

Comparative Analysis of Adolescent Attitudes Towards LGBTQ+ in Urban and Rural Schools in Thimphu

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Abstract

The objective of the research is to examine the attitude difference between urban and rural school adolescents towards lesbian and gay individuals in Thimphu. There were 240 participants in the study, with 120 from urban schools and 120 from rural schools. The study adopted a stratified random sampling method. To gather data, structured self-administered survey questionnaires in hardcopy have been distributed to all identified respondents. The instrument used a five-point Likert scale to assess the attitude of students towards lesbians and gays. The findings revealed a **significant difference in attitude** between urban and rural adolescents towards lesbian and gay individuals, with urban participants demonstrating a higher level of acceptance compared to their rural counterparts. The findings show a statistically significant difference in attitudes, with urban respondents scoring slightly higher ($M = 3.86, SD = 0.18$) than rural respondents ($M = 3.78, SD = 0.17$), $t(238) = 3.496, p = 0.01, CI [0.04, 0.13]$. The effect

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size was modest ($d = 0.45$), indicating a slightly more positive attitude among urban students. This highlights geographical disparity in attitudes toward lesbian and gay individuals among adolescents.

Keywords: Urban, Rural, Acceptance, Attitude, Adolescents, and Minority Groups (Lesbian & Gays)

Introduction

In Bhutan, a nation where traditional views on sexuality and gender norms prevail, the concept of sexual diversity is often limited and misunderstood (Wangdi & Tshering, 2017). Homosexuality has historically been a marginalized topic, only gaining noticeable attention after recent legislative attempts to amend Article 213 of the Penal Code of Bhutan 2004, which criminalizes sexual conduct against the order of nature. Although no charges have been filed under this article, the societal understanding and acceptance of LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly lesbians and gays, remain relatively nascent. The formal introduction of terms like “Lesbian” and “Gay” into the national language in 2015 by the Dzongkha Development Commission marked a significant step towards recognition (Sherubtse College, 2019).

Despite the limited visibility, there are signs of growing awareness, as evidenced by the 215 individuals who have openly registered as members of Pride Bhutan. However, many LGBTQ+ individuals continue to conceal their identity due to the risk of discrimination, ostracism, and various forms of mistreatment that can lead to severe consequences such as school dropouts, mental health issues, and an increased risk of HIV. The societal challenges are compounded by a lack of

comprehensive literature or studies addressing the lived experiences and societal attitudes toward these individuals, which further perpetuates their marginalization (Johnson & Greeley, 2007; Dorji, 2018).

This paucity of research and understanding not only obscures the true challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals but also hinders the development of informed policies and support systems designed to integrate and protect this minority group. While some studies suggest that lesbians and gays may receive more negative treatment compared to other LGBTQ+ groups, empirical research confirming these assertions remains scarce (Deese et al., 2013).

Therefore, this research aims to delve into the attitudes of urban and rural Bhutanese populations towards lesbians and gays, examining whether regional differences affect societal acceptance and understanding. By exploring how these attitudes are shaped by geographical factors, the study seeks to uncover the extent to which the recent policy changes aimed at harmonizing homosexuality have penetrated the awareness of adolescents. This inquiry is particularly pertinent as it investigates which of the two minorities, lesbians or gays, is more accepted among adolescents. Such insights are critical in a society where the acknowledgment of LGBTQ+ rights is still emerging and often fails to translate into full participation in civic and workplace roles. Addressing these issues is not only about enhancing our understanding but also about fostering the necessary societal conditions to end the discrimination and challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in Bhutan.

Literature Review

Over the past five years, there has been a growing level of acceptance and a positive shift in considering LGBTQ+ people in mainstream society (Flores, 2019). Nevertheless, issues related to the LGBTQ+ community persist in modern-day society. Numerous studies and findings discuss the presence of harassment, violence, and discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals. This indicates either a lack of awareness of LGBTQ+ rights or an evenly negative attitude towards homosexuals.

In the East Asian region, LGBTQ+ community, lesbian and gay individuals are perceived as harming the reputation of standard femininity and masculinity and are still negatively viewed. Similarly, there are beliefs that lesbian and gay people, compared to other minority groups, are perceived to endanger the reproduction level of human demography and leave the family line stranded (Yongliang et al. 2012). Thus, it is evident that compared to the heterosexual populace, lesbian and gay individuals are subjected to sheer public scrutiny and criticism in different social settings.

