

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Discourse analysis on same-sex relationship through the lens of religious and social belief systems

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ABSTRACT

Religious beliefs and systems have a profound impact on shaping individuals' attitudes towards same-sex relationships. There is a diverse range of perspectives within religious communities, with some individuals adhering to traditional teachings that condemn homosexuality, while others engage in a process of reinterpretation to support and accept same-sex relationships. This qualitative study aims to analyze the different perspectives about same-sex relationship from the lenses of religious and social belief systems. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants (n=16) who identify themselves as a member of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ) community (n=5) and religious people (n=11). Findings indicated the complexity of religious influence on social issues and emphasizes the role of individual engagement with faith in either hindering or facilitating acceptance to same-sex relationship. People who are inclined to their religious faith tend to condemn same-sex relationship. Notably, this study observed different interpretations of people about their religion and faith. While others believed it is against God's will to engage in same-sex relationship, others interpret their belief in more holistic and inclusive way. Nevertheless, this study underscored the importance of understanding the evolving societal attitudes and the role of religion in fostering social discussion, tolerance, and inclusivity within diverse religious communities and society at large.

Keywords: LGBTQ, religious belief; religious people, same-sex relationship; social belief

1. Introduction

Religious factors have been identified as strong factors when it comes to assessing public opinion regarding same-sex romantic relationships. Studies among evangelical Protestants indicated that those who are theologically conservative mostly oppose any sort of homosexual practice^[1-4]. Some studies^[5-7] also revealed that evangelical Protestants with close ties to their fundamental beliefs oppose same-sex marriage and civil unions. Theoretically, diverse religious traditions exhibit varying effects on support for same-sex practices, which can be attributed to differing beliefs regarding the interpretation of the Bible^[8].

The goal of this study was to explore the perceptions of religious people in Abrahamic system, e.g., Catholic and Muslims in the context of same-sex relationship. This study delved into different perspectives of religious people about same-sex relationship and comparing their personal belief systems. This approach shed light on the differences on religious and social contexts of same-sex relationship. This study also observed

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different interpretations of religious belief systems among religious people.

Numerous studies have consistently observed a correlation between negative attitudes towards same-sex relationships and certain demographic characteristics such as older, male, politically conservative, African American, residing in more rural areas, possessing lower levels of education, having limited exposure to diversity, adhering to the belief that homosexuality is a choice rather than an innate characteristic, endorsing traditional gender roles, and, most notably, displaying higher levels of religious devotion and/or conservatism as measured by various indicators^[1,5,6,9-14].

Different dimensions of religion influence opinions on same-sex relationship^[15-17]. Religious tradition fortifies one's personal identities, thereby shaping their perspectives on what is considered as morally permissible or impermissible conduct. Van Geest^[18] revealed that conservative evangelical Protestants exhibit a greater likelihood to perceive same-sex marriage as a moral concern that contradicts their belief systems.

This study captured the perceptions of Filipino religious people, specifically the followers of Christianity and Islam, in the context of same-sex relationship. This study delved into different insights based on two major thematic directions—the social and religious belief systems. This is essential approach because some studies^[19-21] explained the potential attribution of religion to belief, and ultimately the overall reaction of a person towards same-sex relationship. Even with small number of Muslim populations, African countries were generally against homosexuality in terms of public opinion. It emerged that majority of Zimbabweans (96 percent), and Ugandans (90 percent), expressed the belief that homosexuality is never justifiable^[19].

This study expected to collect context-valuable findings which can be used in comparing the perspectives of religious people to same-sex relationship. In this study, same-sex relationship can be in union or marriage, although neither was institutionalized currently in the Philippines. This study explored the complex belief systems and their intricate comparisons based on personal interpretation of their religious beliefs and social norms.

