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“As If I Use a Filter, and It Has Become a Part of Me”: Discriminatory Workplace Experiences of Lesbian and Gay Employees of India

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Abstract

In 2018, the Indian penal code scrapped section 377 and decriminalized consensual homosexuality. However, there exists a significant knowledge gap regarding what extent Indian workplaces have been successful in ensuring a discrimination-free environment for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) employees. Thus, to address this gap, the current study explored discriminatory workplace experiences encountered by Indian lesbian and gay (LG) employees. The qualitative data has been collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and analyzed through the thematic analysis method. A hybrid of the inductive and theoretical thematic analysis revealed four themes, that is, subtle discrimination, disclosure dilemmas, dressing and appearance norms, and gender-binary filter. LG employees frequently encounter workplace discrimination in subtle forms (distancing, excluding, commenting behind the back, and dignity-attack). Experiences of discrimination and fear of going through workplace discrimination lead to disclosure dilemmas, that is, a multilayered decision-making process involving strategy formation, risk perception, and fear of discrimination while choosing/ not choosing whether/how/where/when to disclose sexual identity at the workplace. Also, to establish heteronormativity, Indian organizations often maintain strict dress and appearance norms. In addition to these externally employed norms, LG employees use a gender-binary filter to screen their behaviors, gestures, speech (content, tone, pitch), walking, and dressing to confirm they align with the gender binary and to avoid workplace discrimination. Thus, the study shows that in Indian organizations, the workplace experiences of LG employees are far from discrimination-free. The organizations can use the study findings to understand current affairs and develop policies to ensure an inclusive workplace for LG employees.

Keywords

discrimination, dressing, inclusion, LGBT, thematic analysis, qualitative

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“As If I Use a Filter, and It Has Become a Part of Me”: Discriminatory Workplace Experiences of Lesbian and Gay Employees of India

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In 2018, the Indian penal code scrapped section 377 and decriminalized consensual homosexuality. However, there exists a significant knowledge gap regarding what extent Indian workplaces have been successful in ensuring a discrimination-free environment for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) employees. Thus, to address this gap, the current study explored discriminatory workplace experiences encountered by Indian lesbian and gay (LG) employees. The qualitative data has been collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and analyzed through the thematic analysis method. A hybrid of the inductive and theoretical thematic analysis revealed four themes, that is, subtle discrimination, disclosure dilemmas, dressing and appearance norms, and gender-binary filter. LG employees frequently encounter workplace discrimination in subtle forms (distancing, excluding, commenting behind the back, and dignity-attack). Experiences of discrimination and fear of going through workplace discrimination lead to disclosure dilemmas, that is, a multilayered decision-making process involving strategy formation, risk perception, and fear of discrimination while choosing/not choosing whether/how/where/when to disclose sexual identity at the workplace. Also, to establish heteronormativity, Indian organizations often maintain strict dress and appearance norms. In addition to these externally employed norms, LG employees use a gender-binary filter to screen their behaviors, gestures, speech (content, tone, pitch), walking, and dressing to confirm they align with the gender binary and to avoid workplace discrimination. Thus, the study shows that in Indian organizations, the workplace experiences of LG employees are far from discrimination-free. The organizations can use the study findings to understand current affairs and develop policies to ensure an inclusive workplace for LG employees.

Keywords: discrimination, dressing, inclusion, LGBT, thematic analysis, qualitative

Homosexuality in India: Legal vs. Social Inclusiveness

Undoubtedly, 2018 is a milestone year in India's history of the LGBTQ movement. Article 377 of the Indian penal code, which criminalized homosexuality and played an instrumental role in extorting, harassing, and stigmatizing the Indian LGBTQ community for centuries (Kumar, 2019; Misra, 2009; Pufahl et al., 2021), was declared unconstitutional in 2018. On the legal front, this decriminalization is unquestionably a significant step. Nevertheless, there might be colossal debate regarding to what extent a legal step has led to

substantial positive changes at the societal level. The effect of decriminalization on the development of positive attitudes toward homosexuality is not well-established in the literature. Some studies show a direct impact of decriminalization on developing positive public opinion towards homosexuality (Hooghe & Meeusen, 2013; Takács & Szalma, 2011; Van den Akker et al., 2013), whereas other studies show no significant effect (Redman, 2018). Thus, social scientists might ask, “Is decriminalization enough?” (Borah, 2018).