In Bhutan, discussions about lesbians and gays became visible only after 2015, though gender issues existed in the country before but were simply invisible in society. Lesbian and gay individuals are those whose genders don't conform to societal expectations of gender roles (Dorji, 2018). Like in other countries, they are underrepresented in any activities in Bhutan. Even in formal or informal empirical studies, they are often not included. Despite legal harmonization, such as the amendment of certain sections of the penal code of Bhutan that

criminalize homosexuality, they are still largely invisible. Based on the observed trends and studies, it can be interpreted that men are found to be more resilient towards the LGBTQ+ community than women. The attitude difference between genders towards lesbians and gays, according to some literature, is subjective and may not significantly bias the acceptance of minorities in the community. Nonetheless, understanding how regional location influences people's attitudes toward minorities is deemed important for better understanding the visible and unseen factors linked to these variations in attitude.

According to Grossman and Augelli (2006), social norms are structured to understand only the binary classification of gender, and thus, lesbians and gays are almost invisible in society. Moreover, the study has found that the general society assumes minority groups are confirmed to the gender of their biological sex and the role in which they fit. In similar research, Wangdi and Tshering (2017) assert that Bhutanese are acquainted with gender being either male or female. Any sexual qualities that are expressed in contrast to heterosexuals are stigmatized and discriminated against by society (Sherubtse College, 2019). This rationale holds that such practices and norms contradict conventional gender constructs in society. However, transgender individuals are accepted in the Bhutanese context compared to lesbians and gays (Zam, 2013; Chuki, 2019). Additionally, homosexuality, in other senses, such as females liking females and males liking males, is not considered normal in Bhutanese society. As stated in Fitzsimons (2020), among minority groups, lesbians and gays are negatively rated by almost all respondents from 23 Western

and non-western countries. Furthermore, the findings have shown that compared to gays, lesbians are more accepted by society.

Some studies have shown that gender and region have an impact on people's attitudes toward lesbians and gays in Bhutan (Chuki, 2019). However, these are only limited papers that have slightly touched on the impact of gender and region on attitudes toward lesbians and gays. The message is not directly conveyed that these variables have affected people's attitudes toward accepting these minority groups in society. Attitude is defined as behavior or belief systems that are embedded in one's tradition and social norms that are preserved over a longer period and often harder to change (Wangdi & Tshering, 2017). The study in Singapore on "gender difference and attitude towards LGBTQ+" found that people generally harbor negative feelings towards lesbians and gays, and this disparity exists even in highly educated societies.

The state of people's attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ community as influenced by regional location is strongly evidenced by numerous international literatures. According to Eliason (1995), the attitude of general society towards the LGBTQ+ community is expressed in terms of geographical location, namely the attitude difference in people living in urban and rural areas. Some studies on attitude differences towards lesbians and gays have concluded that people living in rural areas are less accepting than those in urban areas. On the other hand, owing to media outlets and better infrastructures in place, urban areas connote a positive attitude. For example, in one study conducted by Rondahl et al. (2004), the survey conducted with students from diverse geographical locations

such as the Philippines, Sweden, and Hawaii found that geographical location has an extreme impact on their attitude towards minority groups. On aggregate, 85 percent of respondents from Hawaii gave a negative view of lesbians and gays based on psychological explanations of attitude, while 44 percent of respondents from the Philippines are found to be more liberal towards lesbians and gays based on their acceptance level in society. The study by Akhouri and Kehksha (2018) reveals that rural areas have a more negative attitude towards lesbians and gays than urban areas.

In the study by (Herek & Glunt, 1993), it is observed that heterosexuals are not comfortable becoming friends with lesbians and gays because they fear rejection and negative reactions from society. (Rubin & Hewstone, 2004), initiated an LGBTQ+ ally course based on three theories: social identity theory, multicultural theory, and self-concept formation theory, to understand the attitude of students and their cognitive development to social issues. In this study, students expressed fear of social criticism, lack of family support, and prejudice if they befriended LGBTQ+ individuals, leading to the conclusion that students struggle to develop normal relationships with LGBTQ+ members.

Similarly, Brown (2019) argues that queer and gerontological theorists give undue recognition to LGBTQ+ members in their study, thus suppressing their basic rights and freedom. Moreover, the literature has found that attitudes towards LGBTQ+ are influenced by the environment people live in. The attitude of society towards sexuality and gender identity differs depending on whether these issues are openly discussed or not.

In the Bhutanese context too, faintly, Chuki (2019) reveals that urban society is more tolerant of gender diversity and sexuality than rural areas. Also, in the same paper, it was stated that in both areas the issue of such minorities is not talked about openly. Hence, this literature has shown that attitude towards lesbians and gays is determined by the region people live in.

Similarly, some research reports that urban areas have a higher acceptance level towards lesbian and gay individuals. This contrast in attitude between urban and rural areas is influenced by platforms such as social media outlets, education, and norms of society (Li et al., 2021). On the contrary, some literature has evidenced that rural people are less considerate towards lesbians and gays compared to urban (Levitt & Klassen, 1974). A study conducted by Lee and Quam (2013) explains that rural areas are more receptive to information and thus develop greater acceptance towards the LGBTQ+ community. They reported higher levels of guardedness about sexual orientation with other people in the communities (Lee & Quam, 2013). In the study by Akhouri and Kehksha (2018), the result reveals that females have a more negative attitude towards lesbians and gays than males. In Bhutan, there is limited information on understanding gender attitudes toward such minorities, and the small sample size in the research limits its generalizability.