2. Literature review

Many studies were conducted on the perceptions of people about same-sex relationship. Studies noticed certain factors that have traditionally been considered influential to negative attitudes for same-sex intimacy, such as being of African American descent, believing that homosexuality is a matter of choice, and identifying with political conservatism, are significantly influenced by religious factors^[5,17,22]. In Philippine setting, the study of Astillero et al.^[23], indicated that majority of Filipinos (87 percent) believed it is one's right to choose whom he/she will love, and it does not hamper other's morality (56 percent). Even with huge support from majority, Philippines still experiences debates on same-sex relationship because the country is widely influenced by Catholicism^[24]. In this study, the narratives from religious people could provide in-depth analysis on how religion could influence the belief and support to same-sex relationship.

Virtue theory places its foundation and emphasis on the ethical dimension of character, rather than focusing on moral obligations. This aligns itself with the biblical emphasis on the emulation of Christ's character^[25]. Utilitarianism, as a moral framework, assesses the ethical nature of an action by evaluating its ability to maximize overall welfare for the largest number of individuals^[25]. However, it has been argued that this approach is problematic due to its potential to rationalize instances of injustice in the pursuit of the collective benefit, without adequately considering or safeguarding the interests of marginalized or minority groups^[26]. In the context of same-sex relationship, controversies arise due to the differing perspectives surrounding the non-affirming state on the concordance of homosexual individuals with God's will^[27-29].

A noteworthy correlation has been observed between the subjective aspects of religiosity and individuals' attitudes towards same-sex relationships^[16,30,31]. The act of attending religious services fosters the development of a cohesive social network comprising individuals who possess shared perspectives^[32]. The adherence to a literal interpretation of sacred texts and the engagement in subjective practices such as prayer are recognized as significant components of religiosity^[33].

Individuals who exhibit higher levels of religiosity, often measured through indicators such as church attendance or composite measures, and hold more conservative or fundamentalist theological beliefs, often assessed through biblical literalism or self-identification as “born again,” tend to express opposition towards sexuality^[1,2,4]. In contrast, younger people were does not take their religious teaching too literal^[34].

Attitudinal change trends are not uniform when considering factors such as generations, religious identity, religious involvement, belief, or subjective spirituality. In the last decade, belief systems and thoughts by generations shifted^[15,35]. Specifically, individuals belonging to younger birth cohorts, specifically the Millennials and Generation X, exhibit a higher level of acceptance towards same-sex marriage when compared to their counterparts from older cohorts and Millennial cohort exhibits a lower frequency of attendance at religious services compared to their counterparts from the baby boom cohort when they were at the same age^[33].

According to Philippines Social Science Center, Filipino youth population holds firm convictions regarding the existence of a God, the concepts of sin, the belief of an afterlife in the form of heaven, and resurrection^[36]. However, the adherence of young Filipinos to the teachings of their religion in expressing their perspectives on moral matters is not consistent. In terms of divorce, abortion, homosexuality, the utilization of contraceptives, and premarital sexual activity, the younger generation believed that the perspectives held by the church on various matters are outdated^[24,36].

3. Methods

This study used a qualitative design as the appropriate scheme for uncovering deeper extraction of experience and descriptions^[37]. This study extracted the narratives from religious people, i.e., pastor, Muslim and Christian students, lector. These narratives shed light on the different aspects of same-sex and how people from specific demographic react and perceive this issue. Qualitative analysis essentially provides in-depth investigation on the concepts and ideas related to a topic of interest.

4. Participants

The study used purposive sampling, which includes, Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ) and religious people. Purposive sampling is a form of non-probability sampling that deliberately selects participants based on specific characteristics and qualities^[37,38]. The participants were chosen to represent specific group of people which can therefore give demographic-sensitive results^[39]. Purposive sampling enabled the researchers to randomly select participants coming from specific demographics using pre-determined criteria. There were 16 participants who participated in the one-on-one interview. Researcher also collected their demographics as presented in the **Table 1** below.

