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Homosexual University Students' Perceptions of the Marriage Equality Referendum in Taiwan

ABSTRACT. This study examined the perceptions of 12 homosexual university students regarding Taiwan's marriage equality referendum (MER) held in November, 2018. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect data, and the phenomenological approach was employed for data analysis. Four themes emerged from the data: reactions to the outcomes of the MER, emotional responses before and after the MER, perspectives on the MER, and self-reflection following the MER. The present findings have implications for counseling and education professionals as well as undergraduates in terms of homosexual students' perceptions regarding the MER and how they coped with stress following the MER. These findings also serve to reminder policy-makers of the importance of protecting and advancing human rights and gender equality.

KEYWORDS: marriage equality referendum, same-sex marriage, homosexual university student

Introduction

The legislative process regarding marriage equality in Taiwan has been encumbered considerable difficulties. In 2003, Taiwan had its first gender parade, Taiwan LGBT+ Pride. In 2006, legislator Hsiao Mei--chin broached the issue of marriage equality and demanded a public hearing on the legalization of same-sex marriage, but her proposal was rejected. In 2017, Taiwan's Associate Justice ruled that restricting marriage to only that between a man and a woman was unconstitutional,

thus requiring an amendment of relevant civil codes and the enactment of same-sex marriage laws. Before any legislative change, a referendum was held on November 24, 2018. The referendum was related to various topics but included two questions specifically addressed marriage equality. Question No. 14 was "Do you agree to the protection of same-sex marital rights with marriage as defined in the Civil Code?" In total, only 30.9% of voters agreed, with 63.5% disagreeing. Question No. 12 was "Do you agree to the protection of the rights of same-sex couples in cohabitation on a permanent basis in ways other than changing of the Civil Code?" In total, 61.12% of the voters agreed, with 38.18% disagreeing (Central Election Commission [CEC], 2018). The results of the marriage equality referendum (MER) revealed that 63.5% of the voters disagreed with same-sex marriage, and that 61.12% of the voters agreed that same-sex marriage should not be incorporated into the Civil Code (CEC, 2018). These outcomes clearly demonstrated the opposition of the majority of voters to marriage equality.

Before and after the MER, the media was saturated with comments and messages that discriminated against the homosexual community, presented anti-homosexual attitudes, and criticized people who support gender equality education and same-sex marriage. This prompted considerable emotional distress among homosexual students, raising concerns regarding this demographic in response to the MER. Thus, this study explored the perceptions of homosexual students regarding the two questions on the MER from September 2018 to February 2019, covering the period 3 months before and 3 months after the MER.

1. Homosexual University Students

Homophobia is not uncommon on university campuses (Liu & Huang, 2008), and homosexual students are sometimes discriminated against on campus (Chang et al., 2013). Meyer (2003) indicated that stigma, prejudice, and discrimination against homosexual students generate a hostile environment that can increase stress and result in the development of mental health problems in this population. Thus, homosexual students tend to seek a safe space on campuses where they can be at ease (Chang, 2007). Homosexual university students commonly experience discrimination and biases (Misawa, 2010; Renn, 2017), and homophobic bullying at

schools can aggravate depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation in this group (Russell et al., 2011). Homosexual undergraduates also exhibit high levels of stress and have difficulty in constructing their identity (Chang & Chen, 2014). Female students are more concerned than male students about creating a gender equal and friendly campus and are more willing to support those in the homosexual community (Chang & Wang, 2009). By contrast, male students are more concerned about the stigma and discrimination that homosexual people encounter as well as issues related to social ethics and morality (Chang & Wang, 2009).

University students' attitudes toward homosexual individuals can affect the identity development of the individuals in this community (Liu et al., 2004). Support and companionship are crucial for homosexuals to gain strength and courage (Liu, 2003) and to facilitate their identity development (Lin, 2015). Participation in gay or lesbian clubs can also help undergraduates to learn homosexual culture and gain a sense of belonging (Liu, 2003). In these clubs, homosexual students support each other, thereby enhancing self-understanding and promoting identity development. Students develop their gender identities through involvement, coursework, and advocacy related to gender equality (Renn, 2017). Educational professionals should enhance student awareness regarding gender equality by having relevant discussions in classes, providing related books and reading materials in the library, and creating gender associations or clubs (Chang & Wang, 2009); teachers can also challenge gender stereotypes and avoid gender bias and discrimination (Chang et al., 2013).