Attitude and Acceptance Level Towards Lesbians and Gay

According to Fetner (2016), the US once assumed homosexuality was a mental illness, and the attitude towards homosexuality was consistently negative throughout the 1970s and 1980s. However, following consequent advocacy and seminars, the study found that not only are policies changing,

but attitudes towards lesbians and gay people have shifted to a high level of acceptance. Relatively, in the context of Bhutan, the decriminalization of homosexuality, as much-debated policy changes, has gained greater momentum in terms of accepting lesbians and gays in society. In Bhutan, policy changes such as decriminalization provide the LGBTQ+ community with guidelines on how things should be, but the reality happens at the ground level, where people are and where things happen. It is pertinent to grasp societal perceptions and how this significant policy initiative became known to the public.

According to the “LGBT+ Global Acceptance Index” (2019), the least accepting countries include Bhutan, Thailand, Singapore, Guyana, and Kenya, with average GAI scores ranging from 3.40 to 3.44 from 2000 to 2017. The report also states that the most accepting countries, such as Iceland, the Netherlands, Norway, Canada, and Spain, are becoming more accepting, with GAI scores ranging from 6.8 to 7.53. The study, based on cross-sectional surveys, prioritized findings based on participants from both rural and urban areas. The acceptance level of the participants towards LGBTQ+ people in the study is measured from variables such as social norms, engagement in civic roles, and workplace environment, among other factors. Therefore, these variables have been adopted in the present study to measure the attitudes of participants owing to their relevancy and clarity of the model.

In Bhutan, numerous advocacy programmes have been conducted to educate the general society about the challenges and issues minorities face in society. Despite such awareness and initiatives, people’s attitudes towards lesbians and gays

remain traditional and unfriendly. According to Tobgay (2019), one of the imminent issues concerning minority groups is that health workers and facilities are not gender-friendly and lack the necessary skills and knowledge to address their specific needs. The study also found that health services are an important determinant in enhancing the economic productivity of key populations.

Moreover, public institutions such as schools and health centres have limited knowledge of gender identity, sexual orientation, and gender expressions, which are not openly discussed. Besides regular outreach programmes, peer counselling, advocacy, and networking activities, lesbian and gay individuals, in particular, face numerous discriminations (Tshomo, 2019). Additionally, HIV screening, testing, and distribution of condoms/lubricants do not reach minority groups.

Exclusion of the LGBT Community from the Mainstream Society

Employment Discrimination

According to Damante (2016), one way to bring a positive attitude towards LGBTQ+ individuals is to incorporate sexual orientation and gender identity into the school curriculum. Nevertheless, educational institutions show minimal concern and lack readiness to engage in further collaboration. The study in Singapore on “Gender Difference and Attitude towards LGBTQ+” found that people generally associate negative feelings towards lesbians and gay individuals, and this disparity exists even with an advanced education system.

Based on the attitude differences of the general public, in comparison to other sexual orientations, lesbians and gay

individuals face exclusion in numerous areas, including economic spheres and the workplace. In close reference to the Human Capital approach, lesbian and gay individuals possess equal competency in improving their productivity in the labor market when they are included in mainstream society and have access to education and training. However, exclusion can limit their economic potential, educational opportunities, and other advantages they would otherwise achieve (Badgett & Nezhad, 2014). On the contrary, lesbian and gay individuals face exclusion while seeking jobs in the market and are also excluded once on the job (Ozeren, 2014). They primarily face harassment, and mental torture, and are provided with few opportunities for advancement and development while in the workplace. There is a clear indication that society at large does not acknowledge the presence of lesbian and gay individuals and regards them as implicit figures even in organizational workplaces. According to Bower and Blackmon (2003), scholars tend to focus significantly on visible aspects of diversity management in the workplace, such as region, gender, ethnicity, and age. However, as indicated by Bower and Blackmon (2003), managing invisible diversity such as sexual orientation (LGBTQ+) is as important as managing visible diversity. This implies that improving societal attitudes and acceptance towards LGBTQ+ individuals within organizations at the grassroots level can have broader impacts, promoting the valuable contributions of LGBTQ+ individuals across various aspects of society.

