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Sources of Stress and Challenges for Gay and Bisexual International Students: Experiences of Social Stigma and Sociocultural and Psychological Racism

Luis M. Dos Santos

Woosong University, 27 Baengnyong-ro 57beon-gil,
Jayang-dong, Dong-gu, Daejeon, South Korea

Abstract

Internationalism and globalisation bring university students to different parts of the world. However, international students may face stress, discrimination, bias, and challenges from the hosted environment due to cultural and social differences. Based on the social stigma and sociocultural and psychological racism theory, the current study aims to understand and explore the sources of stress and challenges of gay and bisexual international university students in South Korea. 40 gay and bisexual international university students currently enrolled at one of the South Korean universities were invited to share their stories. The finding indicated that othering, boycotting from school personnel, and ineffective psychological counselling services in the university health centres and university hospital health facilities played significant roles in their sources of stress, challenges, and sense-making processes. This study filled the research and practical gaps in the areas of stress and challenges of gay and bisexual international university students in South Korea. Also, university leaders, government officials, non-profit organisational administrators, and public health professionals may use this study as their reference to reform and polish the current policies and regulations for LGBTQ individuals and groups, particularly for gay and bisexual international university students.

Keywords: bisexual man, LGBTQ, gay men, international student, neo-racism, social stigma, sociocultural and psychological racism, stress

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

Internationalism, globalisation, and study abroad are on the rise in the field of higher education. Over the past few decades, student mobility has become one of the discussion topics in many university environments. Studying abroad is a significant decision for many university students who want to pursue their education in a foreign country. Although some students only stay in a host country and university for a year or less, many still experience challenges and difficulties due to culture shock, language barriers, stigma, and discrimination from people in the host country's community.

Traditionally, international students tend to go to westernised countries and regions, such as

Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States, for their international education. According to one report (OECD, 2020), Asian students became the largest group of international students at university level in 2018. More than 57% of the international student population came from Asian countries, while more than 30% of this population were Chinese and Indian students. The United States (18%), Australia (8%), the United Kingdom (8%), and Germany (6%) are some of the popular educational destinations. According to Lee (2017), international students may face challenges and difficulties due to cultural differences and barriers. A previous study (Strang, 2012) indicated that international students might establish groups, clubs, and unions to support other international students with a similar background and heritage. Although some gaps, such as establishments of counselling programmes and student clubs, have been conducted and filled through studies and practical projects, other problems, such as stigma and discrimination based on sexual orientation, still exist among communities and populations of international students (Hoe & Hassan, 2018).

In fact, government agencies, university leaders, university lecturers, and student counselling centres want to provide positive experiences to international students as positive comments may increase their country's reputation. According to a recent government report (*Education of International Students*, 2020), South Korea aims to invite a large number of international students to undertake their undergraduate and postgraduate education programmes and training in the country. Due to South Korea's international reputation, many non-credit seekers, particularly Korean language learning students, also want to come to South Korea to take language school courses (Han, 2017; Han, 2015). In the 2018/2019 academic year, more than 160,000 international students were enrolled at one of South Korea's 430 colleges, universities, and graduate schools for both degree and non-credit courses and programmes (Koh & Kim, 2019). Due to the successful academic promotion and cultural development of South Korea, the country's international student population has reached its highest number since the 1990s.

However, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) individuals face challenges and difficulties in communities due to their sexual orientation, particularly in the East Asian region. Although same-sex marriage became legal and recognised on 24th May 2019 in Taiwan (Chang, 2020), other East Asian countries, such as South Korea, do not have any regulations to protect the rights of LGBTQ groups and communities. According to Mezur and Wilcox (2020), religious facilities and institutions have expressed their concerns against the LGBTQ communities in the South Korean environment. In the East Asian region, collectivism plays a significant role in daily practices, particularly for South Korean people (Triandis, 1995). Although LGBTQ individuals and groups do not actively harm or destroy social norms and social behaviours, members of the general public usually believe that the sexual orientation and behaviours of LGBTQ individuals and groups do not follow traditional practices (i.e. practices of the majority) (Costa & Shenkman, 2020).