2. Influence of Media Messages on the Homosexual Community

Topics related to homosexuality have gradually gained increased attention from the government, academia, and the public in Taiwan despite the considerable setbacks faced for the gender equality movement. Hostile messages and fierce rebuttals directed at homosexual individuals on social media became especially common shortly before and after the MER. People who oppose gender diversity are concerned that gender education would confuse children's gender identities (Li, 2011). Chang (2017) reported that when homosexual people face unfriendly or hostile messages on the internet, they experience feelings of shock, anger, sadness, offense,

and powerlessness. Such negative or hostile media messages can produce symptoms of high blood pressure and difficulties in eating, sleeping, and concentrating at work in the targeted individuals (Chang, 2017). Unfriendly remarks or attacks directed at those in the homosexual community can cause them to feel sad and doubt their gender identity (Misawa, 2010). For example, homosexual university students reported feeling angry, anxious, helpless, and disappointed after reading unfriendly messages on the internet (Chang, 2017). They adopted strategies to regulate their emotions, including maintaining boundaries, seeking support, ignoring hateful messages, and participating in activities (Chang, 2017). Improved intergroup communication and social justice advocacy can increase societal understanding of homosexual people, thereby promoting societal gender equality and diversity.

3. Impact of the MER on Homosexual Individuals Within the Political and Cultural Context

Tsai (2022) explored the impact of the MER on eight gay men with human immunodeficiency virus. The participants felt angry with the outcome of the MER, and they adopted coping methods to regulate their emotions; for example, they stopped thinking about the outcome, and they attempted to objectively and calmly consider the outcome and actively advocated for gender equality and diversity. They also confronted those making anti-homosexual remarks, offered evidence in support of gender equality, and disseminated antidiscrimination messages. After marriage equality was not supported in the MER, homosexual individuals experienced negative emotions (Riggle, 2009). Yang (2020) used polling data in 2019 to analyze the outcomes of MER and reported that voters had difficulty comprehending topics related to the MER. A small group of voters in the MER agreed to protect minority rights (such as those of homosexual individuals), and they tended to also support same-sex marriage (Yang, 2020). By contrast, the majority of the voters valued the rights of the majority and opposed same-sex marriage. Liao et al. (2022) observed that supporting same-sex marriage before the MER had a significant positive correlation with psychological distress after the MER. The mental health of minority or vulnerable groups is harmfully influenced in hostile environments where stigma, prejudice, and discrimination are commonplace (Meyer, 2003). In

sum, the MER had a radical effect on those in the homosexual community, prompting them to adopt coping mechanisms especially before and after the MER.

4. Social Impact Theory

Social impact theory (SIT; Latané, 1981) describes how individuals influence and are influenced by each other. Latané (1981) defined social impact as the impact on an individual's feelings, thoughts, or behavior of the real, implied, or imagined presence or actions of others. People are strongly affected by the behaviors of others and tend to be persuaded, inhibited, threatened, and supported through these actions (Latané, 1981). According to SIT, people's influence on others is the result of social forces acting on the individual. The effect of this social influence on people increases with the strength of the source, the immediacy of the event, and the number of sources exerting the impact (Latané, 1981).

SIT suggests that when other people are the source of the impact and the individual is the target, the impact is a multiplicative function of the strength, immediacy, and number of other people (Latané, 1981). In this theory, social impact is driven by three forces, as indicated in the equation: $I = f(S \times i \times N)$, where I is the magnitude of social impact, f() is a multiplicative function of the three conditions of the social situation having an impact, S represents the power of the source(s), i refers to the immediacy or proximity of the source(s), and N refers to the number of sources or people. The total social impact is spread across all the people it is directed at. Thus, if all the influence is targeted at a single individual, they are under immense pressure to conform or obey (Evans, 2023). If the influence is targeted at many people, the overall pressure on them to conform or obey is low. SIT was adopted as the reference framework of this study for comprehending homosexual students' perceptions of the MER in Taiwan.

