



Original Research Article

KNOWLEDGE, ATTITUDE AND PERCEPTION OF COLLEGE STUDENTS TOWARDS THE LGBTQIA+ COMMUNITY IN SOUTH INDIA: A CROSS-SECTIONAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Background: Despite increasing global awareness, the LGBTQIA+ community continues to face significant stigma, discrimination, and social exclusion. Understanding the knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions of young adults is critical to designing inclusive health and social policies and so this study was conducted to assess the knowledge, attitude, and perception of college students towards the LGBTQIA+ community and also to determine the association between sociodemographic factors and these outcomes.

Materials and Methods: A cross-sectional study was conducted among 503 college students in Coimbatore aged 18–25 years using multistage sampling. Data was collected with a validated semi-structured questionnaire administered through Google Forms. Descriptive statistics and chi-square tests were used appropriately which were analyzed with SPSS version 29

Results: Majority of respondents (72.8%) were urban residents. About 65.2% of students accepted the LGBTQIA+ community. Approximately 69.5% disagreed that homosexuality is an illness, and 79.9% disagreed that homosexuals are a danger to children. A statistically significant association was found between urban residence and awareness of Section 377 and between female gender and acceptance of a child coming out as LGBTQIA+ both having a p value of <0.05.

Conclusion: Majority of college students demonstrated a positive and accepting attitude towards the LGBTQIA+ community, particularly among female and urban respondents. Targeted educational interventions are recommended to address remaining misconceptions and foster inclusivity.

Keywords: LGBTQIA+, knowledge, attitude, perception, college students, South India, sexual orientation, homosexuality.

INTRODUCTION

The acronym LGBTQIA+ represents Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual, and the broader spectrum of sexual and gender identities. From birth, individuals embark on mental, emotional, and social development in a world shaped by institutions that permeate beliefs,

practices, attitudes, and socially validated roles. Society has long imposed a binary form of sex, overlooking the complex sexual diversity of the human experience. Individuals with sexual orientations other than heterosexual frequently encounter negative experiences related to societal rejection, which adversely affect their quality of life.^[1,2] Evidence suggests that LGBTQIA+

individuals face discrimination, bullying, and exclusion in educational institutions worldwide.¹ These unwelcoming environments compromise their educational and employment prospects, contributing to psychological distress and social isolation.² The Supreme Court, in 2018, partially struck down Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, decriminalizing consensual same-sex relations between adults. However, social acceptance has not kept pace with legal reform. Understanding how young adults perceive the LGBTQIA+ community is essential for gauging societal progress and informing future policy.³ Hence this study was conducted to assess the knowledge, attitude, and perception of college-going students aged 18–25 years towards the LGBTQIA+ community in South India. It also sought to examine the relationship between sociodemographic characteristics and these outcomes.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

A cross-sectional study was conducted over a period of 3 months among college students studying in Coimbatore in South India. The study population comprised college students aged 18–25 years who were willing to participate. Students outside this age range and those who declined to participate were excluded.

The sample size was calculated to be 408 but eventually we got 503 respondents. Multistage sampling was used to select the colleges and the students from each college. Data was collected using a validated semi-structured questionnaire administered via Google Forms. The questionnaire comprised two sections: (1) sociodemographic details, and (2) questions assessing knowledge, attitude, and perception towards the LGBTQIA+ community across 20 items. Data was analysed using Microsoft Excel. Descriptive statistics (frequencies and percentages) were computed for all variables. Chi-square test was applied to assess associations between sociodemographic variables and selected outcomes. A p-value of less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant.

RESULTS

Sociodemographic Profile

A total of 503 college students participated in this study. The sociodemographic characteristics of the study population are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Sociodemographic characteristics of study participants (n = 503)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age	18–20 years	362	72.4%
	21–25 years	138	27.6%
Gender	Male	243	48.3%
	Female	249	49.5%
	Prefer not to say	11	2.2%
Residence	Urban	366	72.8%
	Rural	137	27.2%
Father's Education	Professional degree	144	28.6%
	Graduate/Postgraduate	141	28.0%
	High school certificate	77	15.3%
	Intermediate/Diploma	61	12.1%
	Others	80	16.0%
Mother's Education	Professional degree	151	30.0%
	Graduate/Postgraduate	169	33.6%
	High school certificate	71	14.1%
	Others	112	22.3%
Father's Occupation	Professional	255	50.7%
	Clerical/Shop/Farmer	84	16.7%
	Semi-professional	67	13.3%
	Skilled worker	54	10.7%
	Unemployed/Others	43	8.6%
Mother's Occupation	Unemployed	210	41.7%
	Professional	152	30.2%
	Semi-professional	48	9.5%
	Others	93	18.6%
Monthly Family Income	Rs. 8217 and above	396	78.7%
	Rs. 4108–8216	53	10.5%
	Rs. 2465–4108	20	4.0%
	Below Rs. 2465	34	6.8%

Knowledge

The knowledge-related responses are summarized in Table 2. Awareness of the abolition of Section 377 was reported by 64.6% of respondents. Awareness of conversion therapy was present in 44.6%, while 26.6% had no idea about it. Awareness of non-binary genders and one's own sexuality was high,

with 87.1% reporting consistent awareness of their own sexuality. A majority (53.0%) disagreed or remained neutral that LGBTQ+ people are more likely to acquire sexually transmitted infections. Regarding whether homosexuality leads to population decline, 34.0% were neutral and 37.5% agreed to varying degrees.