Table 1. Participant's profile.

| Participants | Profile |
|--------------|--|
| 1 | Male, 20 years old, imam |
| 2 | Male, 24 years old, college student |
| 3 | Female, 19 years old, college student |
| 4 | Female, 25 years old, lector in Tugbungan Church |

Table 1. (Continued).

| Participants | Profile |
|--------------|---|
| 5 | Male (bisexual), 29 years old, college student |
| 6 | Male (bisexual), 21 years old, college student |
| 7 | Male (gay), 24 years old, college student |
| 8 | Male (gay), 23 years old, graduate of BPED |
| 9 | Female, 20 years old, college student |
| 10 | Male, 40 years old, pastor |
| 11 | Male, 35 years old, Christian |
| 12 | Female, 20 years old, Christian |
| 13 | Male (gay), 25 years old, Christian |
| 14 | Female, 37 years old, lector |
| 15 | Male, 19 years old, regular church visitor |
| 16 | Female (lesbian), 25 years old, government worker |

5. Instrument

The participants of the study were interviewed using the guide questions presented in **Table 2**. These guide questions enabled the researchers to extract responses relevant to the objective of the study. In developing the guide questions, researchers should allow participants to share their thoughts and develop prompts for further questions^[40]. The questions represent the concept of the study and how results can be connected through theme.

Table 2. Research instruments.

| Objective | Interview set for question 1 | Interview set for question 2 |
|--|---|--|
| Determine argument of religious people supporting same sex relationship. | 1) Do you support same sex relationship? Why? | 2) Considering yourself as a religious person do you still support same sex relationship? And why? |

6. Research procedure

The researchers seek for permission from the participants. Written in the consent were the objective of the study, purpose, terms for confidentiality, use of data, distribution, and voluntary clause for participation. Once the participants agreed onto the terms, a schedule for electronic (phone call) one-on-one interview was assigned based on their convenience.

In analyzing the results, thematic analysis was done. Thematic analysis is a general form of quantitative analysis that delve into different themes and patterns in the responses^[41,42]. Thematic analysis enabled the researchers to analyze patterns in the responses and code them into meaningful and substantial narrative interpretations.

7. Results

This study provided insights on how religious people support the same-sex relationship. Essentially, the participants understand the concept of same-sex relationship as a general term used to describe a type of relationship of two people of the same sex. The narratives of the participants indicated that some religious people support same-sex relationship. Remarkably, this study was also able to collect data from non-supporters of same-sex relationship to compare their notions and ideas in relation to some religious and social perspectives.

7.1. Religious systems

Three of the participants believed that same-sex relationship is against the law of God. As one participant explained, their religion only permits man-woman relationship which manifest their strong religious perception. They believed that same-sex relationship “constitutes a sin” based on their religious perceptions. For some against the same-sex relationship, it is something that contradict the teachings of the Bible.

“In my opinion, I do not support same-sex relationships because I adhere to the teachings of my religion, which state that men are for women only and that failing to do so constitutes a sin.” [Participant 4].

“I will not support the organization of LGBT but I’m willing to help them change by sharing the gospel of God and to make them realize sharing gospel of God can help change person.” [Participant 11].

In comparison, some religious people manifested support to same-sex relationship even with their religious perceptions. For instance, one participant explained that the essence of a religion is to connect people, accept them, and care for them regardless of their sexuality.

“I think that religion is not about what the Bible says, there is something in it that we find it difficult to understand.” [Participant 7].

“It is not about who you love but it’s how you love someone. Religion wants us to realize that we can be with someone, we can love someone, accept them, and care for them.” [Participant 13].

“Regardless of our belief system, God is very forgiving. He knows our genuine feeling to someone. This is I think the most important thing to remember.” [Participant 1].

“For me, it’s not about your religion that matters. It talks about how you live. But I strongly believe that God accepts you for who you are, regardless of your sexuality.” [Participant 5].

