the study. Although Taiwan was the first region in Asia to approve same-sex marriage, people in rural communities might still express negative comments toward LGBT individuals and groups, as same-sex marriage and homosexuality could violate traditional concepts and values of Asian people. Based on the stories and comments of the university students, the researcher categorised three themes and two subthemes.

Table 1: Themes and subthemes

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4.1 Reactions of University Administrators

Before joining the university, many participants had had concerns about the management and administrative styles regarding LGBT issues and affairs at the university. However, the participants indicated that the university management accepted and recognised the needs and differences of sexual minority people:

...I thought my university...and the school management did not like gay and lesbian students...but I was wrong...the university management and people are very nice to students with different backgrounds...so far, many LGBT people do not express any concerns about safety in the university...(Participant #16)

...I was very afraid before I came to the university...because the university is in a rural area...but the university management and the environments are very friendly...the university does not have any facilities or else to limit people based on their differences...no differences between gay and straight people...(Participant #6)

Some participants also indicated that the university established a series of non-discrimination and protection plans and regulations for sexual minorities, LGBT, international students, and disabled students and professional staff on-campus (Kong et al., 2021). Although the policies and regulations might not change the situations and minds of individuals and groups outside the university environment, the university management tried their best to advocate the rights of all minorities in the university. The researcher captured a story:

...there are non-discrimination schemes...although I don't see any people discriminating against people because of their sexual orientation...it is important that the university also has additional plans and regulations for the minorities...gender and sexual orientation would not be any social stigma and discrimination...(Participant #1)

In line with the social stigma theory (Goffman, 1963), the participants argued that there was no significant discrimination or bias by the university management and leadership. According to some previous studies (Worthen, 2018), LGBT university students could face difficulties and challenges due to their sexual orientation and personal characteristics, particularly challenges from university management and administration (Cain & Hevel, 2021; Mavhandu-Mudzusi & Sandy, 2015). However, no participants expressed any limitations or restrictions because of their sexual orientation on-campus. Therefore, the findings of this study discovered new directions and behaviours in university management and leadership, particularly at Taiwanese universities in rural communities.

4.1.1 Support from Departments and Organisations

...there are several student clubs and organisations for the LGBT communities and students...the university departments and administrative offices contributed resources to us...we [LGBT students] have resources and funding for meeting and external connections to the local communities...we could do volunteering activities for our community...with our LGBT organisational logo...(Participant #7)

In Europe and Latin America, LGBT sports clubs and organisations are not uncommon due to social justice and social equality movements and developments over the past few decades. However, due to the prevalence of traditional practices and values, LGBT rights and movements are still not very common in many countries and regions (Miró & Piedra, 2021). Therefore, many participants indicated that they wanted to establish clubs and organisations based on their LGBT orientation. All were afraid that the university would not approve their applications. However, the university administrative offices approved their applications and supported their ideas:

...many LGBT students want to start a basketball team...the university only has a university-level basketball team...we [LGBT students] do not have the interests...but we want to have a leisure club for LGBT and casual students...the university approved our application...(Participant #8)
...we wanted to have an LGBT movie and reading club...to promote the social equality and social justice...my friends told me that the university may disagree with our application...but the university agreed and provided us with an office for our club...we have computers and all equipment...no discrimination and social stigma at all...(Participant #9)

According to the social stigma theory (Goffman, 1963), it is not uncommon to see discrimination and social stigma toward sexual minorities and LGBT individuals and groups, regardless of their location and background. In this case, the participants indicated that they faced no significant challenges, discrimination, or social stigma from university departments and organisations in the university environment. Unlike the findings from the previous studies (Coley, 2017; Mavhandu-Mudzusi & Sandy, 2015; Worthen, 2018), LGBT students and individuals experienced challenges due to their sexual orientation. The participants in the Taiwanese university environments expressed their positive experiences from their university management and leadership. The findings of this study discovered and outlined the current situation in Taiwan, more particularly social justice and social equality in Taiwanese university environments.

