

Understanding Undergraduate Student's Knowledge and Perceptions of Homosexuality: A Qualitative Approach

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Abstract

Homophobic attitude among youth remains a major concern worldwide. While India, where the youth constitute a significant population, makes it more critical and hence addressing this issue become imperative. When young people adopt a positive and inclusive mindset, they contribute to fostering social harmony, innovation, and economic growth. Unfortunately, LGBTQIA+ youth are often subjected to unequal treatment and discriminations. These discriminatory behaviors are often ingrained to negative attitude, prejudice and lack of knowledge. This qualitative research paper was aimed to explore the current knowledge and perceptions of undergraduate youth towards homosexuality. The study was conducted among 104 undergraduate students in two colleges of district of Jorhat, Assam. The findings of the study reveal that individuals who recognize homosexuality as a natural, biological phenomenon and a normal variation of human sexual orientation are more likely to develop positive attitude. And on the other hand religious beliefs, certain moral and social values sometimes act as a contributing factor of homophobic attitude. Addressing homophobia, is not something can be done overnight, it needs collaborative efforts among many stakeholders. Although, the National Education Policy (NEP), 2020 can not explicitly address homophobia, but its focus on gender inclusivity, fostering constitutional values like equality can reduce it over time.

Key words: Homophobia, youth, knowledge, perception

1. INTRODUCTION

India holds a largest segment of youth population and hence investing in youth is crucial to build a healthy nation (Dwivedi *et al.*, 2020). When young people adopt a positive and inclusive mindset, they contribute to fostering social harmony, innovation, and economic growth. Again, the growth of a nation thrives when every individual, regardless of their color, creed, gender or sexual orientation, is treated with equality and respect (Bertay, Dordevic and Sever, 2020). Unfortunately, LGBTQIA+ youth are often looked down upon and subjected to unequal treatment and discrimination, despite possessing immense potential (Wilson and Cariola, 2019). In research this phenomenon is often termed as Homophobia. It refers to prejudice, fear, hatred, or discrimination against individuals who identify as or are perceived to be homosexual (lesbian, gay, or bisexual). It can manifest in various forms, such as verbal abuse, exclusion, discriminatory policies, physical violence, or systemic inequality. Rooted in stereotypes, cultural norms, lack of awareness or misinformation, homophobia perpetuates stigma and marginalization, affecting the mental health, social well-being, and rights of LGBTQ+ individuals, especially the youth (Chaudary, 2023). Undoubtedly, homophobia is deeply rooted in religious, political, and cultural values and beliefs, with negative attitudes toward homosexuality largely influenced by the concept of heteronormativity (Ventriglio *et al.*, 2021) where heterosexuality is considered as normal and homosexuality is often seen as unnatural.

Homophobia is deeply ingrained in many societies and often manifests among youth. For students, however, the most common causes of homophobia include misinformation, peer pressure, and culturally ingrained reinforcement of heteronormative ideals. Such environment continues to foster bullying, exclusion, and verbal or physical abuse against LGBTQ+ individuals, thereby making the school and college environments some of the most common place for homophobic incidents (Moyano and Fuentes, 2020). Additionally, the lack of comprehensive sexual health education that includes discussions on sexual orientation and gender identity contributes more to homophobia. To address this issue, schools and colleges must actively promote knowledge-based curriculum of sexuality courses, anti-discrimination policies, and hence ensures safe spaces for LGBTQ+ students (Rogers *et al.*, 2009, Farrell *et al.*, 2021). The fear of being ostracized in society also prevents many individuals from standing against such behaviors, leaving homophobia uncontrolled.

1.1. Objective:

- To explore the knowledge and perception of undergraduate college students towards homosexuality.