Civic Participation

The state of developing a positive view of lesbian and gay individuals by the general public is determined by the ability of minority groups to participate in civic institutions and take on political roles. Moreover, it has more to do with how general society accepts the fact that lesbian and gay individuals engage in political, volunteerism, and social activities. Gender and sexual minorities such as lesbians and gay individuals are drastically underrepresented in most political roles and elected positions. According to Reynolds (2013), at the global scale, LGBTQ+ people occupy only six percent of all seats in the upper house of the parliament at most. One of the determinants for lesbian and gays' inclusion in leadership roles is to include them in legal frameworks, the decision-making process, and drafting policies that are inclusive of all gender constructs (World Bank, 2016). Moreover, harmonizing punitive laws and fostering the inclusion of minorities in civic life are important elements towards enhancing social acceptance and inculcating a positive attitude among the people. However, there is no uniformity in terms of accepting minorities in society, such as in the case of rural residents being more liberal and accepting while urban people think otherwise. Numerous studies have found that varying attitudes between different regions are viewed as a challenge to foster greater participation of minorities in civic life.

Social Norms

Bullying and Violence are one of the primary factors leading to the mistreatment of LGBTQ+ people. It is caused by a higher degree of unacceptability and an insignificant attitude towards

those minorities. To this essence, this process can manifest in the form of outcomes such as bullying, harassment, and exhibiting violent actions, which are triggered by one's social norms. According to Boonmongkon (2014), LGBTQ+ students face increased dropout rates, absenteeism rates twice as other students, and mental problems due to bullying and harassment by other peers. The study also found that the level of acceptance towards LGBTQ+ students is low and generates a negative attitude towards minority groups.

In the context of Bhutan, decriminalization of “Unnatural sex” was a milestone created to address issues related to the LGBTQ+ community. But while referring to grievances shared by the LGBTQ+ community in an interview, most people still have difficulty understanding their presence, and thus discrimination against the minority group is taking another shape. They are of the view that at the policy level, LGBTQ+ rights have been well received, but there still needs excessive awareness programmes required at the ground level. Moreover, the LGBTQ+ members stress that challenges associated with the LGBTQ+ community are also tied to the well-being of the general society. Thus, tangible issues such as violence and harassment of minorities should be eliminated through collaboration between multi-government agencies.

Some findings from the literature show that the region plays a vital role in determining the attitude difference of people towards lesbians and gays. It is normally thought that people residing in urban areas will have a positive attitude towards lesbians and gays due to their education and exposure, but on the contrary, some research has shown that there is negativity exhibited in urban areas too. Whereas, some rural areas show

positive acceptance towards lesbians and gays. Hence, this gap provides space to see the attitude difference and acceptability in the two communities. Therefore, the following hypotheses are proposed for the study:

H0 = There is no difference in attitudes towards lesbians and gays between rural and urban students.

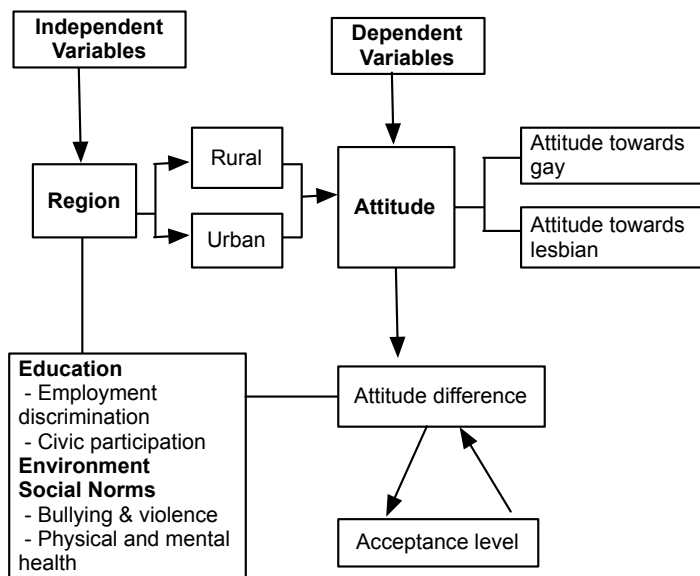
H1 = There is a difference in attitudes towards lesbians and gays between rural and urban students.

Conceptual Framework

The following conceptual framework has been derived from the Global Acceptance Index of LGBTQ+ individuals from 174 countries in the year 2017. The study measured the relative level of acceptance and attitude differences among urban and rural areas. According to the study, understanding the level of acceptance and attitude differences towards LGBTQ+ individuals is solely determined by region and its consequent factors such as education, social norms, and environment. Thus, in close reference to the aforementioned study, the following conceptual framework as illustrated in Figure 1 below has been framed with clear relevance to the Bhutanese context. In the study, the dependent variables are attitude differences towards lesbians and gays, which are bound to be explained by relevant independent variables. The independent variables such as urban and rural regions, and their determinants such as education, environment, and social norms will help explain the dependent variables.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework on the Attitude of Students Towards LGBTQ



Study Design

The research employed a descriptive approach, using a cross-sectional survey design for its efficiency and effectiveness, allowing it to capture the attitudes of urban and rural adolescents towards lesbians and gays at a specific moment.