1.2   Purpose of the Study

South Korea attracts a large number of international students from all across the globe for both degree and non-credit programmes, including sexual minorities and LGBTQ individuals and groups who come to South Korea for their academic and career development. Given the social background in East Asia, particularly in South Korea, gay and bisexual men, women, and groups may face stress, challenges, and difficulties in university environments and at the community level. Based on the social stigma theory and the sociocultural and psychological racism theory, the current study aims to understand and explore the sources of stress and challenges for gay and bisexual international university students in South Korea (Chase, 2012). In short, two research questions guided this study:

1. What are the sources of stress and challenges for gay and bisexual international university students in South Korea, particularly their experiences at the university level?
2. How would gay and bisexual international university students describe the sources of the stress and challenges they face in South Korea due to their sexual orientation, particularly their experiences at the university level?

1.3 *Significance of the Study*

According to Mezur and Wilcox (2020), LGBTQ individuals and groups face significant challenges and difficulties in South Korea due to their sexual orientation. Although some studies (Jones, 2020; Krumbein, 2022) have been conducted to answer the concerns of LGBTQ individuals and groups in South Korea, these studies focused on the problems for local residents and citizens. The questions and problems of gay and bisexual international university students have not been addressed. Therefore, the results of this study will fill the research and practice gaps with regard to gay and bisexual international university students who face stress, challenges, and difficulties which impact their experiences and sense-making processes during their academic and professional voyage in South Korea.

2. Theoretical Frameworks and Literature

2.1 *University Services and LGBTQ Students*

Although schools and universities are the places where students, university lecturers, and scholars share intelligent talks and knowledge, some individuals and groups discriminate against their peers on the basis of their sexual orientation (Mavhandu-Mudzusi & Sandy, 2015). For example, a recent study (Mavhandu-Mudzusi & Sandy, 2015) highlighted that religious stigma and discrimination had significant impacts on sexual minorities as they were labelled as sinners and devils due to their sexual orientation and personal characteristics. Another study (Woodford, Weber, et al., 2018) indicated that LGBTQ college and university students were at risk of depression and attempted suicide due to the discrimination, stigma, bias, and psychological problems they experience as a result of their sexual orientation (Chase, 2012). The researchers argued that the well-being of LGBTQ students is associated with microaggressions, victimisation, psychological resilience, pride, and outness (Woodford, Weber, et al., 2018). Although the university continued to offer help and counselling services to all students on campus, the gaps still could not be closed. Another study (Hood et al., 2019) argued that university health services could play a role in understanding LGBTQ college students' experiences on campus and at the community level; however, the results of this study indicated that universities could not provide effective help and services which met the needs of LGBTQ students. In addition, some LGBTQ students face additional disadvantages. According to Miller et al. (2020), some LGBTQ college students with autism syndrome indicated that their self-identity (i.e. LGBTQ college students with autism) played a significant role in their personal beliefs system as their disadvantages would limit their participation in LGBTQ communities. Although some studies have addressed the questions and problems of LGBTQ students and youths, such as health promotion in the East Asian region (Dos Santos, 2020, 2021a), the problems of gay and bisexual international university students in South Korea have not been addressed.

2.2 *Social Stigma Approach*

Social stigma refers to discrimination and bias against individuals and groups based on their culture, gender, skin colour, race, sexual orientation, illness, disease, or background (Goffman, 1963). According to the categories from the social stigma approach (Goffman, 1963), sexual orientation is one of the elements for discrimination and bias. Gay and bisexual men experience discrimination and bias which may adversely impact their mental health and psychological well-being compared to heterosexual men. Although government agencies, non-profit organisations, and school managements have established educational curricula, counselling sessions, conferences, and community promotions to close the gaps in terms of how heterosexual and LGBTQ individuals are treated (Owen-Pugh & Baines, 2014; Rasberry et al., 2018), sexual minorities continue to have negative feelings due to the discrimination and bias they experience as a result of their sexual orientation and

their personal characteristics (E. Kim et al., 2021). According to Pachankis et al. (2018), sexual orientation with social stigma is associated with enacted stigma (e.g. sexual orientation and personal beliefs), anticipated social stigma (i.e. personal feelings and reactions with regard to how other people view themselves), personal stigma (i.e. minority individuals and groups describe members with similar backgrounds and characteristics), and stigma concealment (i.e. individuals and groups have no intention to show their sexual orientation to other parties) (Earnshaw & Chaudoir, 2009).

