

Forms of Violence against Taiwan Emerging Adulthood LGBTQ Population: A Public Health Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks into the effects of traditional and cyber violence directed towards the LGBTQ+ population and focuses on the Taiwanese population aged between 18-25 years old, also known as the emerging adulthood age group. This time period is often characterized with identity discovery and early identification of sexual orientation, which can increase the risk of adverse health outcomes as emerging adults experience identity confusion and discrimination but do not have the appropriate coping strategies to deal with it. While Taiwan is the first place in Asia to legalize same-sex marriage, the LGBTQ+ community still faces homophobic discrimination and bullying in society. A total of 15 articles were identified for this paper of which eight examined the Taiwanese population. Findings suggest that although all members of the Taiwanese LGBTQ+ community are likely to be victims of bullying compared to heterosexual individuals, boys with a non-heterosexual identity tend to have a higher risk than girls, which narrows the sample to bisexual/gay men. In addition, all articles call for prevention or intervention methods at the population level, which leads to the discussion of preventive approaches through different aspects, including family, peer, community, and online.

Introduction

Gender-based violence (GBV), or the umbrella term referring to any perpetration based on gender roles, comes in either traditional violence, cyberviolence, or both^[1]. Traditional bullying mostly takes the form of verbal, social, and physical bullying, including behaviors such as verbal ridicule, relational exclusion, physical aggression, and theft of belongings. Meanwhile, cyberbullying constitutes the posting of upsetting pictures or videos, rumor-spreading through emails or social media, or any other harassment through electronic means ranging from public social networking sites to private text messaging^[2]. Compared to traditional bullying, cyberbullying is generally less detectable as the perpetrators can remain virtually anonymous. In addition, the lack of geographical boundaries allows perpetrators to easily access the victims from other communities and share their information for dissemination. While any forms of GBV pose a serious public health risk to the general population, this article will specifically focus on the LGBTQ+¹ community in Taiwan.

Looking at cyberbullying specifically, this form of violence in LGBTQ+ youths is significantly less investigated although it is estimated that globally half the LGBTQ+ population experiences online peer victimization^[3]. The emerging adulthood age group (18-25 years old) was selected for this review as it is commonly characterized with self-discovery and early identification of sexual orientation. This is also the phase where individuals transform from adolescence to complete adulthood as they become more independent and open to

¹ LGBTQ+: Term that refers to the community of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and others.

exploring life possibilities^[4]. During this vulnerable time, individuals may be more susceptible to bullying and harassment.

Taiwan's Background

Although Taiwan is the first place in Asia to legalize same-sex marriage, the LGBTQ+ community still faces hardships with their identity given the history of cultural and social changes in Taiwan^[5]. In the 1910s, terms such as “natural” and “abnormal” were first applied to understand LGBTQ+ individuals. Soon, public opinions began to criticize this community, specifically lesbians due to their choice of not getting married, in the decade to come. Negative representations of the LGBTQ+ community in the media reached their height in the 1980s when the appearance of HIV/AIDS caught the attention of the public health system^[5]. Eventually in the 1990s, clinical psychiatric theories shifted their attitude to be more positive towards the LGBTQ+ community and fought for equal rights^[5].

Nonetheless, old generations tend to be less tolerant of non-heterosexuality compared with European and North American countries^[10]. According to a survey conducted by TVBS TV channel in 2012, around 68% of respondents considered the Taiwanese society to be unfriendly towards the LGBTQ+ community^[5]. Although currently there are LGBTQ+ rights and policies that support the rights of the LGBTQ+ community, such as the anti-discrimination law², LGBTQ+ individuals still face bullying and other forms of violence^[5].

This paper seeks to identify health outcomes associated with bullying and harassment, whether traditional or cyber, and recommendations at the population level targeting the LGBTQ+ emerging adulthood population in Taiwan.

Methods

PubMed and Google Scholar were searched to locate scientific articles on different forms of GBV, including both traditional and cyber violence. In order to identify articles on this topic, the following keywords were used: violence or aggression, LGBTQ or gender-based, emerging adulthood, cyberviolence, Taiwan*, and public health or epidemiol*. Combining the results of different search pools, 966 potential titles were identified through the PubMed database with an additional 475 documents located through Google Scholar along with citation tracking. After removing non-relevant studies and having screened the abstracts of the articles for keywords such as “emerging adulthood”, “LGBTQ+ community”, any form of violence, or any indication of health outcomes, 15 key studies were identified, including eight that focused specifically on Taiwan. Although this paper focuses on the Taiwanese population, it also reviews articles with global focus as they offer additional information on the health outcomes and public health. In addition, internet-based resources for Taiwan were searched to access reports, or surveys. One report, in particular, was identified from the Taiwan Tongzhi (LGBTI) Hotline Association report on Taiwan LGBTI Rights Policy Review.