In India, decriminalization took place around half a decade ago, and it might be erroneous to draw conclusions about the effect of decriminalization on social attitudes. However, the existing literature shows that even after this legal transformation, instances of victimization and social exclusion are widely reported by the LGBTQ community (Dagras, 2021; Mewafarosh & Chatterjee, 2019). In September 2020, one report published in *The Hindu* newspaper showed that the Indian LGBTQ community still encounters prejudice and discrimination daily. In the social, educational, and organizational spheres, India remains broadly hetero-patriarchal (Anand, 2016; Bhugra et al., 2015; Dhabar & Deshmukh, 2021; Gill, 2017; Laharia & Gokakkar, 2021) with widespread discrimination and stigmatization towards LGBT persons.

Whereas these studies indicate discrimination experienced by the LGBTQ community across spheres of life, the current qualitative study focused on discrimination encountered by LGBTQ individuals in the workplace.

Workplace Discrimination Against LGBTQ Individuals

LGBTQ individuals encounter multiple aversive workplace experiences (Mara et al., 2021). Workplace discrimination (Kattari et al., 2016; Nelson et al., 2019) through wage penalties (Carpenter, 2005; Mize, 2016), hiring discrimination (Baert, 2018), bullying (Drydakakis, 2019; Gordon & Pratama, 2017; Noronha et al., 2022), heterosexist harassment (Rabelo & Cortina, 2014), micro-aggressions (Francis & Reygan, 2016), and attacks on dignity (Baker & Lucas, 2017) are rampant.

Discrimination is a behavior characterized by treating someone differently from others primarily based on a person’s group identity (Whitley & Kite, 2016). Discrimination based on race, class, caste, and gender is not rare in organizations (Dipboye & Colella, 2013). Discrimination against LGBTQ employees is frequent. Waite (2021), for instance, found that gender-diverse employees are 2.2 times more vulnerable to workplace discrimination than their cisgender colleagues. Around 33.3% to 50% of LGBTQ employees encounter workplace discrimination regularly (Kattari et al., 2016; Sears & Mallory, 2011).

Workplace discrimination might occur at different phases and take various forms. Dipboye and Colella (2013) mentioned that workplace discrimination involves proximal/overt processes and covert/distal mechanisms. At the proximal level, discrimination against LGBT employees is evident in huge wage penalties (Carpenter, 2005; Mize, 2016), tenure refusal, and delayed promotion (Eliason et al., 2018; Gordon & Pratama, 2017). Most commonly, homosexual applicants experience hiring discrimination by receiving significantly fewer positive call-backs (Ahmed et al., 2013; Patacchini, Ragusa, & Zenou, 2015; Moya & Moya-Garófano, 2020) than their heterosexual peers across the world. Hiring professionals’ negative attitudes toward homosexuality and belief in traditional gender roles negatively impact their evaluation of gay/lesbian applicants (Bryant-Lees & Kite, 2020a; Mize & Manago, 2018). This explains why the internet-based hiring process (without face-to-face contact) leads to no significant discrimination toward LGBTQ persons (Bailey et al., 2013).

In the distal forms, discrimination occurs “in the organizational structures, systems, policies, and practices that can have unintended effects of perpetuating inequalities” (Dipboye & Colella, 2013, p. 426). DeSouza and colleagues (2017) have classified subtle workplace

discrimination against LGBTQ employees into two categories: microaggressions and social ostracism. Microaggressions incorporate heterosexist/transphobic language use, heteronormative norm endorsement, and disproving LGBT individuals (Nadal, 2019; Sadika et al., 2020). On the other hand, social ostracism is defined as the process of being excluded by mainstream society.

Discrimination against LGBT employees is well-studied, but most studies are located in the Western context (Ghosh, 2015; Moussawi, 2015). We could find only a few works that have addressed the workplace experiences of LGBTQ persons in the Indian context. Palo and Jha (2019), in their book, “Queer at Work,” have provided an exhaustive account of the issues faced by LGBTQ individuals in Indian workplaces. This book shows us the evidence of discrimination, identity crisis, and deeply rooted heteronormativity in Indian organizations. In a qualitative study, Philip and Soumyaja (2019) observed a structural exclusion of transgender individuals in Indian organizations. Noronha et al. (2022) observed that the fear of being bullied determines the disclosure decisions of LGBT persons inside Indian organizations, eventually impacting their mental and physical health status.

