External Challenges of Homosexual Men in the Process of Change

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to identify the external challenges faced by the homosexual male community during the process of leaving the homosexual lifestyle. Seven Muslim homosexual men, between the ages of 22 and 48, participated as informants in this qualitative study, which employed purposive sampling and snowball sampling methods. Researchers used semi-structured in-depth interview techniques to collect data. Through thematic analysis, the study found four external challenges that must be faced by informants in this process of change. Negative responses from individuals in the environment, social environment factors, technological developments, and the absence of a support system were the external challenges the informants encountered throughout their journey away from the homosexual lifestyle. Implications and recommendations for two professional groups—counselors and religious figures—who are directly involved with this community are also discussed to help them overcome the homosexual lifestyle.

Keywords: Homosexual men, external challenges, process of change

INTRODUCTION

This study seeks to investigate the external challenges encountered by Muslim homosexual men who are attempting to leave the homosexual lifestyle in Malaysia. While much discourse exists on LGBT identity formation and maintenance, less focus has been placed on the barriers to change faced by those seeking to exit such lifestyles. This paper addresses that gap.

To anchor the analysis, the study is guided by Meyer's Minority Stress Theory (2003), which posits that sexual minorities experience chronic stress as a result of stigmatization, discrimination, and internalized negative societal attitudes. This framework is particularly relevant in the Malaysian Muslim context, where religious, cultural, and legal pressures intensify the stress experienced by individuals seeking to transition to a heterosexual lifestyle. Minority Stress Theory helps illuminate how these external pressures hinder recovery, reinforce internal conflict, and complicate the process of behavioral change.

To provide a stronger conceptual foundation, this study is situated within the framework of Minority Stress Theory (Meyer, 2003), which emphasizes how stigma, prejudice, and discrimination create a hostile and stressful social environment that negatively affects sexual minorities. This theory is particularly relevant in the Malaysian context, where cultural and religious opposition to homosexuality exacerbates the psychological challenges faced by this group.

Despite legal and religious condemnation of homosexuality in Malaysia, some individuals actively pursue a process of change to leave the homosexual lifestyle. However, little is known about the specific external barriers they face in this transition. Therefore, this study aims to explore these external challenges among Muslim homosexual men in Malaysia, offering deeper insight into the social, technological, and interpersonal factors that may hinder or facilitate change.

A homosexual lifestyle is defined as a state in which an individual is attracted to another of the same gender in terms of social interactions, lifestyle patterns, and same-gender sexuality (Amran & Noriah, 2014). Homosexuality is not only related to sexual behavior but also involves desires and tendencies toward others of

the same gender in psychological, emotional, and social aspects (Nek Mah Batri, Farahwahida, Siti Norlina, Ahmad Muhyiddin, Mohd Nasir & Zulkiflee, 2016). Men who are sexually attracted to other men are known as gay, in addition to being referred to as homosexual men (Mahfudzah, 2015). In Malaysia, homosexual issues started to become more prominent in recent years when this community became more active in promoting their lifestyle through organizing various programs and festivals (Siti Hajar, 2018). However, the Malaysian government openly rejects this lifestyle by implementing specific civil and Shariah laws (Ashgar Ali & Yusuff Jelili, 2018; Mohd Izzat Amsyar, Muhammad Syahlan, Hisham & Fareed, 2018; Nurul Husna & Zuliza, 2015).

Nevertheless, the Muslim community in Malaysia is not exempt from engaging in this lifestyle. In the Islamic context, LGBT behavior is considered a sin that is cursed by God, with severe punishment promised in both this world and the hereafter because it is regarded as a major sin in Islam. This is clearly stated in the Quran and the Hadith, which are central references in Islam, that severe punishment will befall any Muslim involved in LGBT (Noor Hafizah, Kamal Azmi & Rosni, 2016; Tri Ermayani, 2017). Since the homosexual lifestyle contradicts Islamic teachings in aspects of faith, worship, and morality, it has led to rejection from some segments of Malaysian Muslim society, causing those within the Muslim community who practice homosexuality to face significant opposition (Noor Hafizah & Norsaleha, 2016; Jun et al., 2017; Noor Hafizah et al., 2016).
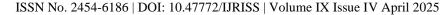
Nasrudin, Mohd Suhaimi & Lokman (2013) state that heterosexual individuals in the United States, whether men or women, demonstrate strong negative attitudes toward the LGBT community. In Malaysia, the lives of transwomen (mak nyah) are considered high-risk due to insults and stress from society—reactions frequently experienced by this community. Additionally, Jeanete (2016) found that the LGBT community in Indonesia, which is predominantly Muslim and still upholds Eastern cultural values, faces stigma, discrimination, and violence. Previous studies also show that violence is perpetrated by families, communities, and governments. The conservative religious beliefs held by Indonesian society appear to be a factor contributing to the rejection and discrimination toward the LGBT community.