4.2 Reactions in Classroom Environments: Support from Professors, Classmates, and Peers

Reflecting other studies (Tang & Poudel, 2018; Wilkinson et al., 2017) focusing on LGBT students’ experiences and situations in Asia, before the students came to the university, many were afraid of the problems of sexual orientation, discrimination, and social stigma from their classmates and in classroom environments. However, after spending several semesters on-campus with their classmates and in their classroom environments, many expressed positive experiences, in particular all expressed that sexual orientation did not limit their development. One the one hand, some students actively expressed their sexual orientation to their classmates and professors during their lectures and peer-to-peer discussion sessions:

...I am out...I want people to understand me, and I want to show the truth of my soul to my classmates and others...my professors and classmates did not show any abnormal behaviours and reactions to me...we are in the university and in the classroom...I can see the social equality...no differences between us...based on my sexual orientation...(Participant #10)

...my classmates support me...and support my personal decision...this is my own life and I do not need other people’s judgement...the university, my professors, and my friends in my courses always support me...we have excellent relationship...we can share our knowledge and works from a fair platform...(Participant #11)

On the other hand, some participants did not actively share their sexual orientation with others, but explained that their classmates and professors expressed positive reactions and feedback to students with different backgrounds:

...our university has international students, disabled students, and LGBT students...I did not tell people my sexual orientation...I don’t believe it is essential...my classmates recognised people with different backgrounds...we had positive and critical discussions about the same-sex marriage in Taiwan...the sharing was positive...(Participant #12)

In line with the social stigma theory (Goffman, 1963), in some countries and regions, LGBT identity and sexual orientation has significantly impacted the experiences and sense-making processes of individuals and groups, particularly in university environments (Coley, 2017; Nash & Browne, 2019). However, based on the sharing of participants currently enrolled at a Taiwanese university in a rural community, the participants expressed significantly positive feedback and stories. Although some experienced challenges, the difficulties did not significantly relate to their sexual orientation and LGBT status.
More importantly, traditional concepts regarding social stigma and discrimination (Coley, 2017; Goffman, 1963; H. Lee et al., 2021; Mavhandu-Mudzusi & Sandy, 2015; Yang, 2021), particularly in East Asian regions, did not perfectly match the findings from the participants' sharing. In fact, most of the participants did not experience social stigma or discrimination based on their sexual orientation in university environments. The findings of this study discovered and outlined how social justice and social equality were applied in the Taiwanese university environment (Ren et al., 2020; Yang, 2021).

4.3 Reactions in Dormitories and Reactions of Roommates

Based on a previous study (Pomerantz, 2010), LGBT students might experience bullying and discrimination in their dormitories due to their sexual orientation. Unlike single-room dormitories with individual bedrooms and spaces, many Taiwanese dormitories are shared rooms with multiple roommates in the same bedroom environment. Although only same-gendered students share rooms, conflicts and arguments are not uncommon. Bullying, bias, and discrimination can occur, particularly toward sexual minorities. However, all participants expressed that no bullying or significant conflict occurred based on their sexual orientation. The researcher captured the following stories:

...we had conflicts between different roommates...but these were only the time management and living style...my roommates knew I am gay...but they recognised my sexual orientation...we discussed and agreed with all people's differences...I knew that in some countries, such as South Korea...gay roommates were being bullied by other roommates...but it never happened in this university... (Participant #3)

...so far, no one has reported any discrimination and bullying cases based on people's sexual orientation...if some bad things happen, our communities must be noticed...but the LGBT and straight communities are excellent...no bullying happened in our dormitory...the supervisors of the dormitory also pay special attention to all bullying issues in our dormitories...no abnormal things happened... (Participant #13)

Although conflicts and disagreements occurred in the participants’ dormitories, arguments based on sexual orientation played no role in the experiences and sense-making processes of the participants (Goffman, 1963). Although a previous study (Pomerantz, 2010) argued that LGBT students might experience challenges due to their gender and sexual orientation, the participants in this study expressed their positive experiences with their classmates in the school dormitory environment. Therefore, the findings of this study further discovered and advocated that social justice and social equality have been widely exercised in Taiwanese university environments.