Over the past few decades, gay and bisexual men have been stigmatised as the carriers and the transmitters of sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), such as human immunodeficiency virus and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (HIV/AIDS) (McKinnon et al., 2017). Although many scientific reports have indicated that both heterosexual and homosexual individuals and groups can be infected with different types of STDs and HIV/AIDS, members of the general public continue to believe that gay and bisexual men are the main sources of the illness (Adam et al., 2017; Race, 2018). Another recent study (Skinta et al., 2019) further indicated that gay men living with HIV face significant stigma due to their personal characteristics and illness. Although others cannot be infected with HIV through any personal contacts and interactions, they continue to experience stigma and discrimination due to their illness, regardless of their occupation.

Besides the concerns about HIV/AIDS, the personal characteristics and images of gay and bisexual men and groups are stigmatised. A recent study (Austen et al., 2020) indicated that weight and body image play significant roles in the lives of homosexual and heterosexual men. Although body image and personal appearance do not impact overall performance and ability, individuals and groups could discriminate against gay and bisexual men due to their sexual orientation coupled with their body image. In some rural communities with lower populations, gay and bisexual men face discrimination and stigma as people living in small communities usually know each other (Hubach et al., 2019). Unless students enrol at one of the larger universities in the country or region, they will know each other due to the small school environments and communities resulting from a limited population (Christie, 2021). However, relevant studies focusing on the sources of stress and challenges for gay and bisexual university students are missing, particularly for gay and bisexual men and groups in the South Korean university environment. Therefore, further investigations and studies should be conducted in this area.

2.3 *Sociocultural and Psychological Racism*

The sociocultural and psychological racism perspective is useful for investigating the problems and challenges of individuals and groups. This perspective (Dos Santos, 2021c, 2022) was developed on the basis of the neo-racism theory, and it suggests that individuals and groups face discrimination and bias based on psychological and internal factors and social, personal, and external factors. The psychological and internal factors refer to religious and philosophical behaviours and personal beliefs. Some scholars (Mavhandu-Mudzusi & Sandy, 2015) have argued that gay and bisexual individuals' religious practice might impact their experiences and behaviours, particularly in the areas of discrimination and bias from other parties in the community. Although religious practice is not uncommon as a means for discrimination and stigma, gay and bisexual men and groups face further challenges due to their sexual orientation. The social, personal, and external factors indicate that individuals and groups could be discriminated against on the basis of their place of origin, age, social behaviours, cultural characteristics, spoken languages, sexual orientation, and career development. In this study, sexual orientation is one of the significant factors. However, the researcher wanted to understand any significant factors that may also impact the experiences, sources of stress, and challenges of gay and bisexual international university students in South Korea. Figure 1 outlines the sociocultural and psychological racism theory (Dos Santos, 2021c, 2022).
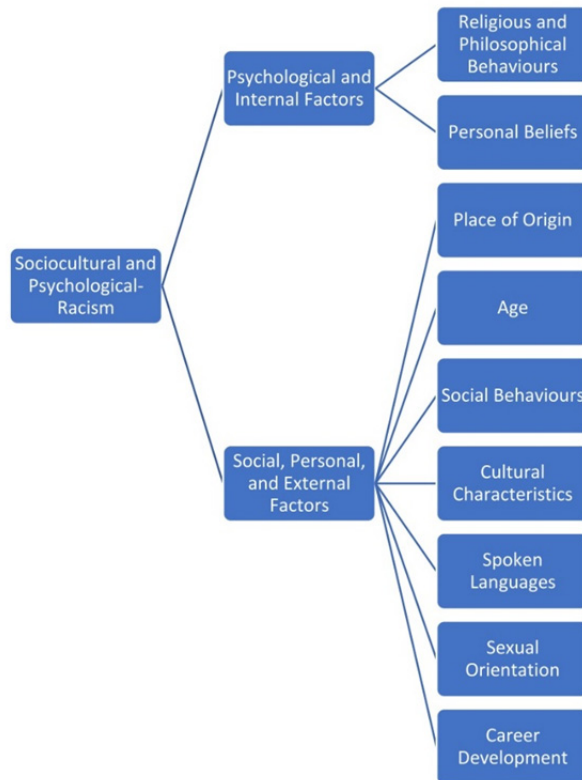
Figure 1: The sociocultural and psychological racism theory (Dos Santos, 2021c, 2022).