Research Gap

While workplace discrimination against LGBTQ individuals is well-documented in the literature, most work is based on Western societies. Drastic cross-cultural differences exist in the social status of LGBT individuals (Lee & Ostergard, 2017). South Asia shows lower social acceptance toward LGBT persons, whereas countries like Afghanistan, Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh still criminalize homosexuality (Bhatia, 2016; Wolf, 2013). Indian society generally shows a narrow social acceptance towards LGBTQ persons. A 2006 World Value Survey revealed that the attitude of Indian society towards LGBT individuals is so negative that forty-one percent of the respondents did not want LGBT neighbors (Badgett, 2014).

The mainstream Hindi movies have negatively portrayed LGBT individuals characterized by mockery and stereotypes (Bhugra et al., 2015; Kalra & Bhugra, 2015). After the decriminalization, however, Bollywood movies like *Chandigarh Kare Ashiqui* and *Badhai Do* aim to portray LGBTQ individuals more positively (Barthwal & Sharma, 2022). Most Western countries are more accepting of homosexuality, with a fairly older legal history of decriminalization than India. This difference in the social standing of LGBTQ persons is surely reflected in the differences in their workplace experience. Thus, it would be erroneous to generalize the theories and models of workplace discrimination developed in the Western context to Indian society.

In addition to differences in social standing, countries differ in their approach to equality in the workplace. Like any social movement (Armstrong & Bernstein, 2008), the LGBTQ movement also involves: (a.) instrumental goals that involve legal formulations, inclusive policy, and structural changes in organizations; and (b.) expressive goals that involve changes in attitudes at a cultural level. Countries like the United States simultaneously pursued expressive and instrumental goals for years. It was possible to indulge in instrumental goals since homosexuality was decriminalized years back, again backed up by movements like the Homophile movement that emphasized greater social acceptance. Indian workplaces, on the contrary, could only focus on expressive goals without legal decriminalization status (Ghosh, 2020). Even multinational corporations rarely extend their LGBTQ-friendly policies in their Indian offices (Badgett, 2014). Noronha and colleagues (2022) observed “organizational apathy” in Indian organizations where organizations either showed outright disapproval or homophobia or were reluctant to implement LGBTQ-friendly policies even when they were formally there. Thus, it is evident that organizations' approaches toward LGBTQ-friendly

workplaces vary, which, in turn, is likely to affect the workplace experiences of LGBTQ employees.

Most existing literature uses a survey-based quantitative approach and emphasizes the proximal discriminatory processes. There is a need to explore and develop theories on how workplace discrimination might subtly occur. A theory-testing, post-positivist, deductive approach cannot necessarily detect the subtle and symbolic forms of workplace discrimination, which calls for a theory-developing, inductive, qualitative approach.

The existing literature on workplace discrimination against LGBTQ employees emphasizes the forms, processes, and structure of discrimination. There is a lack of work on the psychological mechanisms the discriminated person uses to cope with the discriminatory workplace.

Present Study

The current study is an attempt to address the following research objectives:

1. To explore workplace discrimination encountered by Indian LG persons who work as full-time employees in Indian organizations (Age=23-45 years);
2. To explore the strategies that discriminated LG individuals use to cope with such aversive experiences in workplaces;
3. To explore the psychological consequences of workplace discrimination on LGBT employees.

Researchers' Positionality

Our research team comprised four social science researchers (three biological females and one biological male) from different parts of India (Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, and West Bengal). We have been working on gender-related psychological processes emphasizing LGBTQ persons in India. We have educational degrees in psychology and cognitive sciences (two have a Ph.D. and two have a master's degree). Our education in social science and interest in understanding discrimination towards gender and sexual identities have motivated us to choose this research. One member of our research team identifies with the LGBTQ+ community and, having experienced discrimination based on their identity, brings their pertinent perspective to the research. We recognize that our identities and experiences had some influence on our analysis of the data provided to us in this study.