Table 2: Knowledge-related responses (n = 503)

Variable	Response	Frequency	Percentage
Awareness of abolition of Section 377	Yes	325	64.6%
	No	178	35.4%
Awareness of conversion therapy	Yes	223	44.6%
	No idea	133	26.6%
	No	144	28.8%
Awareness of non-binary genders (sexuality awareness)	Yes	438	87.1%
	No idea	34	6.8%
LGBTQ+ people more likely to be infected with STI	No	31	6.2%
	Strongly disagree	87	17.3%
	Disagree	129	25.6%
	Neutral	182	36.2%
	Agree	82	16.3%
	Strongly agree	23	4.6%
Lesbian/gay people identified by mannerisms	Strongly disagree	57	11.3%
	Disagree	89	17.7%
	Neutral	186	37.0%
	Agree	136	27.0%
Homosexuality results in decrease in population	Strongly agree	35	7.0%
	Strongly disagree	40	8.0%
	Disagree	103	20.5%
	Neutral	171	34.0%
	Agree	146	29.0%
	Strongly agree	43	8.5%

Attitude

Attitude-related responses are shown in Table 3. A notable 69.5% of respondents disagreed that homosexuality is an illness, while 46.5% believed it is a personal choice. The majority strongly opposed employment discrimination, with 79.9% disagreeing that homosexuals should not be employed in

schools. Similarly, 73.0% disagreed that homosexuals are a danger to children. A strong pro-equality stance was observed, with 79.5% agreeing that homosexuals should be given social equality. Regarding comfort around homosexuals, 48.3% expressed comfort.

Table 3: Attitude-related responses (n = 503)

Variable	Response	Frequency	Percentage
Being homosexual is a choice	Yes	234	46.5%
	No	162	32.2%
	No idea	107	21.3%
Homosexuality is an illness	Strongly disagree	223	44.3%
	Disagree	127	25.2%
	Neutral	98	19.5%
	Agree	35	7.0%
	Strongly agree	20	4.0%
Homosexuals should not be employed in schools	Strongly disagree	275	54.7%
	Disagree	127	25.2%
	Neutral	42	8.3%
	Agree	32	6.4%
Homosexuals are a danger to children	Strongly agree	27	5.4%
	Strongly disagree	245	48.7%
	Disagree	122	24.3%
	Neutral	62	12.3%
	Agree	44	8.7%
Homosexuals should be given social equality	Strongly agree	30	6.0%
	Strongly disagree	24	4.8%
	Disagree	17	3.4%
	Neutral	62	12.3%
I feel comfortable around homosexuals	Agree	166	33.0%
	Strongly agree	234	46.5%
	Strongly disagree	45	8.9%

	Disagree	56	11.1%
	Neutral	159	31.6%
	Agree	117	23.3%
	Strongly agree	126	25.0%

Perception

Perception-related findings are presented in Table 4. A large proportion (55.4%) agreed that digital platforms influence sexual perception. About 51.3% agreed that children of gay parents may face difficulties accepting their parents' sexuality, and

61.4% agreed that such children are subject to bullying. When asked about accepting their own child coming out as LGBTQIA+, 51.7% responded affirmatively, 17.9% said they would not, and 30.4% were uncertain. Regarding the stability of homosexual marriages, 61.0% were neutral.

Table 4: Perception-related responses (n = 503)