Negative family reactions regarding these issues also pose challenges for the homosexual community. They might face rejection and isolation when their families learn about their sexual identity. Furthermore, their relationship with their parents is also affected, with the loss of closeness and increased tension. A worse consequence is when some within this community face complete family estrangement if they are disowned due to their homosexuality (Rahman & Valliani, 2016).

Among the LGBT community, especially teenagers, there is a risk of further isolation by those closest to them and by society in general, potentially jeopardizing their psychological functioning. This is because the community is at a high risk of becoming involved in risky behaviors, mental health problems, attitudinal issues, as well as drug and alcohol abuse (Ahmad, Haikal Anuar, Abd Satar, Wan Shahrazad, Wan Azreena, Zainal Abidin & Wan Mohd Zain, 2015; Nasrudin et al., 2013). Nasrudin et al. (2013) also mentions psychological confusion, suicidal tendencies, and inner conflicts between religious beliefs and sexual identity as possible psychological issues for this community, possibly caused by society's attitude toward homosexuality, which can undermine the resilience of the LGBT community.

The joy and excitement experienced by homosexual individuals in practicing this lifestyle is found to be a barrier to leaving it. Although the desire to change is present among some who practice homosexuality, the pleasure they experience while engaging in it leads them to ignore public opinion about homosexual behavior. In turn, this hinders the change process. In addition, the attitude of this community presents another challenge in the process of change. They are often found not to make serious efforts toward the desired change, meaning that intent alone is not sufficient to realize that change (Ahmad et al., 2015).

Nevertheless, individuals who practice homosexuality may still return to a heterosexual lifestyle aligned with societal norms. Sexual impulses can be managed in the same way as other negative impulses, such as theft and murder, which also exist within human nature (Musa Yusuf & Ahmad Zaharuddin Sani, 2014). Given past findings about how legal factors and societal/familial acceptance pose challenges for the LGBT community choosing to practice homosexuality, the possibility that Muslim homosexuals seeking to abandon the lifestyle

might encounter similar circumstances cannot be ignored. Accordingly, this study was conducted to identify external challenges faced by Muslim homosexual men throughout their process of leaving the homosexual lifestyle.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research utilized a phenomenological approach to examine the experiences of Muslim homosexual men undergoing rehabilitation. This approach was chosen because it is suitable for research on events, situations, experiences, or concepts shared by a specific group (Aizan Sofia, Ezarina & Norulhuda, 2019). Furthermore, it allows for detailed and explicit information to be gathered from the informants' own perspectives. The researchers received assistance from representatives of Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (JAKIM) and Pertubuhan Permata Insan Disayangi (PINTAS) to select seven informants. All these informants lived in the Klang Valley and the Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Purposive and snowball sampling methods were used to recruit informants for this study, which is particularly appropriate when the target group may be difficult to access (Wright, 2014). The researchers employed semi-structured, in-depth interviews to gather comprehensive information by allowing further questioning on the topics shared by informants. Two informants participated in face-to-face interviews, while the rest were interviewed by phone due to the nationwide Movement Control Order (MCO).

Before the interviews, informants were given a briefing about the study's purpose, interview procedures, and ethical considerations. Those interviewed face-to-face provided written consent, while those interviewed by phone gave verbal consent. Each informant was interviewed at least once.

Findings were analyzed using thematic analysis, which comprises six phases: (1) familiarizing oneself with the data, (2) generating initial codes by labeling the data relevant to the study, (3) identifying potential themes by grouping the codes and establishing patterns in the data, (4) reviewing these themes against the coded data and the overall dataset, (5) defining and naming each theme to ensure conceptual clarity, and (6) producing a written report, in which the researcher presents the findings supported by verbatim quotes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Background of Informants

At the time of the interviews, all informants were between 22 and 48 years old. Most informants were university graduates, except for two who completed only secondary school. The data also show that only one informant was Chinese, with the rest being Malay. Regarding marital status, five were single, one was divorced with one child, and another was married. One informant was unemployed, while the rest worked in government or private sectors. Table 1 below provides demographic details of all the informants.

Table 1 Demographic Data

Informant	Age	Education Level	Ethnicity	Marital Status	Occupation
1	48	SPM	Malay	Divorced (1 child)	NGO
2	40	PhD	Malay	Single	Professional
3	43	Master's	Malay	Married	Civil Cervant
4	39	Bachelor's	Malay	Single	NGO
5	29	Bachelor's	Chinese	Single	Law Firm Executive & NGO
6	22	Diploma	Malay	Single	Unemployed
7	30	SPM	Malay	Single	NGO

External Challenges in Leaving a Homosexual Lifestyle

Negative Reactions from Individuals in the Environment

Negative reactions from people within the informant's social environment were the first external challenge faced by these individuals in the process of leaving the homosexual lifestyle. People in the informant's environment included both family members and friends from the LGBT community. For instance, Informant 6 stated that negative behavior exhibited by his sister when she found out about his sexual orientation (i.e., scolding him) caused him to rebel by returning to the homosexual lifestyle.

