

## **Exploring the Nature of the Influence of Social Media in Professing the Identity of Homosexuals in Colombo, Sri Lanka: A Mixed-Methods Study**

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### **Abstract**

This study investigates how social media influences Sri Lankans' perceptions of homosexuality. The study looks at how LGBTQ+ people in Sri Lanka have interacted with social media and how it has affected their sense of self, sense of community, and encounters with stigma and prejudice. The study also looks at how social media is utilised in Colombo to support or counteract anti-LGBTQ+ prejudice. Through a quantitative research phase, stratified random sampling surveyed 300 LGBTQ+ individuals (non-heterosexuals) in Colombo's metropolis. This approach, embracing diverse identities and experiences, bolsters research integrity. The survey explores social media use, stigma, prejudice, and its impact on identity. To gain more in-depth and nuanced insights into survey respondents' experiences with social media, the qualitative component conducts in-depth interviews with a sample of 30 survey respondents. The research further scrutinises the discourse and pertinent content pertaining to homosexuality within the realm of social media. It examines both the prevalence and content richness of pro-LGBTQ+ and anti-LGBTQ+ social media profiles. A thorough investigation including 300 LGBTQ+ people (non-heterosexuals) in the Colombo city revealed a startling 58% prevalence of discrimination. The research also explored the link between social media use and cultural constructs of homosexuality, accentuating the intricate interrelationship between digital platforms and conventional sexual orientation beliefs. The uncovered insights highlight the necessity of promoting accepting attitudes and provide crucial factors for the design of strategic initiatives to create a culture of acceptance and inclusion within Sri Lanka's LGBTQ+ population.

**Keywords:** *Discrimination, Homosexuality, LGBTQ+, Social Media, Stigma*

## 1. Introduction and Research Problem

People increasingly use social media as a forum to express their identities through profile curation, content sharing, discussions, and engagement, and interact with others who share their interests. However, social media may be a crucial tool for publicising one's identity and seeking support for those who identify as homosexual in nations where homosexuality is stigmatised or forbidden. People who identify as gay frequently experience discrimination and societal stigma in Sri Lanka, where homosexuality is illegal under Section 365A of the Penal Code (UNHCR, 2020). Notwithstanding these challenges, an escalating number of LGBTQ+ individuals in Sri Lanka are leveraging social media for interpersonal engagement and identity assertion. Nevertheless, the dynamics of utilising social media to propagate homosexuality within the Sri Lankan context remain unexplored.

The influence of social media in formation of the identity of homosexual persons in the Colombo metropolis is the issue this study attempts to explore. Despite the fact that LGBTQ+ people are becoming more visible on social media in Sri Lanka, little is known about how social media is being utilised in this country to promote homosexuality. In antecedent scholarly inquiries (e.g., Vrangalova et al., 2017), scrutiny into the role of social media in professing LGBTQ+ identities due to its global reach, fostering self-expression and community connection. Nonetheless, the extant disparities in culture and jurisprudence imply the incongruity of such findings in the Sri Lankan milieu. Consequently, this research endeavors to discern, via a mixed-methods paradigm, the influence of social media on the portrayal of homosexuality within the confines of the Colombo metropolis.

This study specifically addresses the following research questions: (1) How do LGBT+ people in Sri Lanka utilise social media to express and ensure their identities are recognised? (2) How is the use of social media in Sri Lanka to promote homosexuality influenced by social and cultural factors? By identifying possible techniques to use social media to promote LGBT+ persons' identities and assist community formation, the study's findings may help shape the creation of policies and interventions targeted at promoting the well-being and social inclusion of LGBT+ individuals in Sri Lanka. Apparently, it is important to note that the impact of social media in ensuring the identity of homosexuality in Sri Lanka is a complicated and understudied subject. This study seeks to address this knowledge deficit by investigating the manner in which individuals of non-heteronormative orientations employ social media platforms for the purpose of articulating and advocating their identities. Additionally, it aims to delineate the challenges and benefits inherent in this endeavor. The discernment of efficacious strategies to employ social media for identity advocacy and community advancement holds the potential to yield profound implications for the amplification of social integration and the overall welfare of the LGBTQ+ populace within the Sri Lankan context.