5. Methods

Phenomenological research aims to study the phenomena experienced by human beings. It entails a comprehensive description of ordinary conscious experience of everyday life (the life-world)—a description of things

(the essential structures of consciousness) as one individual or a group of individuals experiences them (Schwandt, 1997). It was thus deemed appropriate in the present research context.

6. Participants

Internet ads were used to recruit potential participants. Nine female and three male students from seven universities in Taiwan agreed to participate in the study; they were aged 18–22 (average 19.5) years. The participants (1) had a homosexual identity, (2) attended the research independently, and (3) were willing to share their perceptions of the MER in 2018. The second and third authors served as the interviewers. They organized a time and place for the interviews and explained the purpose, procedures, and potential advantages and risks of the study; all the participants provided signed informed consent.

7. Researchers

The three researchers involved in this study are heterosexual women with strong concern for gender issues and with full support for gender equality and same-sex marriage. Before and after the MER, they became aware of the discrimination and bias that homosexual people experienced as well as the pressure from the public, media, and people opposed to marriage equality.

8. Data Collection

The second and third researchers collected data through semi-structured in-depth interviews. The participants shared their perceptions of and reactions to the MER from September 2018 to February 2019. Each interview lasted 1–2 hours. All of the 12 participants were interviewed until data saturation was reached. The following questions were asked in the interviews: From September 2018 to February 2019, please describe (1) your perceptions of the MER, (2) your views on and reactions to messages on social media regarding the MER, and (3) your perspectives on and reactions to the opinions of friends, classmates, family members, and

others concerning the MER. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for data analysis.

9. Data Analysis

The authors analyzed the data following the procedures by Moustakas (1994): (1) read the written transcripts several times to obtain an overall feeling of the transcripts; (2) identify meaningful phrases or sentences that pertain directly to the experience; (3) create meanings and cluster them into themes common to all of the transcripts; (4) integrate the results into an in-depth description of the phenomena; and (5) validate the results with the participants and include their remarks in the final description.

Several methods were used to maximize the validity and reliability of the data analysis. As proposed by Gibbs (2007), the steps of the procedures were first verified and arranged into a detailed protocol, and the results were included in a database. The transcripts were checked to ensure transcription accuracy, data were carefully compared with codes, and notes were made concerning codes and definitions. In accordance with the validation strategies proposed by Creswell and Miller (2000), the researchers maintained prolonged engagement and persistent observation of the issues related to students' reactions to the MER. Multiple sources (observations, interviews, and field notes) and methods were combined to provide corroborative evidence for the elucidation of themes or perspectives. Finally, rich, detailed descriptions were created to reveal the participants and settings encountered in the interviews.

10. Results

10.1. Reactions to the Outcomes of the MER

10.1.1. Triggering Negative Emotions

When the outcomes of the MER were announced, the participants felt sad, lost, confused, and distressed. They also felt angry, hurt, weak, hesitant, and helpless. The process leading up to the MER and the final results prompted feelings of disappointment and insecurity in the participants; doubts about life and humanity also emerged. One participant said: "Of course I [feel] sad [about the outcome of the MER]." Another explained:

"In that moment (when the results were announced), ...I was crying while [watching] the votes being counted... I suddenly felt belittled." One participant said: "I have been deeply affected by the [negative MER] outcome for a while.... I felt sad." Another participant reported: "When I saw those false statements or negative remarks, I couldn't help but feel full of resentment. [I hope] those [hostile] remarks [will disappear over time]. I was quite angry [with all those things]."

10.1.2. Losing Trust in Certain Religious Worshippers

The outcome of the MER affected the participants' views of religious worshippers, increasing the doubt and confusion they felt toward religion as well as religious people. Before and after the MER, some religious people strongly criticized the homosexual community and advocated for restricting homosexual people's rights to marriage, family, and childbearing. The participants believed that the MER had caused a rift among certain religious believers. One said: "Don't they say that God loves the world? But they [certain religious believers] keep attacking and opposing homosexuals... I felt confused, just confused about what is right."