Findings

Table 1 presents summary information on the eight studies that examined health outcomes associated with GBV on emerging adult LGBTQ+ in Taiwan along with their population-level recommendations. The table includes

² Anti-Discrimination Law: Different treatments based on classifications, such as disability or sexual orientation, should be governed by the rights to equality under the law.

the age of the study participants, the period when the study was conducted, and the method of recruitment used to obtain the study subjects.

Table 1: Studies conducted on Emerging Adult LGBTQ+ Populations in Taiwan

Entry Number	Authors and date	LGBTQ population, age, location, period of study, and recruitment method	Forms of GBV	Health outcome or other change in behavior	Population-level Recommendations
#1	Hu, H. F., Chang, Y. P., Lin, C., & Yen, C. F. (2019).	500 Gay & Bisexual Men, Age 20-25 years Location: Taiwan, recruited online & through LGBTQ clubs from August 2015 to July 2017	Traditional harassment Cyber harassment	Low level of general & health-related quality of life, physical health and psychological well-being damages.	Early Provision of critical resources, early detection of & intervention for harassment victimization, guidance from mental health professionals
#2	Li, D. J., Chang, Y. P., Chen, Y. L., & Yen, C. F. (2020)	500 Gay & Bisexual Men, Age 20-25 years Location: Taiwan, recruited online & through LGBTQ clubs from August 2015 to July 2017	Homophobic bullying	Anxiety, depression, psychotic symptoms, alcohol abuse, hostility, sleep problems, suicidality	Internet anonymous support where sexual minorities can feel at ease and supported.
#3	Li, D. J., Chang, Y. P., Chen, Y. L., & Yen, C. F. (2020)	500 Gay & Bisexual Men, Age 20-25 years Location: Taiwan, recruited online & through LGBTQ	Traditional bullying, Cyberbullying, Homophobic bullying	Problematic substance abuse, including prescription drugs, sedatives/hypnotics, depressive & anxiety symptoms	Enhance family support to create a protective effect

		clubs from August 2015 to July 2017			
#4	Lin, H.-C., Hu, H.-F., Chen, M.-H., Ko, N.-Y., Hsiao, R. C., Yen, C.-N., & Yen, C.-F. (2018)	500 Gay & Bisexual Men, Age 20-25 years Location: Taiwan, recruited online & through LGBTQ clubs from August 2015 to July 2017	Traditional & cyber harassment	Low satisfaction with academic performance & more likely to miss classes	Social support is a protective factor In-person harassment and cyber harassment should be the targets of more prevention & intervention programs.
#5	Wang, C. C., Lin, H. C., Chen, M. H., Ko, N. Y., Chang, Y. P., Lin, I. M., & Yen, C. F. (2018)	500 Gay & Bisexual Men, Age 20-25 years Location: Taiwan, recruited online & through LGBTQ clubs from August 2015 to July 2017	Traditional & cyber homophobic bullying	Depression, anxiety, and physical pain	Early prevention and intervention for homophobic bullying and enhancement of family support
#6	Wang, C. C., Chang, Y. P., Yang, Y. H., Hu, H. F., & Yen, C. F. (2019)	500 Gay & Bisexual Men, Age 20-25 years Location: Taiwan, recruited online & through LGBTQ clubs from August 2015 to July 2017	Traditional & cyber harassment	Higher levels of disturbed identity and lack of identity.	Effective school-based preventive measures and interventions are required. Schools should provide students with critical resources and establish comprehensive policies.
#7	Wang, C. C., Hsiao, R. C., & Yen, C. F. (2019)	500 Gay & Bisexual Men, Age 20-25 years Location: Taiwan, recruited online &	Traditional & cyber harassment	Depression, anxiety, increase the risk of difficulties in peer interaction in childhood and adolescence.	Mental-health services providers and education professionals should provide sexual minority individuals who come out early the critical resources

		through LGBTQ clubs from August 2015 to July 2017			
#8	Wang, P. W., Ko, N. Y., Hsiao, R. C., Chen, M. H., Lin, H. C., & Yen, C. F. (2019)	500 Gay & Bisexual Men, Age 20-25 years Location: Taiwan, recruited online & through LGBTQ clubs from August 2015 to July 2017	Traditional and cyber homophobic bullying victimization	Increased risk of suicidality in emerging adulthood	Suicide prevention programs should consider the time of coming out, traditional homophobic bullying victimization, and level of family support.