## **2. Research Methodology**

Epistemologically grounded, this study adopts a mixed-methods paradigm, blending quantitative and qualitative methodologies to meticulously investigate the intricate interplay between social media and the promotion of the identity of homosexuality within Sri Lanka. Deliberate purposive sampling is employed to discern fervent LGBT+ users of Facebook, Instagram, and

Twitter, via social media platforms and web forums. The study's quantitative facet employs a self-administered online survey, incorporating closed-ended inquiries to ascertain demographic particulars, and to gauge the frequency and intensity of LGBT+ individuals' social media engagement in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, the qualitative arm of the study employs semi-structured interviews to glean profound insights into the utilisation of social media by Sri Lankan LGBT+ individuals to articulate and bolster their identities. Drawing from extant literature and study themes, interview questions are fashioned. To ensure linguistic adeptness and respondent ease, interviews are conducted in participants' native tongue, recorded, and transcribed verbatim for meticulous scrutiny.

The amassed data extracted from the survey and interviews will be scrutinised individually, and subsequently integrated to offer a comprehensive understanding of the role played by social media in amplifying the identity of homosexuality in Sri Lanka. Quantitative data shall be subjected to descriptive statistics, delineating the prevalence and vigor of social media use by Sri Lankan LGBT+ individuals. In tandem, qualitative data will be methodically examined through thematic analysis to unearth emergent patterns and insights concerning the utilisation of social media to foster LGBT+ identities within Sri Lanka. This mixed-methods inquiry holds the promise of a nuanced exploration into the dynamic interface of social media and identity propagation of homosexuality. By encapsulating the frequency, intensity, challenges, and benefits associated with social media engagement for Sri Lankan LGBT+ individuals, this study strives to inform both policy and practice. The outcomes possess the potential to identify effective social media strategies that underpin LGBT+ identities and facilitate social inclusion in Sri

Lanka, rendering noteworthy ramifications for both theory and application.

### **3. Objectives of the Study**

This research seeks to comprehensively comprehend the social media usage encounters of Sri Lankan LGBT+ individuals, considering the impacts of social and cultural dynamics on these encounters. The primary objectives encompass investigating how LGBT+ individuals employ social media to connect with others and convey their identities. The overarching intention is to establish a profound comprehension before embarking on the initiation of their social affiliations. The survey questions tried to learn more about how often and what kind of social media users use them, as well as whether or not social media has made it easier or harder for them to express their sexual orientation online. The survey questions hope to learn more about how this has impacted their usage of social media and online presence. The study aims to investigate how social and cultural elements affect LGBT+ people's use of social media in Sri Lanka. In-depth interviews with LGBT+ people will serve to further understand the potential influences that Sri Lankan social and cultural issues may have on how LGBT+ people utilise social media.

### **4. Scope and Significance of the Study**

In order to understand the experiences and perspectives of LGBT+ people in a nation where same-sex relationships are illegal; it is important and pertinent to examine the role that social media plays in promoting the identity of homosexuality in Sri Lanka. By studying how LGBT+ people use social media to express their identities and interact with like-minded people, this study adds

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to the body of knowledge on LGBT+ issues in Sri Lanka. A thorough knowledge of the experiences and opinions of LGBT+ people in Sri Lanka on the use of social media in promoting their identities is made possible by the study's mixed-methods approach. The results of this study have important policy and practice ramifications because they emphasise how crucial it is to provide LGBT+ people in Sri Lanka with safe spaces and welcoming surroundings. According to the study, social media gives LGBT+ people a platform to express themselves and find support, which can improve their well-being and social inclusion. The research did note, however, the difficulties and dangers of promoting LGBT+ identities on social media, such as the possibility of discrimination and exposure to hate speech.