10.1.3. Being Suspicious of People

In the time leading up to the MER and once the results had been announced, the participants became keenly aware of anti-homosexual attacks both on social media and in daily life. They became increasingly suspicious of people and had difficulty trusting people. One participant said: "I am not only sad about the [MER] result, but [I have] also [become more] suspicious of human beings..." The hostility, criticism, and rumors from those opposed to homosexual rights resulted in the participants losing trust in humanity; they felt deeply hurt. One participant said: "(About the result of the MER,) I felt disappointed with human nature and humanity [as a whole]."

10.1.4. Being Angry and Disappointed with Society

The participants were disappointed by the fact that most voters opposed the propositions in the MER. They felt that homosexual people were misunderstood by the public and wondered why they could not simply be accepted as members of society. They felt rejected by society because of their sexual orientation, and that feeling was compounded by the rejection of their request for marriage equality. They were disappointed with so-

ciety in general, which was accompanied by feelings of sadness, hurt, and resentment. They desired to clarify their perspective and role in society but did not know where to start. One participant said: "Irrational criticism of same-sex marriage makes me feel very angry, and I would think that you criticized me [despite knowing] nothing about me."

10.1.5. Experiencing Adversity and Pressure in Life

The participants were concerned about their ability to survive in society, especially in the context of hostile words and aggressive actions by those opposing marriage equality before and after the MER. They reported having difficulty being part of Taiwanese society, resulting in an existential crisis. One participant remarked: "Sometimes I feel very helpless living in a society [that does not accept homosexuals), I don't know how [I'll be able to] survive."

10.2. Emotional Responses Before and After the MER

Before and after the MER, numerous false statements and rumors spread in society and online; for example, "The purpose of the homosexual activists is to turn more children into homosexuals. Your children and grandchildren are at risk" and "The homosexual activists will turn more Taiwanese people into homosexuals." These statements were met with anger from the interviewees, who even reported engaging in verbal conflicts with those opposing marriage equality, which led to negative emotions. One participant said: "I was very angry when I read some messages attacking homosexuals, and then I quarreled with them [those opposing marriage equality]."

The participants recognized the importance of their significant others' attitudes toward same-sex marriage. If those close to them held negative or prejudiced attitudes toward the HOMOSEXUAL community, the participants tended to avoid discussing related issues with them. Family members' criticisms of homosexuals led to feelings of distress and sadness. For instance, the parents of some of the participants criticized the MER and rejected homosexuals, resulting in the participants feeling alienated from their parents. One participant said: "My dad made it very clear that he can't accept homosexuality; that is, he may [expel] a gay child [from] his house." Another participant noted: "My mother said that Taiwan's president made a big mistake [in approving] the MER and [having more homosexuals] will make [things worse in] the whole country. ...at that moment, I was really sad." The participants were deeply hurt by their friends and family opposing the MER and rejecting homosexuality.

10.3. Perspectives on the MER

10.3.1. MER as Incomplete, Hasty, and Imprecise

The participants claimed that the MER was poorly designed and incomplete. The voters struggled to understand the nuances of the topic and to make an informed decision in the MER. According to the participants, the MER was drafted hastily and the process was rushed; thus, the results do not accurately represent public opinion. The participants doubted the fairness of the referendum's outcome, with one participant saying: "The information on the MER... was not complete or precise enough... it was biased and distorted.... Many people didn't know much about the MER itself." Another participant said: "I think [the MER] was hasty and imprecise."

10.3.2. Dichotomous Options on the MER Causing Conflict

Some participants argued that the MER had increased antagonism in society, blaming the dichotomized phrasing of the MER questions for conflict between those in favor of and against marriage equality as well as the limited communication between the two groups, which ultimately yielded a lose–lose situation. One participant said: "The MER has turned into a social conflict.... It has indeed [become] a serious social conflict." Another participant said: "The closer the [date of the] MER was, the more intense the conflicts (between the two parties) became."

10.3.3. Inappropriateness of the MER in Terms of Human Rights

The participants believed that human rights should not be subjected to a referendum. Being able to marry and have a family is certainly a human right, and people should not deny the human rights of others by voting against it. One participant said: "Human rights should not be [decided in] a referendum, and should not be judged by others... [Holding the] MER was a mistake."