Method

Design

As mentioned in the "Research Gap" section, there is a significant knowledge gap regarding the workplace experience of LG employees in India. Since no existing model and theory exists in this context, we cannot rely on a hypothesis-testing deductive quantitative method. Also, because of the sociocultural context of homosexuality, the current research must tap into cultural factors to understand the experiences of the LG employees. Following a quantitative method would result in context stripping in such a situation. We have relied on an exploratory qualitative approach since the research interest is broad. We have employed thematic analysis to address the research mentioned above objectives.

Sampling

The foremost challenge of the current study was reaching the participants, primarily because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The organizations were functioning in the work-from-home mode. We contacted Human Resource professionals from a few organizations and realized that most organizations were reluctant to help us reach the LG employees since it would violate privacy. Moreover, contacting the LG employees through the organization was considered unsuitable since most of them tend not to disclose their gender identities in their organization. Thus, we decided to approach organizations leading Indian organizations working towards equal rights for LGBT persons. We contacted thirteen such organizations through a standard email with detailed information about the project's aims and mode of data collection. Most organizations expressed their inability to provide support since the pandemic had hugely impacted their organizations' functioning and the LGBT individuals' lives. Out of the two agreeing organizations, collecting data from one organization was impossible because of the language barrier. Finally, one West Bengal-based organization supported the project by providing contacts of a few volunteers for the initial interviews. We have used a convenient sampling method for reaching out to other interviewees.

A total of twelve interviews were conducted for the current study. Among the participants, three were lesbians, and nine were gay men. Except for one working in the government sector, all the others worked in the private sector. The details of the interviewees are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Participants' details

Sl. No.	LGBTQ Identity	Age	Organizations/Jobs
1	Lesbian woman	33 years	Teacher
2	Lesbian woman	32 years	Teacher
3	Gay man	35 years	Fashion industry
4	Gay man	31 years	Used to work in hotel industry Currently working medical scribing
5	Gay man	45 years	Government sector
6	Gay man	30 years	Fashion industry
7	Trans man	24 years	NGO worker
8	Gay man	31 years	Marketing professional

9	Gay man	30 years	Fashion industry
10	Gay man	23 years	Engineer
11	Gay man	25 years	Engineer
12	Gay man	32 years	HR manager
13	Lesbian	37 years	Engineer
14	Non-binary person	28 years	Engineer

Data Collection

The data collection process involved in-depth telephonic interviewing; it “permits an in-depth exploration of a particular topic or experience and, thus, is a useful method for interpretive inquiry” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 25). Interviewing through a telephonic/virtual mode was not an ideal method; however, the data was collected during the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in India when state-level lockdowns were operational. Thus, the organizations, researchers, and participants opted for telephonic/virtual interviews to ensure the health and safety of everyone. Many contemporary Indian studies followed this research tool (Pandya & Redcay, 2022) during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Moreover, the interviewees reported the telephonic mode as a “safer” space. They felt it was easier to share intimate emotions, deep thoughts, and stigma experiences without fear of being judged. When asked to choose, all interviewees preferred a telephone call over a video call. Interviewee 8, for instance, mentioned that “I never shared this much with anyone probably. Maybe because I cannot see you, I cannot see if you are judging me. This feels way better than actually talking about all these things face-to-face.” This statement aligns with existing literature that suggests the benefits of telephonic interviewing over physical ones in: (a.) maintaining a better power balance between the interviewer and interviewees; (b.) avoiding bias and stereotypes (Vogl, 2013); and (c.) perception of greater anonymity and privacy (Carr & Worth, 2001; Holt, 2010; Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004).

Visual cues are a critical limitation of telephonic interviews, especially when the interviewees lose their energy and motivation to continue the conversation. Nevertheless, the interviewer concentrated more on maintaining the engagement of the interviewees (Irvine et al., 2013). The interviews took place between April 11th and June 9th, 2021. The interviews were audio-recorded after taking consent from the interviewees. The interviews typically lasted between 25 minutes to one hour and 20 minutes, with an average of approximately 40-45 minutes. In the initial interviews, the questions were highly open-ended. The interviewer asked questions like: (a.) Tell me about your workplace; (b.) Share any work experience you will never forget; (c.) Has your sexual identity has impacted your workplace experience? Later, based on the initial interviews’ analysis, themes emerged. The preliminary analysis informed questions for the later interviews.