The conceptual framework examines how regional factors (urban versus rural) influence adolescents' attitudes towards LGBTQ individuals. Specifically, it considers how educational opportunities, environmental conditions, and social norms in urban and rural settings contribute to the development of either positive or negative attitudes among adolescents. These factors

impact the overall acceptance of LGBTQ individuals by rural and urban adolescents. The difference in attitudes is assessed through levels of acceptance, which are determined by analyzing data collected from participants.

Research Participants

Participants for this study were selected from Nima Higher Secondary School (NHSS) and Motithang Higher Secondary School (MHSS) in Thimphu Thromde for urban areas, and Wangbama Central School (WCS) in Genekha village, Maedwang Gewog, for rural areas. These locations were chosen as representative urban and rural areas based on classifications by NSB (2008). The study focused on adolescents aged 15 to 19, as this age range corresponds with the prime developmental stage, according to Elliot and Feldman (1990). Moreover, it aligns with the age range specified in the National Adolescent Health Strategic Plan (2013 – 2018) and World Population Prospects (2010), ensuring relevance to Bhutanese population demographics. By focusing on this age group, the study aims to gain insights into attitudes toward lesbian and gay individuals among adolescents, who constitute a significant portion of the Bhutanese population and are crucial for understanding societal perspectives on diversity and inclusion.

Sampling Method

The study utilized stratified sampling, dividing the population into two main groups: urban and rural. This method was chosen because it allows for selecting random samples from each specific stratum—NHSS and MHSS in urban areas, and WCS in a rural setting—rather than from the entire population

at once (Albright & Winston, 2017). Each school within the strata was given an equal probability of selection, making stratified sampling ideal due to the minimal variation within each school group. The data from each stratum was organized in an Excel sheet, from which samples were randomly drawn, optimizing the representativeness and efficiency of the sampling process.

Sample Size

The sample size for this research was drawn using stratified random sampling. The overall population in the study was found to be 1,672, which is composed of two schools from urban and one from rural areas. Since there is no overlapping of strata in the given population, the total population is identified as:

$$N = N_1 + N_2 + N_3$$

$$n = n_1 + n_2 + n_3$$

N = total population, N_1 , N_2 , and N_3 are population from each stratum
 n = sample population, n_1 , n_2 , n_3 are population from each stratum

In order to identify the sample population of 'n' a simple random sampling of 15 percent of the total population has been chosen. Therefore, the identified sample for the study is as follows.

$$\begin{aligned} N &= N_1 + N_2 + N_3 \text{ (} N_1 + N_2 = \text{population from urban area,} \\ &N_3 = \text{rural population)} \\ 1672 &= 246 + 990 + 436 \end{aligned}$$

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$n = n_1 + n_2 + n_3$ ($n_1 + n_2$ = sampled population from urban area, n_3 = sampled rural population)

$$240 = 20 + 100 + 120$$

Therefore, the total sample chosen for this study is 240; constituting 120 from urban and 120 from rural area.

Table 1

Participants Sampled from Three Selected Schools in Thimphu, Bhutan

Schools	Population	Sample
Motithang Higher Secondary School (MHSS)	990	20
Nima Higher Secondary School (NHSS)	246	100
Wangbama Central School (WCS)	436	120
Total population	1672	240

Instrumentation

The current study adopted the survey instrument used by Flores (2019) in his research "Social Acceptance of LGBTQ+ People In 174 Countries 1981 To 2017," which integrates questions from multiple international surveys including Afrobarometer (2014-2018), Eurobarometer (1993-2015), the American's Barometer (2004-2018), the European Values Survey (1981-2018), and the International Social Survey Programme (1988-2012). This instrument was selected for its global relevance and comprehensive assessment of public attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals.

The first section of the survey collected background information on participants, including gender, age, education level, and location. The other section consists of questions related to the attitudes towards gays and lesbians. The responses

are rated using a five-point likert scale (1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree) designed by Rensis (1932).

To refine the survey's accuracy, pilot testing was conducted with a group of students aged 15 to 19, which helped validate the reliability of the survey questionnaires. Feedback was also solicited from relevant stakeholders such as Pride Bhutan to enhance the survey's effectiveness. Due to technological limitations in rural areas, questionnaires were distributed in printed format to ensure accessibility for all participants.

Instrument Reliability

The reliability of the instrument for this study was tested using Cronbach's alpha. The initial reliability testing of the pilot survey yielded a Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha=0.64$. After identifying that item 10, 14, 19, and 28 negatively impacted the scale, these were removed, resulting in a revised questionnaire consisting of 24 items. Subsequent reliability testing showed an improved Cronbach's alpha of $\alpha=0.804$, indicating acceptable reliability for measuring attitude differences.