Immigrants from other countries and regions often face challenges in different aspects of life, particularly in religious practice (Dos Santos, 2021b). According to Froio (2018), religious practice and culture could become a means for discrimination and stigma due to the conflicts between majorities and minorities. Although biological racism (i.e. traditional racism) could play a role in social stigma and discrimination, sociocultural and psychological racism and neo-racism could also play significant roles beyond skin colour (Dos Santos, 2021c, 2022). Yao (2018) argued that Chinese international students face challenges due to social, personal, and external factors and the idea of othering during their academic voyage in a foreign country. In fact, discrimination and bias based on skin colour (i.e. biological racism) is not an uncommon experience for many individuals and groups in a foreign country (Brown & Jones, 2013). It is important to understand how social, personal, and external factors based on sociocultural and psychological racism may impact the experiences of gay and bisexual international university students.

3. Methodology

3.1 Phenomenological Approach

The phenomenological approach was used to investigate the current study. Phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994) is useful to understand the meaning, backgrounds, and stories of individuals' lived experiences in a social situation. Individuals and groups in the society could face

discrimination, bias, challenges, and difficulties due to their backgrounds and situations. The problems could impact certain groups of individuals in the public communities. Based on this social context, the phenomenological researchers want to understand the backgrounds and stories of these targeted groups of people at the community, regional, or national levels.

3.2   Participants and Recruitment

Based on the snowball sampling strategy (Merriam, 2009) with the application of the phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994), the researcher recruited 40 gay and bisexual international university students in South Korea. First, the researcher contacted three participants for the data collection procedure. The researcher sent the official invitation letter, unsigned consent form, and protocol to the participants via email. After the discussion, these three participants agreed to join the study.

After the participants completed their interview session, they should refer at least two participants who met the criteria of the study. Based on the snowball sampling strategy, 40 participants decided to join and share their lived stories to the researcher. The participants needed to meet all the following elements:

- International university student
- Gay and/or bisexual individual
- Study in South Korea for no less than two academic year
- Non-vulnerable person
- At least 18 years old
- Willing to share their lived stories and experiences

3.3   Data Collection

In-depth, open-ended, semi-structured, and private interview sessions, focus group activities, and member checking interview sessions were employed in the data collection procedure (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2009; Tang & Dos Santos, 2017). First, the researcher invited the participants for the in-depth, open-ended, semi-structured, and private interview sessions. As the data collection procedure was conducted before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, 28 sessions were conducted in-person whilst 12 sessions were completed via online platform. East session lasted from 98 to 152 minutes with no breaks.

Second, after all participants completed their in-depth, open-ended, semi-structured, and private interview sessions, the focus group activities were conducted. Four focus group activities were formed. In other words, ten participants joined a focus group activity for story sharing. As the focus group activities were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, all four focus group activities were conducted via online platform due to the social distancing recommendation. Each focus group activity lasted from 129 to 176 minutes with one ten-minute break.

After the researcher collected the qualitative data from the participants, the researcher categorised the information based on each participant's individual file. After the researcher placed the data to the file, the researcher emailed the data to the targeted participant for their confirmation. Therefore, the member checking interview sessions were conducted for confirmation via online platform. All participants joined the member checking interview sessions individually and confirmed their data. Each member checking interview lasted from 43 to 56 minutes.