Variable	Response	Frequency	Percentage
LGBTQ+ people ashamed of sexual orientation due to societal attitude	Strongly disagree	50	9.9%
	Disagree	125	24.9%
	Neutral	172	34.2%
	Agree	121	24.1%
	Strongly agree	35	7.0%
Separate schools contribute to increase in homosexuality	Strongly disagree	103	20.5%
	Disagree	129	25.6%
	Neutral	128	25.4%
	Agree	112	22.3%
	Strongly agree	31	6.2%
Homosexuals more prevalent in urban than rural areas	Strongly disagree	21	4.2%
	Disagree	57	11.3%
	Neutral	117	23.3%
	Agree	243	48.3%
	Strongly agree	65	12.9%
Digital platforms influence perception of sexuality	Strongly disagree	24	4.8%
	Disagree	60	11.9%
	Neutral	140	27.8%
	Agree	216	42.9%
	Strongly agree	63	12.5%
Children of gay parents face difficulty accepting parents' sexuality	Strongly disagree	20	4.0%
	Disagree	47	9.3%
	Neutral	178	35.4%
	Agree	208	41.4%
	Strongly agree	50	9.9%
Children of homosexual parents subject to bullying	Strongly disagree	19	3.8%
	Disagree	39	7.8%
	Neutral	136	27.0%
	Agree	255	50.7%
	Strongly agree	54	10.7%
Accept if own child comes out as LGBTQIA+	Yes	260	51.7%
	No idea	153	30.4%
	No	90	17.9%
Homosexual marriage is stable and can last longer	Strongly disagree	43	8.5%
	Disagree	63	12.5%
	Neutral	307	61.0%
	Agree	66	13.1%
	Strongly agree	24	4.8%

Association Between Residence and Awareness of Section 377

A chi-square test was performed to assess the association between place of residence and awareness of the abolition of Section 377. The results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5: Awareness of abolition of Section 377 by residence

Residence	Aware (Yes)	Not Aware (No)	Total
Urban	247 (67.6)	118 (32.4)	365
Rural	76 (56.3)	59 (43.7)	135
Total	323	177	500

Chi-square statistic = 5.576; p-value = 0.018 (significant at $p < 0.05$). Urban residents were significantly more aware of the legal acceptance of homosexuality than rural residents.

Association Between Gender and Acceptance of Child Coming Out as LGBTQIA+

Table 6: presents the cross-tabulation of gender with acceptance of a child coming out as LGBTQIA+.

Gender	Accept (Yes/No Idea)	Do Not Accept (No)	Total
Male	102 (42.1)	140 (57.9)	242
Female	150 (60.7)	97 (40.3)	247
Total	252	237	489

Chi-square statistic = 16.895; p-value < 0.001 (significant at $p < 0.05$). Female respondents demonstrated significantly greater acceptance of their own child coming out as LGBTQIA+ compared to male respondents.

DISCUSSION

This study assessed the knowledge, attitude, and perception of 503 college students in Coimbatore towards the LGBTQIA+ community. The overall acceptance rate of 65.2% is higher than the 43% reported by Madrid et al. (2018) among Filipino high school and college students.^[5] This improvement may reflect the growing influence of urbanization, social media exposure, and increased representation of LGBTQIA+ individuals in mainstream Indian media.

The finding that 69.5% of respondents rejected the notion that homosexuality is an illness is encouraging, though a residual 11.0% agreed with this misconception, indicating the need for continued educational efforts, particularly in clinical and allied health settings. Consistent with literature, urban respondents in this study were significantly more aware of the legal repeal of Section 377 ($p = 0.018$), suggesting that access to information and education remains unequal across rural and urban divides.^[3]

A notably significant finding was the gender-based difference in parental acceptance, where female respondents were significantly more likely to accept a child who came out as LGBTQIA+. This finding aligns with previous research indicating that women tend to hold less homophobic attitudes than men, possibly due to differential socialization and empathy-related factors.^[2,3]

The widespread belief that digital platforms influence sexual perception (55.4% agreed) is consistent with the growing body of evidence linking online exposure to evolving attitudes towards gender and sexuality. Similarly, the finding that 61.4% believed children of homosexual parents are subject to bullying reflects ongoing societal stigma,^[1] and highlights an area where targeted school-based interventions could be beneficial.

Compared to Neviyarni S. et al. (2019), who reported 69.2% non-acceptance in Indonesian students,^[7] and Dabra and Prasad's (2021) findings of neutral attitudes in Indian students,^[8] this study suggests a more positive trajectory among South Indian college students. However, the persistence of ambivalence on questions such as the stability of homosexual marriages (61.0% neutral) indicates that acceptance is still evolving and may benefit from positive representation and inclusive curricula.^[4,6]

CONCLUSION

This study showed that a strong majority opposed discriminatory attitudes, supported social equality for homosexuals, and rejected the misconception that homosexuality constitutes a mental illness.

Statistically significant associations were found between urban residence and legal awareness, and between female gender and parental acceptance. These findings underscore the role of geography and gender in shaping attitudes. Future interventions should aim to address rural knowledge gaps, engage male respondents through evidence-based sensitization programmes, and incorporate LGBTQIA+-inclusive education in college curricula to foster greater empathy and social inclusion.

Recommendations

Rights-based education programmes should be incorporated into college curricula to address persistent misconceptions about the LGBTQIA+ community. Mental health support systems in educational institutions should be strengthened to address the specific vulnerabilities of LGBTQIA+ community.

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