(Researcher): "...maybe your sister's attitude was one of the factors that made you want to rebel. She sometimes scolds you, nags you, so you rebel and go back to it?"

(Informant):"Hmm." (Informant 6)

These reactions often led to internal conflict, emotional withdrawal, and setbacks in their efforts to change. For example, Informant 6 recounted: "She would scold me every time the topic came up, and after a while, it made me feel ashamed of trying to change. I went back to it out of spite." This highlights how familial disapproval not only fails to support change but can also reinforce the identity being rejected. Meyer's (2003) framework explains this as a form of distal minority stress, where rejection from family members contributes to identity concealment and psychological strain.

Such negative responses can derail the process of leaving the homosexual lifestyle because they cause the informant to feel pressured due to a lack of support. According to Nurul Naimah and Mohd Yusri (2018), sibling-related family pressures can trigger negative emotions like hurt and lead children into other social problems. Positive responses from family members, such as acceptance, are crucial, as they have a positive impact on the psychological well-being of the informant, thereby facilitating the process of leaving homosexuality. Indeed, Nasrudin et al. (2013) found that family support helps to build and increase the resilience of transwomen (mak nyah) who are in conflict between religious beliefs and sexual identity, ultimately protecting their psychological well-being.

Additionally, certain friends tried to influence the informants to cease their efforts to abandon homosexuality, thus creating another challenge. As a result, some informants decided to avoid these friends to ensure consistency in their efforts toward change.

"...sometimes you have to distance yourself from friends who might influence you. We try to avoid them." *(Informant 3)*

Friends can have considerable influence because of the motivation they provide. This is understandable given that friends in the LGBT community are found to play a role in helping homosexual individuals form and reinforce their sexual identity (Felix, 2016).

Furthermore, the anonymity of unfamiliar social spaces and peer encouragement led to increased vulnerability. Informant 2 shared:

"When I was overseas, no one knew me, and it felt like I could get away with anything. That freedom was dangerous."

This supports the idea that reduced social accountability can enable behavioral relapse. Goffman's (1963) theory of stigma also supports this, suggesting that individuals may switch between 'front stage' and 'back stage' behaviors depending on social context.

Social Environment

According to the informants, meeting more gay men provides opportunities for them to return to the homosexual lifestyle. Informants also noted that such opportunities often present themselves when they travel

to places where they are not known to the local community, thus diminishing concerns about tarnishing their reputation.

"...it's pretty easy. When you meet new people, it's even easier for me. It's like the more you want to change, the bigger the test you face..." (Informant 3)

"...for instance, if you go on vacation outside of Malaysia, to a place where people don't know you, where the surau committee doesn't know you, or the mosque community doesn't know you, that's when temptation comes. Sometimes friends can be mischievous and look for a masseur or whatever..." (Informant 2)

Social environments that offer such opportunities become a challenge for informants to resist, as they can disrupt their progress in leaving the homosexual lifestyle. These opportunities may tempt them to continue homosexual practices, as found by Azlina and Che Wan Hashimi Rafsanjani (2018), whose study reported that one reason adolescents in Kuala Lumpur become involved in gay culture is the abundance and availability of certain environments, such as budget hotels, nightclubs, and massage parlors. Felix (2016) further noted that friendships and surroundings that reinforce homosexual culture can shape and strengthen an individual's homosexual identity.

Researchers also discovered that one informant was raised in a feminine social environment. He mentioned that close relationships were formed only with female family members, his mother and sister, making it difficult for him to abandon the homosexual lifestyle. This environment led him to develop close relationships only with female friends, reinforcing his sexual attraction to men.

"...one more thing that makes it hard for me to change is that I'm close only to the females in the family—my sister and my mother—so my inclination to be around women is high, which is one factor that pushed me in this direction." (Informant 6)

Growing up in a feminine social setting made it harder for this informant to adopt a heterosexual lifestyle. This aligns with findings by Puteri Hayati and Nurul Hudani (2015), who asserted that individuals who spend much of their time with females risk failing to develop identities that match their assigned gender, potentially leading to problematic sexual behaviors. Indeed, a family environment characterized by femininity can guide adolescents toward gay behavior (Azlina & Che Wan Hashimi Rafsanjani, 2018).

Technological Developments

Informants reported that the rapid advancement of technology today makes it easier for them to meet other gay men through specific applications accessible via smartphones. In addition to these apps, social media can also expose them to homosexuality-related content.