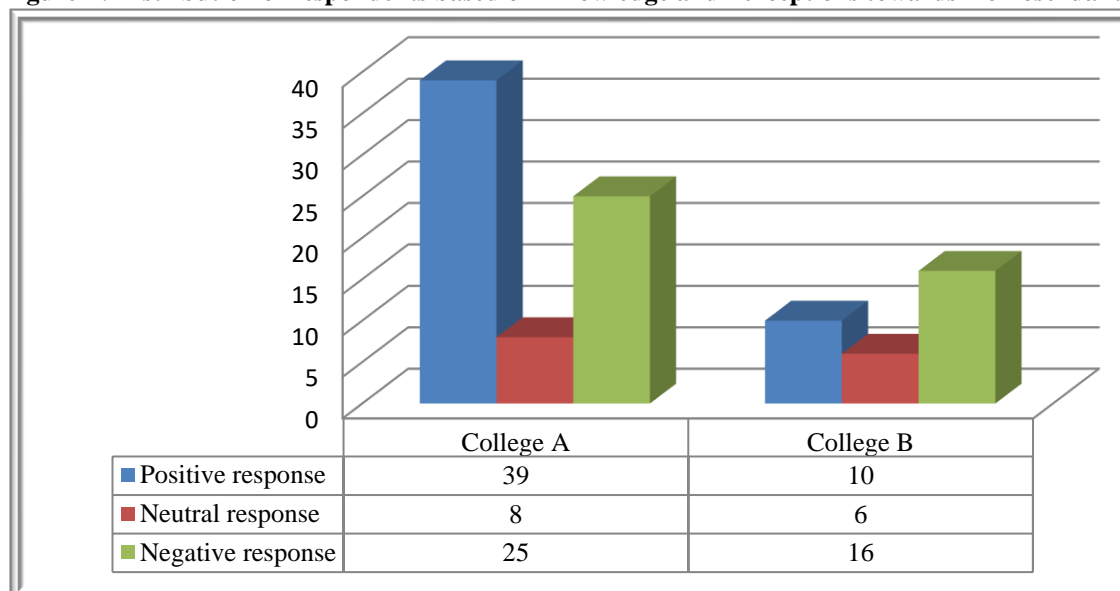
1.2. Methodology

The present study was conducted in undergraduate colleges of the district of Jorhat, Assam. A written permission was granted from the Director of Higher Education (DHE), Assam, to conduct the study in the colleges without hampering the regular class hours.

A group of 104 students from two colleges were selected randomly. A survey was conducted by the researcher to know the total population of students in 16 undergraduate colleges in the district of Jorhat, Assam. The selection of the colleges was purposive and was based on student enrollment. The two selected colleges, College A (n=72) and College B (n=32) had the highest enrollment. To collect qualitative data the students were asked to answer an open ended question "What is Homosexuality according to you? Is it Good or Bad? Justify why" Before collecting the data, written consent was taken from the respondents and they were assured that their information will be kept confidential and will be used only for research purpose. For data analysis an inductive approach is a 'bottom up' approach, it is driven by what is in the data, which means that the codes and themes are derived from the content of the data (code based on participants' experiences).

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Figure-1: Distribution of respondents based on Knowledge and Perceptions towards Homosexuality



The Figure-1 represents the distribution of respondents based on Knowledge and Perception towards Homosexuality. The figure shows that among the 72 respondents of College A, majority of the students (n=32) had correct knowledge. On the other hand among the respondents of College B, majority of the students had negative perception towards homosexuality.

2.1. Thematic Analysis of Qualitative data

2.1.1. Familiarizing of the data

The written responses of the students were read again and again for understanding and to categorize into three distinct response-Positive, Neutral and Negative responses based on the answers they wrote.

2.1.2. Generating Initial Codes

All similar semantic data provided by the participants were combined into small groups to create initial codes. Initial codes were then reviewed and codes with similar semantics were further converted to broader transitional Codes.

Table- 1: Overview of initial and transitional codes recurring throughout the positive responses

Interview Question	Initial Code	Transitional codes
What is Homosexuality According to you?	<p>Positive Responses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homosexuality is a normal sexual orientation • Romantic attraction and behavior between same sex couple • Love between two individuals of same sex • Way to express one's identity freely • Homosexuality is biological • It is normal and one's own choice • Hormonal Imbalance • Homosexuality is a normal feeling • Homosexuality is an Emotional connection between two people of same sex <p>Neutral Responses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A person with both male and female organs • Do not have adequate knowledge • Can be corrected if they want <p>Negative Responses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fake • a mental disorder and can be treated • Way to get publicity and earn followers • Against Nature • willingly become gay but born straight • Influence of westernization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Romantic and Emotional Expression • Natural and Biological • Innate and Valid orientation • Misconception and Lack of awareness • Unnatural • Social trend • Disorder
Is it Good or Bad? Justify why?	<p>Positive Responses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Natural Process • Not one's own fault • Love between two homosexuals and love between two heterosexuals are same • Do not cause any harm to the society • Least respected and oftendiscriminated • Equally contributing to the society <p>Neutral Responses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Neither good nor bad • Cannot say <p>Negative Responses</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sinful • Against Religion • Morally bad • Harming the society • Harming Children • Fake and Cheat people • Anything against nature is bad 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legitimate Phenomenon • Challenge faced by LGBTQIA+ Community • Equal and integral memberof society • Neutral • Moral and religious objection • Perceived harm to society • Deception and unauthentic

2.1.3. Searching for themes

After frequent recurring of qualitative data, two themes were emerged. The themes were-

(I) Adequate knowledge and awareness among youth is critical to have positive attitude towards homosexuals.