According to one of the key findings of the study, social media is vital in raising the visibility and knowledge of LGBT+ problems in Sri Lanka. As per the study, LGBT+ people may use social media as a platform to raise awareness of LGBT+ rights and challenges in Sri Lanka, which may boost the visibility and comprehension of LGBT+ identities and experiences. This result is in line with other research that showed how social media may help marginalised populations become more visible and well-known (McMillan & Morrison, 2006; Sánchez & Magno, 2016). The study's other key result is that social media gives LGBT+ people a platform to interact with like-minded others and find support. The study discovered that social media gives LGBT+ people a secure area to create and maintain a sense of community, which can improve their well-being and social inclusion. This conclusion is in line with other research that showed how social media may help marginalised populations by fostering supportive settings (Kavadias & Lerman, 2019; Rai, 2018).

The research did note, however, the difficulties and dangers of promoting LGBT+ identities in Sri Lanka using social media. According to the survey, LGBT+ people are at risk for mental health problems, are exposed to hate speech and negative comments, and are in fear of being recognised and subjected to discrimination. These results underline the requirement for laws and other measures to address the difficulties and dangers of utilising social media to promote LGBT+ identities in Sri Lanka. For instance, adopting anti-discrimination laws and programmes, offering mental health care for LGBT+ people, and establishing safe spaces and friendly settings for LGBT+ people on social media platforms. In a nutshell, this study offers a thorough knowledge of how social media in Sri Lanka promotes the identification of homosexuality. The results of this study have important policy and practice ramifications because they emphasise how crucial it is to provide LGBT+ people in Sri Lanka with safe spaces and welcoming surroundings. By exploring how LGBT+ people use social media to express their identities and interact with like-minded people, the study also adds to the body of knowledge on LGBT+ issues in Sri Lanka. The study's conclusions may help shape policies and actions that enhance the welfare and social inclusion of LGBT+ people in Sri Lanka

## **5. Review of the Relevant Literature**

Social media has assimilated into modern culture and has made it possible for people to interact and communicate with others on a worldwide scale. Social media thus has the potential to be very influential in defining people's identities and fostering societal change. A particularly effective instrument for

advancing the rights and visibility of marginalised people, such as the LGBTQ+ community, is social media (Levina & Aricak, 2017). Many LGBTQ+ people still experience prejudice and marginalisation, despite the global trend towards the acceptance of LGBTQ+ people and the decriminalisation of homosexuality in a number of nations (Gnanadason, 2019). Same-sex sexual behaviour is prohibited in Sri Lanka and has a maximum ten-year jail penalty (Equaldex, 2021). Because of this, LGBTQ+ people in Sri Lanka frequently experience harassment and violence in addition to considerable societal stigma (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

An important topic of enquiry is the influence of social media in promoting the identification of homosexuality, given the difficulties LGBTQ+ people in Sri Lanka confront. According to Duguay (2016), social media has the ability to help LGBTQ+ people connect with others, access resources and support networks, and express their identities. However, little research has been done on how social media may be used to promote homosexuality in Sri Lanka.

Previous studies have emphasised social media's ability to advance LGBTQ+ visibility and rights. For instance, a research done in the United States has demonstrated that social media has significantly contributed to raising awareness of LGBTQ+ people and advocating their rights. According to a study done in India, social media has made it possible for LGBTQ+ people to express themselves, connect with others, and access resources and support networks (Kumar & Srikantan, 2017).



## **6. Results and Findings**

### **6.1. Quantitative Results**

The survey results showed that 96% of participants use social media to express their identities as LGBT+ individuals. The most used social media platforms were Facebook (87%), Instagram (53%), and Twitter (27%). Participants reported using social media to connect with other LGBT+ individuals (81%), express their feelings and thoughts about their identities (77%), and find support and understanding (67%). Additionally, 62% of participants reported that social media has helped them in their journey of self-discovery and acceptance as LGBT+ individuals. Evidently, these findings substantiate the cultivation of a nuanced awareness regarding non-heteronormative individuals among a substantial portion of social media users. Manifestly, this delineates the intricate mechanisms through which individuals of diverse sexual orientations employ personalised social media platforms to foster connections with like-minded individuals.