3.4   Data Analysis

The researcher transcribed the voiced messages to written transcripts. The researcher re-read and revisited the data multiple times in order to find out the relationships. Afterwards, the researcher

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exercised two-step techniques to narrow the massive data to meaningful groups (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). First, the researcher employed the open-coding technique to narrow down the large-sized data to first-level themes and subthemes. From this stage, 20 themes and 32 subthemes were merged. Second, based on the first-level themes and subthemes, the researcher further narrowed the data based on the axial-coding technique. As a result, three themes and three subthemes were yielded for this study.

3.5 Human Subject Protection

4. Results and Discussions

Although many of the participants came to South Korea for different purposes and reasons, many experienced stress, challenges, and difficulties due to their sexual orientation and personal characteristics. Unlike Taiwan and other Western countries and regions, LGBTQ issues and social movements are not actively discussed and protected in South Korea. Therefore, in order to avoid any aggressive attacks and impolite behaviours from members of the general public in South Korea, LGBTQ individuals and groups can only engage in their behaviours behind the scenes. On the basis of the participants' personal stories and sharing, the researcher categorised three themes and three subthemes. Please note that in order to provide a comprehensive comparison between the current findings and the previous literature, the researcher combined the results and discussion chapters together as a single chapter for this study. Table 1 outlines the themes and subthemes of the finding.

Table 1: Themes and Subthemes

Themes and Subthemes		
4.1.	Othering: I am not the same as them because of my sexual orientation	
	4.1.1.	Challenging my sexual orientation with homosexual jokes and slang terms
4.2.	Boycotting by school personnel	
	4.2.1.	Discrimination from classmates and peers
	4.2.2.	Discrimination from school professional staff
4.3.	Ineffective psychological counselling services in university health centres and university hospital health facilities	

4.1 Othering: I am not the Same as Them Because of my Sexual Orientation

All participants indicated that their sexual orientation and place of origin caused significant challenges for them as foreigners in terms of their experiences and sources of stress in South Korea. Although same-sex and civil marriages are recognised in many countries and regions (Chang, 2020; Huang et al., 2020; Lee & Lin, 2020), South Korea does not have any plans to recognise any such types of union and marriage in the future.

> *...I have body, brain, emotion, and other things...I am the same as other people on earth...sexual orientation should not limit our background and opportunities...but many times...Korean people need to ask my sexual orientation and my romantic relationship...I shared my sexual orientation...because I do not think it is a bad thing to anyone...but they do not accept and blame my sexual orientation...(Participant #4, Interview)*

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...LGBTQ people are the same as others...we do not have any differences...we are not even disabled people...we are the same residents on earth...but Korean people...in my university and in the community...always categorise people based on their age, nationality, and sexual orientation...being a good student...sexual orientation makes no differences...straight students and gay students earned the same academic degree...but Korean people cannot accept people with other characteristics...(Participant #14, Focus Group)

4.1.1 Challenging my Sexual Orientation with Homosexual Jokes and Slang Terms

Homophobia is not uncommon in many South Korean environments, including but not limited to the university environment (Chase, 2012). Although LGBTQ individuals and groups do no harm to university and community members, some people continue to make fun of sexual minorities. In the present study, participants stated that they had experienced stress, challenges, and difficulties inside the university environment and at the community level. All of the participants expressed that, at the university level, organisers of student clubs, afterschool activities, and sports teams usually asked about an individual's background, such as sexual orientation and place of origin, when considering membership applications (E. Kim et al., 2021). Several participants indicated that they would like to join the campus broadcasting service (English Channel). However, the broadcasting service manager had asked some in-depth questions about their personal background, such as romantic relationships and sexual orientation, which did not relate to the their skills. As one participant commented:

...the broadcasting service manager asked my romantic relationship...the manager asked me if I had any partner or lover...will I want to marry a Korean person...I told the manager that I am gay and want to date a Korean boy...the manager asked me to leave the room immediately because the broadcasting service does not welcome LGBTQ people...they even called me gay boy after closing the door...I could hear from the corridor...(Participant #24, Interview)

Another group of participants wanted to join sports teams and clubs. However, during the application period, they expressed their concerns about unessential questions regarding their background and sexual orientation. A story about the swimming team was captured:

...I wanted to join the school swimming club...I did not want to join the school team...but I wanted to know some classmates who also liked swimming...as their hobbies...some club advertisements...were posted all over the campus...I went to the swimming club office...and the officers asked for detailed information...about my romantic relationship, age, place of origin, and my sexual orientation...I told them I am a gay man...they refused me to join the club for no reason...(Participant #16, Focus Group)

Some participants wanted to join unorganised friends' groups in the playground rather than organised clubs. Many commented that they had been able to play basketball with their Korean classmates once, but after they finished the game and entered the changing room, their Korean classmates wanted to discover their romantic relationship status. Many had shared their sexual orientation with their classmates, but after doing do, they received no further invitations to participate; instead, they found homophobic jokes and slang terms on some chat groups:

...we were good friends for two or three times...but some Korean classmates asked about my romantic relationship and status...I told them that I am a single gay person...and I am open to a relationship...they called me a dog in the Korean language...and left the changing room immediately...without telling me...I could read some homophobia jokes and slangs over the chat groups...they masked a part of my name...but I could see...they were talking about my identity...(Participant #3, Interview)

Traditionally, Korean people need to understand the backgrounds of individuals in order to establish friendships and relationships with newcomers (Shin, 2010). In the current study, all of the participants indicated that their biological and other characteristics should not be considered when they are establishing a friendship with other classmates and peers. Many Korean people ask a person

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about their place of origin, spoken language, age, and even marital status before engaging in meaningful conversations (E. Kim et al., 2021). Such background checks created dissatisfaction and confusion among all of the participants in this study due to the cultural shock and bias. More importantly, when the participants shared their sexual orientation with their classmates, peers, and community members, all of their Korean counterparts expressed negative comments about their sexual orientation (i.e. as gay and bisexual men). In line with the social stigma approach (Goffman, 1963), the present study found that sexual orientation alongside background and place of origin plays a significant role in creating sources of stress, challenges, and difficulties for gay and bisexual international university students. In line with the sociocultural and psychological racism theory (Dos Santos, 2021c, 2022), sexual orientation, personal characteristics, and personal beliefs played significant roles in this group of participants. Although studies (Dos Santos, 2020; Peretz, 2017; Yang, 2021) indicated that sexual orientation is developed based on individuals' biological characteristics, Korean people continued to discriminate and categorise the participants. As a result, the participants experienced strong level of stress, which negatively impacted their experiences and sense-making processes.

4.2 Boycotting by School Personnel

All of the participants were university students (both undergraduate and postgraduate students) enrolled at one of South Korea's universities. Although they were welcome to join some off-campus activities, university activities and life played significant roles in their sense-making processes and experiences. The data indicated that all of the participants were active students who wanted to contribute their energy and time to the university and their peers. However, many expressed negative experiences which significantly outweighed their positive stories of South Korea. As one participant said:

> *...I wanted to leave the university and South Korea...because many people on campus discriminate me...perhaps random people don't know me...but if I need to use some services...people judged and blamed me...because I am active in the LGBTQ movements on campus and in our university...(Participant #29, Interview)*

4.2.1 Discrimination from Classmates and Peers

Physical bullying and even cyberbullying are not uncommon in South Korea, particularly sexual crime and digital sex offences (Lee & Lee, 2021). Although the young generation has started to accept LGBTQ communities and same-sex marriage in the East Asian region, many believe the traditional Korean Confucianism, collectivism, and familism beliefs should be given more weight than the social movements of sexual minorities (Yang, 2021). On the basis of this belief, many Korean youths continue to categorise people on the basis of their sexual orientation as LGBTQ social movements do not fit the expectations of traditional Korean perspectives. As a result of such categorisation, all of the participants had negative experiences due to discrimination and bias from their classmates and peers which significantly impacted their sense-making processes and experiences in South Korea (Chase, 2012). As one participant said:

> *...I do not mind sharing my sexual orientation to other people...as people can read my behaviours and personality...but some of my classmates cared about my sexual orientation...and felt like I am an HIV/AIDS carrier...I told them I had tested negative...and HIV/AIDS cannot be transferred because of social interactions...but many Korean classmates...both boys and girls...do not want to talk to me...and believe I am an LGBTQ monster...(Participant #8, Interview)*

Some participants did not disclose their sexual orientation to their classmates and peers. However, their classmates and peers could read their personality and behaviours and engaged in

discrimination against them. A story about cyberbullying was captured:

> *...I know Korean people do not like LGBTQ issues and topics...I did not tell people about my sexual orientation...but some people...perhaps they checked some online dating cellphone applications...they saw my profile...some people told me that they sent my picture and details over the Korean student's chat group...(Participant #19, Interview)*

4.2.2 Discrimination from School Professional Staff

Besides some stories about classmates and peers, the participants' comments also indicated that it was no uncommon for school professional staff to engage in discrimination and bias. Many expressed experiencing discrimination, bias, and categorisation based on skin colour and nationality (Kim et al., 2016). Moreover, categorisation based on sexual orientation also occurs in university environments in South Korea, particularly in lectures by Korean instructors. According to Woodford et al. (2018), colleges and universities have established schemes to ensure fairness and protection for sexual minorities on campus. However, regulations and policies cannot impact the behaviours of individuals and groups (Chase, 2012), such as lecturers and students. The participants in the present study experienced unfairness and discrimination from school professional staff. Such discrimination and bias significantly influenced their stress, sense-making processes, and experiences. Some stories were captured:

> *...I was called the Black gay boy by my professor in Korean language...no Korean classmates told me that term...but when a lot of classmates called me that name...I searched that online...it sounds crazy...because my professor made fun of my skin colour and my sexual orientation...I told that to the Dean of the school...but no answers...(Participant # 40, Interview)*

> *...I do not see my skin colour can impact my learning behaviours...I am Black and I am happy with my skin colour...I love my sexual orientation...but my professors do not recognise the differences...I could not stand...because they called me the gay student in Black skin colour...it is totally appropriate in any countries on Earth...I reported the discrimination to the school department...they told me that I did not record the message...no actions could be taken...(Participant # 32, Interview)*

According to some previous studies (Dos Santos, 2019; Hansen et al., 2018; Wei et al., 2007), factors beyond skin colour (i.e. traditional racism) and internal and external characteristics also significantly impact the status and position of gay and bisexual international university students (Chase, 2012), in this case skin colour and sexual orientation. In line with the social stigma approach (Goffman, 1963), the participants' stories about discrimination and bias from school personnel indicated that sexual orientation plays a role in gay and bisexual international university students' stress, experiences, and sense-making processes on campus (Woodford, Kulick, et al., 2018). For example, one participant commented *"I was asked...for my sexual orientation...I do not feel that was a right question...although I reported, nothing happened..."* (Participant # 20, Focus Group). In line with the sociocultural and psychological racism theory (Dos Santos, 2021c, 2022), in addition to sexual orientation, discrimination and bias due to personal characteristics, such as illness (Haruna et al., 2018; Wong et al., 2019), became sources of stress and challenges which impacted the stress, experiences, and sense-making processes of these students on campus.

4.3 Ineffective Psychological Counselling Services in University Health Centres and University

Many studies (Chang, 2020; McNutt & Yakushko, 2013) have argued that the current psychological counselling and social worker training programmes and curricula were designed on the basis of heterosexual practices and problems. Although LGBTQ individuals and groups may use the same sessions and strategies for their problems, the relationships and marital status of heterosexual and LGBTQ individuals and groups are not the same (Lee & Lin, 2020). Therefore, many participants

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expressed that they had experienced challenges but had no ways to solve their mental health concerns (Lee et al., 2018), particularly with the services available from the university health centres. As one participant said:

...we have the university psychological counselling centre...they have the mental health counselling...I went there because I wanted to seek some suggestions from my romantic relationship with my Korean gay partner...but the counsellor could not help because the health centre and counselling centre had no previous experiences...in LGBTQ questions and concerns...they looked at us...like animals...and asked us to leave the office...(Participant #27, Interview)