7.2. Social systems

Some of the religious people were against of same-sex relationship because it represents “bad behavior” of people. They oppose same-sex relationship in the context of displaying affections in public areas. They believed that same-sex relationship displays negative emotions and bad actions, especially when people see them doing these. Essentially, this perception relates to how people support one’s action based on how other people perceived that certain action as good or bad. This then led them to choose their stance in relation to what other people believe things should be.

“I oppose because I don’t enjoy witnessing bad behavior, such as kissing because people’s perceptions about it was not nice.” [Participant 15].

In contrast, most of religious people expressed support to same-sex relationship in the context of social perception. For instance, one person explained that same-sex relationship also relates to gender equality because it is a valid reason to love someone regardless of their gender. Some also reflect on love and acceptance with highlight on one’s limitations of what to do.

“Yes, I do support same sex relationship probably it’s because I know that they have valid reason for them to love one another even though they’re in the same gender. It also has relation to gender equality.” [Participant 3].

“Yes, because they have all the rights to love and to be loved. For as long as they know their limitation.” [Participant 14].

“Yes, I do support same sex relationship because we all know that in this generation same sex relationship and marriage are very common, we can’t deny the fact that this generation indeed change the people’s own perspective especially when it comes love.” [Participant 3].

“For me, it’s vital to remember that everyone has the right to their own ideas and values, and it’s up to each person to decide how they feel about same-sex partnerships. It is also critical to respect all people’s rights and dignity, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.” [Participant 12].

“Love is a central principle in many religious teachings, emphasizing compassion, empathy, and acceptance. Recognizing the power of love allows for the possibility of affirming and supporting same-sex relationships within a religious context. Love can transcend boundaries and foster understanding, nurturing a more inclusive and compassionate faith community.” [Participant 16].

8. Discussion

Most of the religious people in this study support the same-sex relationship in the context of religious and social systems. The narratives provided comparisons between the beliefs and ideas of religious people which represent an essential recent phenomenon. Most of them support same-sex relationship because it gives them rights, acceptance, and tolerance to human differences.

One major insight from the narratives was relating same-sex relationship to religious systems. Some participants thought that same-sex relationship is against the law of God, as what their belief systems taught them. As one participant explained, *“I do not support same-sex relationships because I adhere to the teachings of my religion.”* [Participant 4]. Not supporting same-sex relationship can be attributed to person’s religion^[43]. In the study of Suen et al.^[43], in Hong Kong, only 17.6% of Christians were supportive to same-sex relationship and 34.3% of non-religious people support. Religion can be a major factor on why people do not support same-sex relationship while others, especially those non-religious also do not support because of other causes, like in this study because of their social belief systems.

With the prevalent hetero-centric norms, Western societies frequently referenced societal and religious influences as factors motivating gay men to settle into heterosexual marriages^[44,45]. The Abrahamic faiths, specifically Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, are known for their firm belief system against homosexuality^[44,46,47]. This study observed similar message patterns from non-supporters of same-sex relationship. As one participant explained, the religion teaches that, *“Men are for women only and that failing to do so constitutes a sin.”* [Participant 4]. Moral foundations are commonly regarded as intuitive responses that reflect variations in moral concerns, thereby influencing individuals’ orientations towards specific social and political ideologies, often categorized as either liberal or conservative^[48,49]. This explains why, *“I don’t enjoy witnessing bad behavior, such as kissing because people’s perceptions about it was not nice.”* [Participant 15], because people see same-sex relationship as unnatural and against social norms.

Additionally, some people perceived that being homosexual can be “changed” with religion. For instance, *“Sharing gospel of God can help change the person.”* [Participant 10]. This is also related to the concept of psychotherapy where, as Pargament^[50] argued, *“Spirituality cannot be separated from psychotherapy...the spiritual dimension of life is fully interwoven with other life domains.”* Psychological studies on spiritual and religious coping responses indicated that religion and spirituality are beneficial or detrimental and whether people deal with relationship crises and changes by holding onto or changing values, beliefs, and religious practices^[50,51]. Some religious people perceived same-sex relationship as curable with religious teachings and belief systems.