Of the 8 studies presented in Table 1, most were published since 2018. All studies were conducted in Taiwan using the same study population, which was comprised of 500 gay/bisexual males aged 20-25 years who were recruited either by online advertising or through LGBTQ clubs. Seven of the eight studies evaluated both traditional and cyberbullying (Entry #1, #3-#8). The types of traditional bullying examined in these studies included verbal ridicule, relational exclusion, physical aggression, and theft of belongings (entry #1, #3-8). Aspects of cyberbullying, as a newly emerged mode of violence, included the use of technology and social media on harassment, threat/insults, stalking, or the dissemination of private information (entry #1-8). Interestingly, all studies only looked at the male populations for homophobic bullying, which may be related to societal gender expectations. While all papers reported health outcomes related to mental health issues, some other health outcomes that were mentioned in entries #3, #4, #5, #6, and #7 include substance abuse, low academic performance, physical pain, identity confusion, and difficulty in peer interaction, respectively. Nevertheless, all of the papers provided recommendations to address these issues at the population level, which included programs targeting a specific outcome such as suicide, school-based programs targeting younger populations, and greater availability of support and resources for emerging adults.

Discussion

Overview

One similarity with all the articles presented above in Table 1 is that the participants were all recruited through internet advertising, including social media platforms provided specifically for the LGBTQ+ community (entry #1-8). All of the articles applied and analyzed the same set of survey previously collected for convenience. These studies all found that although members of the LGBTQ+ community are more likely to be victims of bullying compared to heterosexual individuals, researchers have found that boys with a sexual minority or gender-nonconforming identity tend to have a higher risk of encountering negative reactions than girls with sexual minority identity or gender nonconformity in Taiwan (entry #1-8).

Other than gender disparities, bisexual individuals, in particular, may receive different treatment than the rest of the community^[12]. Previous research has indicated that bisexual individuals may be at an even greater risk for victimization and discrimination from both heterosexuals as well as the LGBTQ community (including

lesbian and gay individuals) due to the belief of binegativity, also known as anti-bisexual prejudice^[12]. Binegativity is the belief that bisexual individuals are simply confused about their sexuality or that bisexuality does not actually exist, which could further discriminate against this community^[12]. Therefore among bisexual individuals, experiences of bisexual discrimination may lead to bisexual-specific minority stress, leading to adverse health outcomes^[12].

Risk Factor of Early Identification

Early identification of sexual orientation and early coming out result in an increased risk of victimization or gender-based violence. Identity formation or realization is a crucial developmental period that typically begins in early childhood and stabilize as individuals enter the adult years^[9]. During the process of consolidating one's identity, individuals may experience identity confusion when they realize that they do not fit into the heteronormative identity development. In a key paper focusing on Taiwan by Wang et al (2019), early identification is associated with ineffective coping strategies as these emerging adults face difficulties in peer interaction, and hence the development of negative mental health outcomes such as depression and anxiety^[10].

To better understand how an individual's self-recognition and surrounding environment may shape their upbringing and development, it is helpful to consider Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory and view these factors as an ecological phenomenon^[10]. According to this framework developed by Bronfenbrenner, self-identity may be the result of interaction between individuals and their immediate environments, including personal relationships such as their family members, classmates, and teachers^[9].

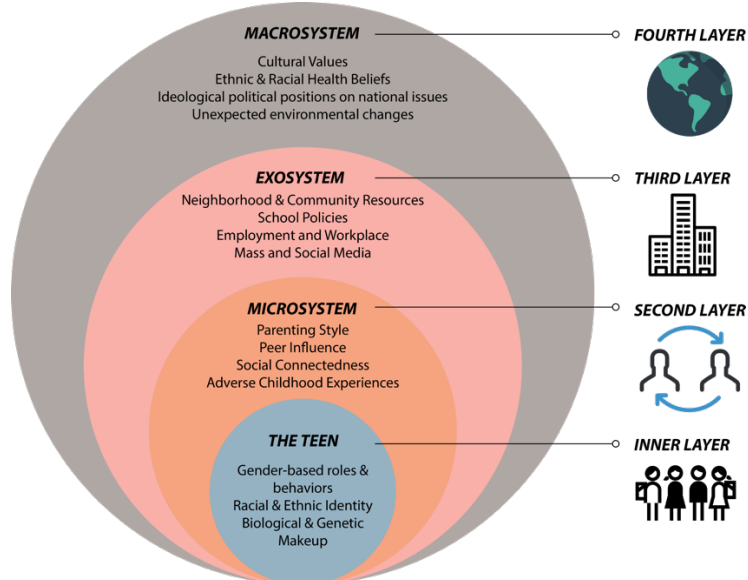


Figure 1. Cultural Identity Expressed in Ecological System Theory

Figure 1 effectively showcases the different systems affecting an individual, including their microsystem (immediate environment) exosystem (indirect social structures), and macrosystem (cultural elements)^[10]. Therefore, in order to target gender-based violence directed towards the LGBTQ community, factors in the micro and exosystem including peer influence, community resources as well as school policies, and cultural values need to be evaluated.