"...with modern technology, it's easier to meet people. In the past, you had to use a computer. Now technology is advanced—just turn on your phone and open any app, maybe TikTok or something else, and you'll find people. So it's a lot easier..."(Informant 3)

"...maybe because of social media, I guess..." (Informant 6)

Technology presented both access and temptation. Informant 3 elaborated:

"Before smartphones, it was harder. Now, it's too easy. You don't even have to look. Apps like Hornet or Grindr just pop up."

These platforms provide instant validation and connection, reinforcing identity via virtual interaction. According to the literature, such platforms reinforce minority identity formation (Felix, 2016) and complicate the process of behavioral reform without adequate monitoring or intervention.

Advances in technology have resulted in the availability of gay apps and social media that can be downloaded

onto a smartphone, allowing quick and easy access to this content. Social media platforms used to spread information and promote LGBT activities can attract individuals who are not cautious, as they can connect with other like-minded community members online (Nurul Jannah, Mutia Sobihah, Lukman@Zawawi, Normala & Azlini, 2017). Azlina and Che Wan Hashimi Rafsanjani (2018) also found that gay apps like Grindr and Hornet are factors that encourage youth involvement in gay lifestyles, as they facilitate finding and meeting partners.

Absence of a Support System

The final challenge expressed by informants concerned the lack of a support system to assist them through the process of leaving a homosexual lifestyle. Some felt that no one understood what they were going through, including friends, leaving them with no outlet for sharing their feelings. This led to an absence of emotional support. Additionally, informants noted that no one provided guidance or advice, requiring them to face issues that arise during this process alone.

"...Yeah, because at that time I wanted to talk to people who really understood, but there weren't any. Friends might be like, 'Really? Are you sure? Are you sure you want this?' And there are no friends who truly support you, so if you want to talk to anyone else, who would that be?" (Informant 3)

"...I don't have anyone to guide me, nobody to ask for advice, nobody I can share anything with, so I'm all alone in these matters..." (Informant 1)

The absence of a support system makes it more challenging to leave the homosexual lifestyle. Support systems, such as supportive friendships, can serve as protective factors that foster resilience, helping individuals to handle crises without jeopardizing their physical, mental, or emotional well-being. Nasrudin et al. (2013) found that because transwomen (mak nyah) possessed strong social support from friends, their psychological health was not affected by conflicts between their religious beliefs and sexual identity.

Without a reliable support network, informants expressed feelings of abandonment. Informant 1 admitted:

"There were times I thought of giving up—nobody seemed to get it, not even my religious mentor."

Such isolation fits within the proximal stressors in Minority Stress Theory, where internalized stigma and lack of emotional support hinder psychological recovery. Strong social support has been found to buffer against these effects and improve resilience during transitions (Nasrudin et al., 2013).

IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSION

Based on these findings, all parties—from families and society to governmental authorities—have roles to play, whether directly or indirectly, in helping homosexual men who are trying to change. The homosexual community often faces external challenges from various aspects beyond their control, so they require external assistance to achieve their goal of change.

Counselors play a distinct role in helping homosexual individuals who wish to change. Counselors today must have a high level of competence regarding LGBT issues, including knowledge, experience, and specialized counseling skills. Addressing this is critical, given the multiple external pressures these individuals face that lie beyond their control. Through counseling, these men can receive assistance in establishing a support system to build and enhance their resilience, enabling them to successfully undertake the change process. Counselors can also help identify effective coping strategies for issues that arise during the process of leaving homosexuality. Therefore, current counselors should participate in seminars, workshops, or skill-based courses focusing on LGBT counseling to ensure they can provide effective services to this community.

Additionally, researchers recommend that religious figures strengthen their knowledge of religious studies and LGBT issues comprehensively so they can deliver more effective outreach using methods tailored to this community. Seminars discussing LGBT issues from Islamic and psychological perspectives, along with skill-building workshops on effective public speaking, are among the programs that religious figures can participate

in if they aspire to reach out to this community. This is important because the community often needs religious and spiritual guidance to return to a life consistent with Islamic principles.

In conclusion, this study identified four forms of external challenges faced by homosexual men in the process of leaving the homosexual lifestyle: negative responses from individuals within their environment, social environment influences, technological developments, and the absence of a support system. The researchers hope that counselors, psychologists, and religious leaders will work together to help the community that wishes to leave homosexuality, providing emotional, cognitive, and behavioral support, thereby making the process easier. Since this study only focused on Muslim homosexual men seeking change, the researchers encourage further studies on other groups such as lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender individuals, who also wish to change, to gain a comprehensive picture of the challenges and issues these groups face. Such information could enable the development of robust LGBT counseling modules and enhance counselor professionalism in addressing current social concerns.

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