In contrast, some religious people were supportive on same-sex relationship explaining, “*Religion is not about what the Bible says, there is something in it that we find it difficult to understand.*” [Participant 7]. Based on the report from Pew Research Center, majority of Catholics (>90%) in European countries, e.g., Netherlands, Germany, Spain, believed that homosexuality should be accepted by society^[52]. In the same study, 80% of Filipinos believed that homosexuality should be accepted by the society. Religious people in this study believed that same-sex relationship as a “*Valid reason for them to love one another even though they’re in the same gender.*” [Participant 3] and, “*They have all the rights to love and to be loved.*” [Participant 14]. This study observed that message patterns naturally relate same-sex relationship to other important social issues like gender equality, rights, and love.

Religion covers various same-sex practices within its moral framework that can be attributed to the varying levels of commitment and societal acceptance associated with each practice type. However, the impact of religious practice and theological beliefs on these practices may vary depending on the specific type of practice^[53]. For instance, some religious people believed that, “*It’s up to each person to decide how they feel about same-sex partnerships.*” [Participant 12]. Specifically, this may involve long-term monogamous relationship rather than short-term erotic or romantic relationship^[53-55]. Critically, same-sex relationship, based on its supporters, emphasize, “*Compassion, empathy, and acceptance.*” [Participant 16]. This study revealed that some religious people believed same-sex relationship is also written in religion because its essence is not just to build a family and have hetero-centric relationship, but to follow moral values regardless of one’s sexuality.

Discourse analysis indicated that religion could influence how people perceived same-sex relationship. Some religious people followed the teachings of their religion as is saying, “*Man is only for a woman*” and, “*Same-sex relationship is a sin.*” While other religious people reflect on the moral framework written in religious teachings explaining, “*Same-sex relationship is about loving someone and accepting them*”. Differences on their perspective was prominent, but majority with religious people support same-sex relationship who naturally relate same-sex relationship to other relevant social issues such as equality, acceptance, compassion, and tolerance to human differences.

9. Conclusion

The discourse analysis conducted on religious individuals who support gender equality in their same-sex relationships reveals a complex process of reinterpretation and negotiation of traditional religious beliefs and values. The attitudes of religious people towards same-sex relationships varied significantly. Some religious individuals supported same-sex relationships within the context of their religious and social systems, emphasizing the importance of rights, acceptance, and tolerance for human differences. On the other hand, there were participants who opposed same-sex relationships based on their belief that it goes against the teachings of their religion. Religion played a significant role in shaping people’s perceptions of same-sex relationships. While some religious individuals adhered to traditional teachings, others embraced more inclusive and accepting attitudes towards same-sex relationships.

Religious beliefs and systems play a significant role in shaping individuals’ attitudes towards same-sex relationships. While some religious people adhere to traditional teachings that condemn homosexuality, others reinterpret their faith to support and accept same-sex relationships. This highlights the complexity of religious influence on social issues, with varying degrees of openness and acceptance within different religious communities. Religious beliefs can either hinder or facilitate acceptance, depending on how individuals engage with their faith and its teachings. As societal attitudes continue to evolve, understanding the role of religion in

shaping perspectives on same-sex relationships is essential for fostering dialogue, tolerance, and inclusivity within diverse religious communities and society at large.

Author contributions

Conceptualization, JVC and CCC; methodology, JVC and CCC; software, JVC and CCC; validation JVC and CCC; formal analysis, JVC and CCC; investigation, JVC and CCC; resources, JVC and CCC; data curation, JVC and CCC; writing—original draft preparation, CCC; writing—review and editing, JVC; visualization, JVC and CCC; supervision, JVC; project administration, JVC; funding acquisition, JVC and CCC. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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