4.3.1 “I Live Off-Campus”: Communities are Friendly

Besides those living in on-campus housing arrangements, some participants lived off-campus in the local community, whilst some lived off-campus in university-owned units. According to a recent study (H. Chang, 2021), members of the general public in rural communities are usually conservative and believe same-sex marriage and LGBT issues significantly violate traditional values and practices, particularly in Taiwan. Participants from metropolitan and urban environments expressed their concerns about the values and concepts of members of the general public in the rural community. However, the participants indicated that the members of general public expressed no social stigma and discrimination due to their sexual orientation or background. First, the researcher captured a story from a participant living off-campus in the community:

...my neighbours and the owner of my living unit knew my sexual orientation and my same-sex romantic relationship...no one in our neighbourhood discriminated against us...I could see the fairness and open-minded people in the community...I am surprised by that...but this is the real situation in Taiwan... (Participant #2)
Second, a few participants lived in the university-owned unit located in the community. Although the university owns the building, members of the general public also live in the same neighbourhood. One story was captured:

…I hung a rainbow flag in front of the windows of my dormitory...basically, all people know I support same-sex marriage and the LGBT communities in our neighbourhood...but no one really cared...people did not express any negative reactions and comments to us...we are all fair in Taiwan, and Taiwanese always express the positive messages to others...(Participant #14)

According to the social stigma theory (Goffman, 1963), arguments and conflicts in university dormitories can occur due to differences in backgrounds, living styles, gender, etc., and according to a previous study (Pomerantz, 2010), LGBT individuals and groups could face negative experiences, challenges, and social stigma from different parties due to their sexual orientation. However, in this case, the participants indicated that their sexual orientation played no role in any challenges, discrimination, or social stigma during their experiences living on-campus and off-campus. More importantly, many believed that members of the general public had already accepted and recognised that sexual orientation, gender, and same-sex marriage should be equal in Taiwanese environments (D. T. Chang, 2020; Fell, 2019; Huang et al., 2020; Ko et al., 2020). Therefore, the findings of this study discovered and outlined the situations and experiences of a group of LGBT university students in a rural university environment based on their stories.

5. Limitations and Further Research Directions

First, same-sex marriage and its related regulations significantly concern the rights of gay couples and groups. Also, lesbians and bisexual individuals and groups experience challenges and difficulties in Taiwanese society. However, the current study only collected data from a group of gay individuals. Therefore, future research studies may expand the participants’ group to other people, such as lesbians, in order to expand the horizon.

Second, the current study collected data from a group of gay individuals at a Taiwanese university in a rural community. In fact, the university usually offers safe and open-minded environments to students, faculty members, and school professional staff, regardless of their sexual orientation and gender. However, voices and feedback from the general public members would be useful, particularly in rural communities. Therefore, future research studies may collect data from the general public members in the rural communities, particularly their understanding and reflection on the same-sex marriage regulation.

Third, although the current study is concerned about the experiences of a group of gay university students in a Taiwanese university, heterosexual individuals and groups’ comments and voices are also important. Therefore, future research studies may further compare the experiences and stories between homosexual and heterosexual individuals and groups, particularly in the university environments in urban and rural communities.

6. Contribution to Practice

First, although the Taiwanese government and the Judicial Yuan approved and agreed the Interpretation No.748 as the law, which allowed same-sex marriage law taking effect on 24th May 2019, the practices and voices of the general public members are more important than the exercises from the government and the Judicial Yuan. Therefore, the current study discovered and outlined the experiences based on a group of gay university students, particularly in rural communities. The findings would fill the gaps in this area and allow readers to understand the current situations in the Taiwanese environment.

Second, government departments and agencies usually focus on the exercises of the law and
regulation in the Taiwanese communities. However, it is important for non-profit organisations and scholars to understand the voices and comments of the general public members and the targeted individuals and groups in order to upgrade and reform the current law and regulations. Therefore, the results of this study would provide a reflection to the policymakers and government leaders, particularly on the long-term developments of the same-sex marriage law.

Third, based on the findings of this study, the participants indicated that no significant challenges and negative experiences were found in the university environment and the surrounding rural environments. However, non-profit organisations and government departments should continue to reform and upgrade the rights and management of sexual minorities, regardless of their status, sites, locations, and backgrounds. The results of this study would become one of the references for these agencies to contribute resources for long-term developments, particularly for sexual minorities in the Taiwanese environment.

References