10.4. Self-reflection after the MER

10.4.1. Focusing on Issues Related to Marriage and Gender Equality

The participants noted that the MER increased public awareness of issues related to marriage equality and diversity for sexual minority groups. People avidly discussed the MER on social media and in person. Therefore, some participants recognized the positive effect of the MER in

foregrounding topics related to same-sex marriage in public discourse. However, some participants were concerned by the strong opposition to the homosexual community that emerged because of the MER. One participant said: "Before and after the MER, [the intensity] of messages and debates [both of those opposed to and in favor of marriage equality] increased."

10.4.2. Atmosphere of Approval on Campus

The participants reported that university students tend to treat homosexual people as equals and recognize the importance of gender equality and diversity. One participant said: "...on campus, most people accept [homosexuals]." Another participant said: "Of course, my peers are supportive of [homosexuals] and recognize [same-sex marriage] as a part of human rights." The participants felt encouraged by the support for gender equality they observed in peers, staff, and faculty on campus.

10.4.3. Positive Impact of the MER

The MER helped focus public attention on issues related to marriage equality and the human rights of sexual minority groups. On this topic, one participant said the following: "[When the public] pays attention to [gender equality and same-sex marriage] issues, [they may begin to question] why so many people stand up to express their ideas (about gender equality). In the past, some homosexuals might [have been] afraid to express their needs and thoughts. Now, quite a few homosexuals stand up to [ask for their rights] and accept their true color."

10.4.4. Consistent Communication and Conflict Resolution

The interviewees observed that people should be educated on gender equality, including rights related to marriage and family. Over time, such education can increase the acceptance of homosexual people getting married, having families, and raising children. Disapproval of homosexuality or attacks aimed at the homosexual community often stem from a lack of understanding. Therefore, open communication channels between the relevant parties can promote mutual understanding. One participant said: "We need to provide a comfortable and friendly environment [where] both parties are willing to express their thoughts... only in this way can [both parties sincerely] share and understand [the perspective of the other side]." Another participant said: "I hope that in the future, homosexuals

and heterosexuals can [coexist in peace]… with mutual respect and less conflict… After the MER, both sides should keep communicating and [aim to understand] each other."

10.4.5. Gender Equality as a Goal

The participants emphasized that the process of fighting for marriage equality has been arduous, and that eliminating prejudice and stereotypes in society would take time. One participant said: "Because homosexuality was viewed as abnormal in the past, there are [fervent] supporters and opponents [of gender equality and the rights of homosexuals]." Despite the attacks against and false statements regarding homosexuality before and after the MER, the participants expressed hope that greater understanding would emerge between groups through communication. After the MER, they reported being more involved in advocating for and safeguarding the human rights of sexual minority groups.

11. Discussion

The participants highlighted that university campuses are more inclusive and accepting of homosexual people than are society in general and the virtual world. The study participants felt supported and understood by their peers, staff, and faculty on campuses, which encouraged them to freely discuss issues related to the MER. The present results are inconsistent with those of previous studies, which have reported that homosexual students experience discrimination and biases on campus and thus require safe spaces (Chang, 2007); that they often encounter oppression or discrimination (Misawa, 2010); or that they face harassment, discrimination, and other obstacles at schools (Renn, 2017). The present results suggest university campuses tend to have a friendly environment in terms of gender diversity in Taiwan.

Before and after the MER, social media was replete with attacks, discrimination, and rumors against homosexuals. The study participants were negatively affected by hostile statements as well as biased and discriminative messages against the homosexual community on social media. According to SIT, people are strongly affected by the behaviors of others and are readily persuaded, inhibited, threatened, and supported by such behaviors; in addition, the social impact is distributed among all the people it is directed at (Latané, 1981). As the date of the MER neared, pe-

ople's anticipation increased rapidly but so did the intensity and number of attacks and negative statements from those opposing marriage equality. The impending MER resulted in higher levels of pressure and anxiety among homosexual people.

According to SIT, the effect of social influence on people increases with the strength of the source, the immediacy of the event, and the number of sources exerting the impact. When the results of the MER were announced, the participants felt rejected by the public, hurt and sad, and marginalized; they questioned how they would be able to survive in such a society. Some of the participants cried or felt stressed, hurt, or disturbed while they watched the results of the MER being announced. The present findings are consistent with those of a previous study, which revealed that support for same-sex marriage before the MER was significantly correlated with psychological distress after the MER (Liao et al., 2022). Social influence targeted at a single individual would place considerable pressure on them to conform to the norm (Evans, 2023).