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted using structured self-administered survey questionnaires, which were designed for ease of completion by participants to enhance data reliability and increase response rates. The data collection process took place in October 2021, following prior consent obtained from the Ministry of Education and the Dzongkhag Education Office before approaching the schools.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analysed using SPSS software. Descriptive statistical techniques such as mean, standard deviation, frequency, and percentage calculations were employed to effectively organize and interpret the data sets, elucidating trends and characteristics inherent within the data. In addition, inferential statistical methods, specifically the independent t-test, were utilized to evaluate differences in attitudes towards lesbians and gays between students from urban and rural settings, as well as to test the null hypothesis. The significance of findings was determined at a p-value threshold of 0.05, whereby a p-value less than 0.05 necessitated the rejection of the null hypothesis in favour of the alternative hypothesis, whereas a p-value exceeding 0.05 would accept the null hypothesis, thereby rejecting the alternative hypothesis.

Finding & Discussions

Findings

Demographic Information

The background information of the participants is categorized as gender, region, the participants' awareness of LGBTQ+ issues, and policy changes regarding homosexuality.

Gender

The study comprised a total of 240 participants, drawn equally from urban and rural settings, with a response rate of 100 percent. Within this cohort, there was a nearly balanced gender composition, with female participants slightly outnumbering

their male counterparts. Specifically, the sample included 123 females, making up 51.2 percent of the participants, compared to 117 males who constituted 48.8 percent of the study population. Table 3 below illustrates the gender of study participants from three selected schools from Thimphu, Bhutan.

Table 3

Gender of the Participants

	Frequency	Percent	Valid %
Female	123	51.2	51.2
Male	117	48.8	48.8
Total	240	100	100

Lesbian and Gay Individuals in the Community

To assess awareness of lesbian and gay individuals, participants were asked if they had ever heard of these groups within their community. Among the urban sample of 120 respondents, 109 (90.8%) were aware of lesbian and gay individuals, while 11 (9.2%) were not. In the rural cohort, also consisting of 120 participants, 101 (84.2%) were familiar with these minority groups, but 19 (15.8%) reported no familiarity. These findings indicate that awareness of lesbian and gay individuals tends to be higher among urban participants compared to those from rural areas.

Table 5

Did You Ever Hear About Lesbian and Gay Individual in the Community?

Area	Responses	Frequency	Percent
Urban	Yes	109	90.8

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Rural	No	11	9.2
	Yes	101	84.2
	No	19	15.8

Decriminalization of Homosexuality in Bhutan

The demographics for this question are categorized into urban and rural respondents. This categorization is because the study aims to determine if the alternative policy changes at the national level are heard at the ground level. From the study, out of 120 urban respondents, 69 participants (57.5%) were found to have known about the harmonization of homosexuality, whereas 51 respondents (42.5%) did not know about such major policy changes at the national level. On the contrary, out of 120 rural respondents, 43 participants (35.8%) responded that they knew about the major policy changes, whereas 77 participants (64.2%) were not aware of the harmonization of homosexuality in Bhutan. The detailed findings from the data are as follows.

Table 6

Are You Aware on the Decriminalization of Homosexuality in Bhutan?

Area	Responses	Frequency	Percent
Urban	Yes	69	57.5
	No	51	42.5
Rural	Yes	43	35.8
	No	77	64.2

Urban and Rural Attitude Towards Lesbian

An independent t-test was conducted to assess the differences in attitudes toward lesbian individuals between respondents

from rural and urban areas. Initially, the Shapiro-Wilk test confirmed data normality.

Table 7 below illustrates the test findings revealing a statistically significant difference in attitudes, with urban respondents having an average score of 3.86 (SD ± 0.18) compared to rural respondents, who scored an average of 3.78 (SD = 0.17). The results of the t-test were $t(238) = 3.496$, $p = 0.01$, and the confidence interval ranged from 0.04 to 0.13. This indicates that students in the urban areas generally have a slightly more positive attitude towards lesbian individuals compared to rural respondents. Even though there is a statistically significant difference in attitudes toward lesbian individuals between rural and urban students, it is not extremely pronounced as Cohen's ($d = 0.45$). It indicates that the difference is little more than moderate rather than large.

Table 7

Test Findings of Respondent's Attitude Towards Lesbian

Region	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Urban	120	3.85	0.18	0.02
Rural	120	3.78	0.18	0.02

Table 8

Independent Samples T-Test for Urban and Rural Attitude Towards Lesbian

Levene's Test for Equality of Variances					t-test for Equality of Means		
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	95% CI Lower	95% CI Upper

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Equal variances Assumed	0.19	0.66	3.49	238	0	0.04	0.13
Equal variances not Assumed			3.49	237.7 3	0	0.04	0.13

Urban and Rural Attitude Towards Gay

An independent t-test was conducted to understand the differences in attitudes toward gay individuals between urban and rural students. The results showed a statistically significant difference in attitudes, with urban students reporting a mean score of 3.81 (SD = 0.17) and rural students reporting a mean score of 3.74 (SD = 0.16). The result of t-test were $t(238) = 3.496$, $p = 0.01$, and the confidence interval ranged from 0.029 to 0.116, providing a precise estimate of where the true mean difference likely lies.