In South Korea, some universities have a partnership with other university hospitals. Some participants indicated that their cases had been transferred to a university hospital for further suggestions. However, such transfers achieved no significant results:

...the university counselling centre could not help...I still wanted to talk to some counsellors...for my relationship with a Korean boy...I was transferred to the university hospital...psychology department...but the doctor and counsellor could not help...and blamed my relationship...I was insulted in the counselling room...I would not come back...(Participant #22, Interview)

More than three quarters of the participants had sought help from counsellors and social workers for different types of counselling. However, these participants expressed their disappointments and negative experiences, stating that they could feel the discrimination and bias from the counsellors (Haruna et al., 2018; Wong et al., 2019):

...I have transferred back-and-forth...from the university counselling centre...to the university hospital...then I went back to the university counselling centre...because both told me that they did not have resources for the LGBTQ communities...I was not seeking for any medicine...I just wanted to talk to someone...who can listen to my story...(Participant #6, Focus Group)

...it sounds like...I am...and other gay individuals...are monsters in this school...I just wanted to take to someone...I want someone can share my bad stories...because I am all alone in this country...with only my broken relationship...but no one can actually help me...I don't speak the local language...and the counselling centre is helpless for sexual minorities...(Participant #18, Focus Group)

Although many sought help and counselling services from university health services and university hospitals, the counselling services were not useful because the counsellors and public health professionals were not trained to deal with same-sex relationships and sexual minorities (Lee et al., 2018). More importantly, many were dismissed from their treatments due to their sexual orientation:

"because the counsellors and doctors were not ready to provide any help for gay and lesbian people...not only international students...but also all local Korean sexual minorities..." (Participant # 10, Interview).

The social stigma approach (Goffman, 1963) certainly played a role in the participants' experiences and sense-making processes due to the stress, challenges, and difficulties they experienced as a result of their sexual orientation. As previously mentioned, Korean public health professionals are not trained to provide help and counselling services to any sexual minority. LGBTQ individuals and other minorities continue to be faced with services that are not tailored to their needs and problems (Dos Santos, 2021a; Hoe & Hassan, 2018). In line with the sociocultural and psychological racism theory (Dos Santos, 2021c, 2022), sexual orientation played a significant role for these participants as they were considered 'others'. Although many actively sought help from counselling services, no positive results were achieved, which impacted their well-being and stress levels (Lee et al., 2018).

5. Limitations and Future Research Developments

First, LGBTQ individuals and groups face stress, discrimination, bias, challenges, and difficulties in South Korea. Although this study used gay and bisexual international university students as the sample group for the investigation, LGBTQ individuals and groups outside of the university environment should also face problems in the community. Therefore, future research studies may expand the sampling groups in order to cover additional populations in South Korea.

Second, the university only collected voices and comments from international students. However, local students and residents may face some similar problems and issues. Therefore, additional age groups should be investigated.

Third, the current study only covered the data from the South Korean environment. However, other East Asian countries and regions, such as China, Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macau, may have different ideas and perspectives about LGBTQ issues and situations. Therefore, future research studies may further investigate the population and problem in other East Asian countries and regions.

Fourth, the current study employed the qualitative research method with in-depth, open-ended, semi-structured, and private interview sessions, focus group activities, and member checking interview sessions. However, quantitative data could be useful to capture voices and comments from a wider population. Therefore, future research studies may employ quantitative and mixed methods in order to collect more data from the participants.

6. Conclusion

South Korea is ready to accept international students all across the global communities with different backgrounds and understanding. However, many universities, public health services, counsellors, social workers, and government agencies are not well-prepared for the LGBTQ individuals and groups, particularly gay and bisexual international university students who do not have the Korean cultural understanding and background. Based on the data from this study, university leaders, government officials, non-profit organisational administrators, and public health professionals may use this study as their reference to reform and polish the current policies and regulations for LGBTQ individuals and groups, particularly for gay and bisexual international university students. Also, although this study focused on the background of international students, the data may further apply to local LGBTQ university students who experience some similar challenges and difficulties.

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