The outcomes of the survey underscored that the principal advantages derived from leveraging social media for the propagation of the identity of homosexuality, pertain to fostering social inclusion authentically, unmasking one's non-heterosexual orientation without pretense, increased visibility and awareness of LGBT+ issues (74%), the ability to connect with like-minded individuals (62%), and the opportunity to express oneself freely (55%). However, participants also reported some challenges associated with using social media including the fear of being identified and facing discrimination (58%), exposure to negative comments and hate speech (42%), and the potential for negative impact on mental health (32%).

## 6.2. Qualitative Results

The semi-structured interviews were used to provide more in-depth insights into the experiences and perceptions of the participants regarding the role of social media in promoting their identities as LGBT+ individuals in Sri Lanka. Thematic analysis of the interview data revealed three main themes. The first theme was "Visibility and Awareness." Participants discussed the role of social media in increasing the visibility and awareness of LGBT+ issues in Sri Lanka. Participants highlighted that social media provided a platform to express their identities and raise awareness about LGBT+ rights and issues in Sri Lanka. One participant stated, "Social media has helped us to show people that we exist and that we have rights." The second theme was "Challenges and Risks." Participants discussed the challenges and risks associated with using social media to promote their identities. The most reported challenge was the fear of being identified and facing discrimination. Participants also reported experiencing negative comments and hate speech on social media, which had a negative impact on their mental health. The third theme was "Community and Support." Participants discussed the importance of social media in building and maintaining a sense of community and finding support. Participants highlighted that social media provided a safe space to connect with like-minded individuals and receive support and understanding. One participant stated, "Social media has helped me to find a community of people who understand me and accept me for who I am."

Overall, the findings of this study suggest that social media plays an important role in promoting the identity of homosexuality in Sri Lanka. While social media provides a platform for LGBT+ individuals to express their identities

and connect with like-minded individuals, it also presents challenges and risks. The findings of this study could inform the development of policies and interventions aimed at improving the well-being and social inclusion of LGBT+ individuals in Sri Lanka.

## **7. Conclusions**

This comprehensive mixed-methods investigation yields noteworthy revelations, notably advocating equitable societal standing irrespective of one's sexual orientation and personal sexual identity, which must be approached with deference and equitable opportunities devoid of generating societal disarray. The study's revelations elucidate that social media constitutes a pivotal instrument for LGBT+ individuals to articulate their identities, procure alliances and reinforcement, and establish connections with kindred spirits who espouse akin principles. The findings of the study also show that social media contributes to greater visibility and understanding of LGBT+ problems in Sri Lanka. According to the quantitative data, most participants utilised social media to express their identities, interact with other LGBT+ people, and seek assistance. Qualitative research also shows that social media is crucial for creating and sustaining a feeling of community, which is crucial for the welfare of LGBT+ people in Sri Lanka. The study also finds that utilising social media comes with dangers and difficulties, such as exposure to hate speech and criticism, and the fear of discrimination.

Overall, this study mitigates potential discord arising from the prevailing societal scrutiny encompassing one's sexual orientation, regardless of whether it is homosexual or heterosexual. By maintaining such discretion, the broader

social fabric could ostensibly remain undisturbed, thereby upholding a semblance of equilibrium in social dynamics while preserving the equilibrium inherent in the natural realm. Interventions should be created to address the difficulties and dangers of social media use, and to guarantee that LGBT+ people are shielded from prejudice and hate speech. Sri Lanka can provide a more welcoming atmosphere for LGBT+ people to express their identities and fully participate in society by encouraging social inclusion and acceptance. The study's findings which emphasise both the potential advantages and difficulties of social media use for LGBT+ people, provide light on the significance of social media in promoting the identity of homosexuality in Sri Lanka. The study's conclusions have repercussions for decision-makers, interested parties, and advocates who fight to advance the welfare and social inclusion of LGBT+ people in Sri Lanka and elsewhere.

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