Furthermore, the calculated effect size, $d=0.42$, points to a moderate difference in attitudes between the two groups. This moderate effect size suggests that while there is a noticeable difference in how urban and rural students perceive gay individuals, the magnitude of this difference is not extremely large.

Table 9

Test Findings of Respondent's Attitude Towards Lesbian

Region	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Urban	120	3.82	0.17	0.02
Rural	120	3.74	0.17	0.02

Table 10

Independent Samples Test for Urban and Rural Attitude Towards Gay

Levene's Test for equality of variances					t-test for Equality of Means		
	F	Sig.	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	95% CI	
						Lower	Upper
Equal variances Assumed	0.21	0.65	3.33	238	0	0.03	0.12
Equal variances not Assumed			3.33	237.41	0	0.03	0.12

Discussions

The initial analysis, using an independent t-test, showed clear differences in attitudes toward lesbian individuals, with urban respondents recording a slightly higher average score of 3.86 compared to the rural average of 3.78. This result was not just statistically significant, with a t-value of 3.496 and a p-value of 0.01, but also practically β with the trend observed in attitudes toward lesbian individuals. Such parallel findings strongly justified the rejection of the null hypothesis, which posited no difference in attitudes based on geographical distinctions.

These consistent findings across two different yet related social dimensions suggest that geographic distinctions play a critical role in shaping societal norms and attitudes. It is possible that urban areas, often characterized by higher exposure to diverse populations and more progressive social norms, foster more accepting attitudes towards minority

groups. In contrast, rural areas might have less exposure to such diversity, possibly contributing to more conservative views.

This study's findings align with those of Brown (2009) and Akhouri and Kehksha (2018), demonstrating that rural adolescents hold more negative attitudes toward lesbians and gays compared to their urban counterparts. However, it contradicts the findings by Lee and Quam (2013), which found that both urban and rural students are equally accepting of lesbians and gays in the community.

Why is There a Difference in Attitudes Between Urban and Rural Adolescents?

Based on the findings presented above, urban adolescents perceive acceptance of minorities significantly more than those in rural areas. Some literature has discussed the same findings and interpreted the results based on their social domain and environment. However, in the context of Bhutan, the reason for urban-rural differences in attitudes towards minorities could be defined from different aspects. Regional differences between urban and rural areas form an important determinant of configuring one's attitude, behaviour, perception, acceptance, and imagination. The inherent cultural practices in one region significantly affect the values and attitudes of individuals. Moreover, students in rural areas have a close association with their parents and thus hold symbols of old traditions where customs and social norms are highly regarded. As clearly discussed in the literature review, unlike rural students whose attitudes are influenced by geographical location and cultural practices, urban students' attitudes are informed by diverse social media outlets, awareness of sexual and reproductive

health, and thus develop better resilience towards these minorities (Feng et al., 2014). Furthermore, urban students are exposed to foreign cultures, leading to the adoption of new social norms and values.

However, irrespective of all these changes, the present findings of urban students developing more resilience towards lesbians and gays are considered positive signs of growing social acceptance towards minority groups. On the contrary, although rural students are exposed to daily classroom learning and other skill-based attributes, their knowledge of minority groups is not common in their ordinary lifestyle in rural areas. Therefore, the issue of gender, especially those who are beyond normal sexual orientation, in rural areas is not welcomed socially.

Adolescents' Preference for Lesbians Over Gays

While both lesbians and gays are part of the LGBTQ+ community, the study revealed a greater acceptance towards lesbians compared to gays among both urban and rural respondents. Statistical analysis showed that urban respondents rated their acceptance of lesbians with a mean score of 3.86 (SD=0.18), while rural respondents had a slightly lower mean of 3.78 (SD=0.17). In contrast, acceptance scores for gays were lower, with urban respondents averaging 3.81 (SD=0.17) and rural respondents 3.74 (SD=0.16), indicating a trend across both groups where lesbians were more favourably viewed than gays.

This differential in acceptance may be related to societal perceptions of visibility and discrimination, as noted in Irvine's (2013) study. Irvine suggested that lesbians are often less visible in society, leading to less overt discrimination. For example, two women walking arm-in-arm typically attracts less scrutiny

or concern from the general public compared to behaviours perceived as non-conforming in men. The study points out that men are often expected to display strong masculine traits and heterosexuality, making deviations from these norms more noticeable and less accepted.