Health Outcome

Victims subjected to any forms of homophobic bullying in the stage of emerging adulthood face higher risks of developing severe depression, anxiety, and physical pain than nonvictims (Entry #1-2, #5, #7). In addition, victims of both traditional and cyber homophobic bullying develop even more severe anxiety in adulthood than victims of only one form of bullying (Entry #5, #7). Observed in all the articles in Table 1, disparities in mental health among LGBTQ teenagers can adversely affect their future developments in both social and academic aspects.

In addition to mental health concerns and psychological distress, homophobic bullying may result in school difficulties, including increased risk of low educational motivation, absence, and truancy due to fear (Entry #4). In addition, compared to other populations in the LGBTQ+ community, it is hypothesized that gay and bisexual men “experience significantly higher levels of internalized stigma and sexual identity concealment, and lower levels of social support”^[4]. Although Taiwan is considered to be one of the most LGBTQ-friendly countries in Asia, the high rate of homophobic bullying in gay/bisexual youths indicates and calls for urgent interventions and prevention methods provided by educational and health professionals.

Prevention

With health outcomes that may affect an individual’s future development into an adult, there is an urgent need to address traditional and cyber homophobic bullying with preventive and intervention methods.

For a preventive method or program to be considered effective, a study conducted by Lundgren et al (2015) states that they must demonstrate a “reduction in experience or perpetration of violence”^[14]. In a list provided by this study, prevention approaches may include parenting, targeted interventions for children/adolescents, school-based (general, dating violence, sexual assault prevention), community-based, and economic empowerment (ibid).

Both the ecological systems theory and prior studies have confirmed that family support could potentially protect LGBTQ youths from the consequences of traditional and cyberbullying by creating a safe environment where conflict can be handled nonviolently^[14]. The results from Wang et al (2018) also revealed that family support moderated the associations between homophobic bullying victimization, current anxiety, and physical pain levels^[3]. Other than utilizing effective parenting strategies, there is also a need for domestic violence prevention methods. According to the report of 2017 Taiwan LGBTI human rights, 25% of LGBTI youths that called the Taiwan Tongzhi (LGBTQ+) Hotline faced parental violence to varying degree, from being forbidden to go out to experiencing domestic violence^[5]. To protect children and youths from the risk of abuse, Chang et al (2018) also calls for a “specific protection” program that encompasses both education and social service aspects for groups that are more prone to domestic and sexual violence^[15]. The Taiwanese government has also set up hotlines and reporting systems to provide preventive services for those who have not yet received proper care^[15].

In addition to implementing preventive measures on a family level, school-based preventions that address gender-based violence should also be considered. There should be a public education to raise the general public’s awareness of this issue and for the LGBTQ+ group to have a better understanding of which prevention programs or resources are available to them when facing bullying. For example, Taiwan Against Gender-based Violence (TAGV) resource network has already established an efficient and convenient way to disseminate anti-violence resources and information via the internet available to everyone^[15]. Nevertheless, although the studies evaluated in Table 1 did not ask who the perpetrators were, peers might be the main perpetrators of homophobic bullying^[3]. Consequently, group education and activities that involve peer mentor training, relationship skill-building, and “bystander” approaches should be considered as primary interventions in a school

setting^[14]. Provision of critical resources, such as the implementation of Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA)³ can also be pivotal in creating a safe school environment. In a research conducted by Russell et al (2009), youth leaders of GSAs “have the potential for individual and collective empowerment as agents of social change at school”^[16].

Other than family and peer support, online social support should also be considered as LGBTQ+ youth tends to have more online friends that would provide emotional support than in-person friends^[17]. While social support is significant to feeling safer in a particular environment, when young people lack social support in person, they may turn to online relationships to fill the gap^[17]. Studies conducted in the US have shown that LGBTQ+ youths may view online spaces as a safer place to receive support and socialize^[17]. To provide help to the victims, it will be crucial to understand youths’ patterns of accessing social support, whether it is in-person or online, as well as examining the trend of online friendships compared to in-person friendships.

To target the health outcomes specifically, victims should be provided with extensive long-term services that can help them recover from trauma^[15]. While Taiwan has a solid foundation with domestic violence and sexual violence recovery center, more immediate protective measures have to be developed specifically for the LGBTQ+ community.

Conclusion

The eight articles reviewed in this paper all identify negative health outcomes correlated with forms of homophobic bullying, whether it is traditional or cyber violence, in the gay/bisexual emerging adulthood population. To help prevent or mediate the health outcomes, it is important to establish a friendly environment in school for the LGBTQ+ community and implement timely intervention methods to prevent emerging mental health problems. Based on these findings, interventions related to family, school, community, and online social support are recommended.

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³ Gay-Straight Alliance: Student-run organizations that unite both LGBTQ+ community and allied youth to create school-based campaigns.

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