(II) Religiosity, social and moral values might contribute to homophobia.

These two broad themes were found to be meaningfully related to the earlier transitional codes.

2.1.4. Reviewing potential themes from positive responses

The subthemesderived from the positive responses highlight the positive feelings of youths in terms of adequate knowledge and awareness towards homosexuality. Certain subthemes also reflect the awareness among youth regarding LGBTQIA+ discrimination and emphasize the importance of eliminating such prejudices. For example, subthemes "Natural and Biological", "Legitimate Phenomenon", "Innate and valid orientation" highlight the adequate knowledge

of the youth and subthemes “Challenge faced by LGBTQIA+ Community” and “Equal and integral member of society” signify the awareness towards LGBTQIA+ discriminations.

2.1.5. Reviewing potential themes from negative responses

The subthemes “Unnatural”, “Social trend” and “Disorder” were derived from the negative responses of the undergraduate students. The subthemes “Unnatural” and “Disorder” reflect homophobia and a lack of proper understanding about homosexuality, while the subtheme “social trend” reveals a negative attitude among youth towards it. The subthemes from many negative responses predominantly reflect religious and moral perspectives; often emphasizing the belief that homosexuality contradicts moral and religious principles. An example of such subtheme is “Religious and moral objection”. The subtheme “Perceived harm to society” highlights a belief or perception that homosexual behavior, could negatively impact societal norms, or stability. The subtheme “Deception and unauthentic” highlights a belief that homosexuals are not honest or true to social and religious norms, and doubts the authenticity of their identities or orientations.

Table- 2. Distribution of Potential Themes and Sub-themes found recurring throughout the dataset

Theme 1(Positive Responses)	Theme 2(Negative Responses)
Adequate knowledge and awareness among youth is critical to have positive attitude towards homosexuals	Religiosity, social and moral values might contribute to homophobia
Sub-theme	Sub-theme
Innate and Valid orientation(Adequate knowledge)	Moral and religious objection(Religiosity and Moral values)
Romantic and Emotional Expression(Adequate knowledge)	Perceived harm to society(Social values)
Natural and Biological(Adequate knowledge)	Deception and unauthentic(Homophobia)
Legitimate Phenomenon (Awareness)	Unnatural(Homophobia)
Challenge faced by LGBTQIA+ Community(awareness)	Social trend(Homophobia)
Equal and integral member of society(Positive attitude)	Disorder(Homophobia)

2.1.5. Defining and Naming Themes

After analyzing the qualitative data, two main themes came out which explain the knowledge and perspective of undergraduate students from the selected colleges of district of Jorhat, Assam, towards homosexuality and contributing factors to Homophobia. This thematic analysis will explore the differences between the knowledge and perception of undergraduate students towards homosexuality and will also discuss the contributing factors towards homophobia based on the positive and negative responses the respondents provided.

(I) Adequate knowledge and awareness among youth is critical to have positive attitude towards homosexuals

Knowledge and awareness play a critical role in combating homophobia; by addressing root cause of prejudice and misinformation. Several studies have proved that people's knowledge of the truth about sexual orientations, with higher level of education, are less likely to hold homophobic attitudes. As per the example, Herek (2000) further indicates that awareness and education campaigns can significantly diminish prejudices through empathy and comprehension, along with debunking myths on homosexuality. The interventions noted by Morrison and Morrison (2002) include inclusivity training and awareness programs, which have also shown reduced discriminatory attitudes and behaviors. This increase in awareness and knowledge further accentuate gradual acceptance, social tolerance and the rejection of the hetero-normal culture (George *et al.*, 2020). This paper will present some extracts from the written responses as evidence to support the derived theme. Some of the positive responses of the question “*what is homosexuality according to you?*” were-

“According to me homosexuality is the romantic and sexual attraction between two individuals of same sex; it is a normal sexual attraction like the attraction between opposite sex.”

“Homosexuality is absolutely normal. It is way to express ones love towards same sex. It is Biological...”

“....an Emotion. It is their choice. But they are often neglected and discriminated by the society without any valid reason. They are nothing less than people who are straight”

Respondents who knew homosexuality, and were aware about it, found to answer positively to the second question they attempted- “*Is it good or bad? Justify why*”. Majority of the respondents from College A i.e. 39 out of 72 responded positively, whereas 10 out of 32 students from college B gave positive response. Some of the exact extracts from the positive responses were-

“It is good, because homosexuality is natural and inborn, they cannot change their sexual orientation according to their wish. We should respect their feelings as the way they are”

“It is not bad because the love between two individual of same sex and love between two individuals of opposite sex is same. We should not judge a person by his/her sexual orientation because being homosexual or heterosexual is a personal matter and is completely valid and natural”

The responses highlight the accurate knowledge and awareness some undergraduate students possess, reflecting their tolerance and positive attitudes toward homosexuality. Those who recognized homosexuality as a natural phenomenon or biological and inborn, they were found to respond more favorably. Some students also had awareness of violence and discrimination faced by homosexuals and expressed disapproval of all forms of injustice. Such students also tend to view homosexuality not as a matter of choice or fault, but an inherent aspect of a person's identity. These students strongly advocate for equality, believing that everyone deserves respect, dignity, and equal rights regardless of their sexual orientation. From the positive responses we can find a clear association between knowledge and awareness of sexual diversity and favorable attitude and acceptance toward homosexuality.