Furthermore, these attitudes extend into formal settings such as workplaces in Bhutan where it is not uncommon for derogatory language to be used against men who exhibit traits traditionally associated with women. This subtle yet pervasive stigma contributes to broader gender biases, highlighting the need for greater awareness and understanding of minority groups and their rights in all spheres of society.

Adolescents' Awareness of Harmonizing Homosexuality in Bhutan

The decriminalization of homosexuality in the year 2020 is regarded as an important policy change. As policy upholds normative values and executive force, such a milestone in the history of the LGBTQ+ community can render extreme support to enhance the participation of minorities in civic roles, conducive workplace environments, and enjoyment of freedom of expression. However, such policy changes only provide them with a manual on how things should be and should not be, but the reality happens at the ground level because that is where the people are and where things happen. No matter what laws or policy changes we bring in, if we cannot change the perception of the general population, then policy intervention alone would not solve the issue. In close reference to the above line, out of the total 120 urban students, 51 (42.5%) respondents are not aware of the major policy changes of decriminalization of

homosexuality. On the contrary, out of the 120 rural students, 77 (64.2%) are not aware of such major policy changes at the national level. Hence, the inference of rural students holding a more negative view of lesbians and gays than urban students is rational. This is because major policy changes at the national level have not reached the knowledge of rural areas and to some extent urban areas. This situation can accumulate negative connotations regarding minority groups. As discussed in the literature by Fetner (2016), policy changes at the national level need to justify their impact on society by bringing positive change in people's perceptions and attitudes. Considering the statistics given above, it presents a new challenge on the part of concerned agencies and policymakers to produce the impact from the grassroots level. The rationale for holding a significant attitude difference between the two regions of urban and rural students is due to a gap in awareness and the reality change in policy at the national level.

Limitations

This study on student attitudes toward LGBTQ+ individuals in urban and rural schools in Thimphu has several limitations. First, the small sample size of 240 adolescents may not fully represent the broader student population, limiting the generalizability of the findings. A larger, more diverse sample could provide a more accurate reflection of student attitudes across different regions.

Additionally, some students struggled with understanding technical terms related to LGBTQ+ issues, leading to incorrect or incomplete responses. To preserve data integrity, such responses were excluded, which may have influenced the

overall results. More informed responses might have provided a clearer picture of student attitudes.

Another limitation is the exclusive focus on students. Broader research involving other age groups or community members could offer a more comprehensive understanding of societal attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals in Bhutan. Finally, a more robust research design, such as an experimental or cohort study that includes both students and members of the LGBTQ+ community, could yield more insightful and balanced findings. These limitations highlight the need for future studies to address these gaps and employ more rigorous methodologies.

Recommendations

To bridge the attitude gap between rural and urban adolescents towards LGBTQ+ individuals, it's vital to implement targeted educational initiatives across both settings. Studies such as Eliason (1995) and Rondahl et al. (2004) have demonstrated that increased exposure and education can positively influence attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals. Therefore, efforts should focus on raising awareness of legal changes, societal shifts, and addressing misconceptions through tailored interventions that emphasize inclusivity and understanding.

Programmes similar to the LGBTQ+ ally courses outlined by Rubin and Hewstone (2004) can be adapted for school and community settings. These courses, based on social identity theory, multicultural theory, and self-concept formation theory, have shown effectiveness in helping students understand social issues, fostering empathy, and reducing stigma. By incorporating these methodologies, education

initiatives can empower adolescents to challenge ingrained biases and advocate for equality.

Furthermore, community engagement programmes, such as workshops and cultural exchanges facilitated by local organization, have been successful in promoting empathy and mutual understanding (Damante, 2016). For example, peer-led discussions and awareness campaigns within schools and communities can create safe spaces for dialogue, as found in Boonmongkon's (2014) research on improving school environments for LGBTQ+ students. Incorporating comprehensive sexuality education into school curricula is also essential. Studies show that education emphasizing respect, tolerance, and the social aspects of LGBTQ+ issues, rather than just biology, leads to a more accepting youth population (Herek & Glunt, 1993).

Interactive teaching methods, such as role-playing exercises, storytelling, and discussions of real-life scenarios, can further help students grasp the complexities of LGBTQ+ issues and the importance of advocacy for equality within their communities (Fitzsimons, 2020). By addressing intersectional issues and promoting inclusivity, these interventions can create a supportive environment for the LGBTQ+ community, leading to lasting changes in societal attitudes.

Conclusion

The study has shown that there is a significant attitude difference between rural and urban adolescents. Rural adolescents are found to be less considerate of lesbian and gay individuals than urban ones. The study has also found that the majority of the respondents are not aware of major policy

changes (legalizing homosexuality) and thus lag behind in terms of their awareness towards accepting minorities. Similarly, compared to gays, lesbians are found to be more accepted by the respondents.

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