One result related to the negative outcome of the MER was that the participants lost trust in humanity and human nature in general, with particularly strong distrust aimed at people with certain religious beliefs. Another negative effect was that the participants began to doubt themselves and their gender identity. To a certain extent, the present results echo those of related studies; for example, homosexuals feel hurt and impaired by false or offensive comments and attacks on social media (Chang, 2016). Homophobic bullying aggravates depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation in homosexual people (Russell et al., 2011). Homosexual individuals experienced negative emotions after marriage equality was not supported in referendum (Riggle et al., 2009), and hostile and homophobic bullying as well as discriminative messages or attacks on social media (Chen, 2020) and in their daily lives which resulted in homosexual individuals feeling angry, sad, and hurt, which contribute to their powerlessness and hopelessness (Chang, 2017). The present results highlight how the mental health of vulnerable or minority groups is negatively affected in hostile environments where stigma, prejudice, and discrimination are commonplace (Meyer, 2003).

After the MER, the participants gradually adopted coping methods, including seeking support from peers, expressing their thoughts among friends, and participating in homosexual advocacy groups. For those in the homosexual community, being a part of gay or lesbian clubs provides them with support and companionship, strengthens their courage, and produ-

ces a sense of belonging (Liu, 2003); homosexual people also adopt coping mechanisms to regulate their emotions; for example, maintaining boundaries, seeking support, responding positively, and advocating for gender equality (Chang, 2017).

Despite the challenges they faced, the participants remained committed to investing in gender equality organizations; performing pro-homosexual advocacy and social actions; helping to reduce prejudice, bias, discrimination, and stereotypes against homosexual individuals; and increasing public understanding of homosexual people, same-sex marriage, and other gender equality issues. The present results are consistent with the aforementioned results of Chang (2017). Seeking support from peers and friends helps homosexual university students become more aware of and accept their own emotional reactions as well as understand and accept diverse opinions, ultimately helping to relieve stress and stabilize their emotions. This notion is consistent with the principles of SIT: when more people share the impact of an external social force, the overall burden is reduced. The present results echo those of Chang, You and Wang (2013), who argued that students should enhance awareness of gender equality by using gender equality materials, engaging in gender education activities, breaking gender stereotypes, and avoiding gender bias and discrimination.

12. Implications

Referendums should be carefully designed and avoid dichotomous options. Debates and discussions before referendums are critical tools to clarify relevant details and enhance the public's comprehension of the issues being voted on. Gender equality laws and norms are crucial to protect the human rights of disadvantaged or minority groups; and these rights should not depend on the outcome of a referendum. Mass communication professionals should convey objective, rational, and balanced information, as well as promote diversity and equality in society. Counseling and educational professionals should also advocate for equality in terms of marriage and family, in addition to striving to eliminate gender prejudice and discrimination. Future research can focus on communication and understanding between the homosexual community and other groups to foster greater acceptance, fairness, and justice on campus as well as in society.

Conclusion

The outcome of the MER prompted feelings of rejection and marginalization in homosexual university students; they also experienced considerable stress and questioned their survival in Taiwanese society. Before and after the MER, those in the homosexual community were the targets of attacks and discrimination both on social media and in daily life; they began to doubt the meaning of life, religion, and religious worshippers; they lost trust in people and society in general; and frequently felt sad, disappointed, frustrated, helpless, and hopeless. All these negative emotions and reactions peaked when the results of the MER were announced. Fortunately, homosexual undergraduates felt supported by their peers, faculty, and staff on campus. They gradually learned to cope with stress, sought support from homosexual clubs or LGBTQ groups, and attended activities to advocate for gender equality and diversity on campus and in society. A positive outcome of the MER is that it stimulated dialogue among various parties in society and increased public awareness of gender issues. The interviewees in this study expressed a desire for increased respect and acceptance of same-sex marriages and families; to reach this goal, they remain dedicated to promoting gender equality and harmonious interpersonal interactions both on campus and in society.

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