(II) Religiosity, social and moral values might contribute to homophobia

Religiosity and adherence to traditional social values often contribute to homophobia because they create and reinforce rigid gender roles and heteronormative culture (Roggemans *et al.*, 2015, Singhal and Gupta, 2022). Many religious doctrines talk about heterosexual relationships being divinely ordained and marginalize same-sex relationships as sinful or unnatural. Similarly, traditional gender roles rooted in patriarchy view homosexuality as a deviation from societal norms, leading to prejudice and discrimination. Such beliefs, when internalized, lead to develop stigmatization, rejection, and violence against the LGBTQ+ community, thereby perpetuating homophobia across generations.

The Theme-2 was derived from the negative responses of the respondents; it highlights how some students answered homosexuality as morally wrong and sinful from religious point of view. Among the 72 respondents, 25 answered negatively and among 32 students of College B, majority, i.e. 16 students gave negative answers. Some of the negative responses under the question “What is homosexuality according to you?” were quoted as-

“Homosexuality is the love between two persons of same sex. When a man gets attracted to man instead of woman they are called gay and when a woman loves another woman, she is called lesbian.”

“.....homosexuality is a psychological disorder. They can be treated with medication....”

“...it is against religion and morally wrong.”

The negative responses highlight the lack of clarity and misinformation among the respondents. Some respondents had heard the term and knew the concept but they assumed them as unnatural and morally wrong. The respondents who thought homosexuality as unnatural, morally wrong and against religious values were more likely to answer negatively in the second question which was “Is it good or bad? Justify why.” Those respondents who had no idea about homosexuality answered “No Idea”, “Can't say” or “it is neither good nor bad” etc. Some respondents justified homosexuality a bad thing as-

“...I believe homosexuality is not good because they can wrongly influence the society which can affect young children and adolescents....”

“...the homosexuals are not real; they act to be homosexuals to earn publicity, followers and to earn money...”

“...it is bad because they are not born as gay, they are fake, it is sin to be homosexual...”

Negative responses from undergraduate students indicate a clear prevalence of homophobia rooted in certain beliefs and misconceptions. Many respondents held homosexuality as morally wrong, thus against religious principles, which highly affected their negative perceptions. They are considered not only unnatural but also relate it to misleading societal values particularly concerning children. In addition, some of the respondents transferred the beliefs that there is only one valid sexual orientation and heterosexuality is real, while the phenomenon of homosexuality is fake and manipulates for monetary gains.

3. CONCLUSION

The findings of the study revealed that majority (47%) of the respondents gave positive responses although 39% of the respondents gave negative responses and only 13% of the respondents preferred to have neutral opinion. The findings conclude that adequate knowledge and awareness about homosexuality, encompassing its conceptual understanding, scientific basis, and LGBTQIA+ rights, play a crucial role in fostering positive attitudes. Individuals who recognize homosexuality as a natural, biological phenomenon and a normal variation of human sexual orientation are more likely to develop acceptance and empathy. And on the other hand religious beliefs, certain moral and social values sometimes act as a contributing factor of homophobic attitude (Monroe and Plant, 2019). Addressing homophobia requires collaborative efforts among policymakers, research and educational institutions and public. Policymakers must enact inclusive laws, researchers should identify underlying problems provide evidence-based data and strategies, and educators can foster acceptance through inclusive curricula. Here, National Educational Policy (NEP), 2020 would play a significant role. The NEP, 2020 envisions an inclusive and equitable education system, including the gender diversity in education system (Mathew, 2023). Although, the NEP can not explicitly address homophobia, but its focus on gender inclusivity, fostering constitutional values like equality can reduce it over time.

Ethical Considerations: the researcher got approval from IHEC (Institutional Human Ethics Committee) for conducting the study. Ethical considerations were taken into account throughout the study. Written consent was taken from the respondents prior to data collection. The participation was purely voluntarily and they were allowed to withdraw at any point. Also, the researcher ensured that the personal information will not be revealed and data will only be used for research purposes.

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