Thematic Analysis

An inductive thematic analysis method was employed to analyze the data derived from the interviews. Thematic analysis is “a data reduction and analysis strategy by which qualitative data are segmented, categorized, summarized, and reconstructed in a way that captures the important concepts within the data set” (Ayress, 2008, p. 867). Thematic analysis can take either the form of theoretical thematic analysis, inductive thematic analysis, or a hybrid of both. Theoretical TA follows a top-down process where a theoretical framework is used as a filter to search for the themes from the data (Mahapatra & Chandola, 2018). On the contrary, an inductive TA takes a bottom-up approach where the development of themes is fully based on the data. In the current study, we have used a hybrid of theoretical and inductive thematic analysis (Maji & Dixit, 2019).

In the theoretical thematic analysis, we typically use a top-down approach where we use “theoretical underpinnings and understanding of the research area of interest or previously established theoretical phenomenon” (Mahapatra & Chandola, 2018, p. 1967) as the theoretical filter. In the current study, for instance, the researchers have consciously tried to check the markers of subtle discrimination prescribed by DeSouza and colleagues (2017) that suggests two types of subtle workplace discrimination, that is, microaggression and social ostracism. Also, Sue’s microaggression theory (Constantine & Sue, 2007) has been used to detect microaggression. Sue’s (2007) theory suggests three forms of microaggression: (a.) microassaults (conscious attacks and derogatory behaviors towards the intended victim), (b.) microinsults (unconscious and demeaning acts, symbolic of negative stereotypes and attitudes), and (c.) microinvalidation (invalidating victim’s feelings and experiential reality).

The theoretical framework did not strictly restrict the analysis, as the researchers were open to the data and used active induction, where the emphasis was located on the data.

In the analysis process, all the six steps Braun and Clarke (2006) suggested were sincerely followed.

- a) For familiarizing with the data, the entire data set was re-read multiple times to ensure more familiarity with the data.
- b) The data analysis began with the generation of initial codes. Initial codes form the thematic analysis's building blocks by developing the themes' foundation. While generating initial codes, an attempt was made to understand the meaning of every paragraph (semantic coding). At the same time, we also attempted to see whether the theoretical components were present in the dataset. This process gives equal and complete attention to each paragraph (Braun & Clarke, 2006). It was ensured that the codes “capture the qualitative richness of the phenomenon” (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 1).
- c) After the initial codes were generated, the next step was searching for themes from the codes, where we clustered the codes with some unifying features and meaningful patterns. Mind notes, tables, and thematic maps are used to search for the relationships between codes, themes, and different levels of themes.
- d) After the themes were enlisted, a closer review was done for a quality check. It was ensured that the themes properly explained the research interest rather than simply summarizing the data.
- e) Also, it was ensured that the examples from the narratives substantiated all the themes. At this phase, a further review of the themes was done to ensure that the themes were coherent, relevant, and thoroughly substantiated.

Results

From the analysis, the following main themes are derived.

Theme 1: Subtle Discrimination

Overt discrimination can be understood as evident, direct, explicit, and intentional forms of discrimination existing in the workplace. Existing literature has consistently suggested workplace discrimination in hiring, promotion, allotment of projects, accommodation, and other fringe benefits (Ahmed et al., 2013; Eliason et al., 2011; Nelson et al., 2019). However, all these proximal and overt forms of discrimination were not evident in the current study. It might be because the LG interviewees did not officially announce their sexual identity inside their organization and/or employed efficient gender-management strategies (such as a gender binary filter) to avoid discrimination.

Subtle discrimination, on the contrary, is covert and indirect. This is similar to a modern type of discrimination (DeSouza et al., 2017). In the current study, all the participants have mentioned experiencing covert forms of discrimination, that is, discrimination that is not evident in the formal documents and policies. Like DeSouza and colleagues' theory (2017), the current study revealed subtle discriminations in two forms, that is, microaggression and social ostracism.

Subtheme 1: Microaggression

Sue and colleagues (2007, p. 72) defined microaggressions as “brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults toward members of oppressed groups.” In the current study, interviewees have experienced several encounters with subtle, indirect, and implicit attacks. They have emerged as invalidating one's sexual preference, violating one's personal space, questioning one's dressing choices, and attacking one's dignity. Even after being different from direct hostility, these microaggressions tend to have immense impacts on the employees' work life. Interviewee 1, a 33-year-old teacher who identifies as lesbian, mentioned,

Since I look different from the norm, I face many questions. There is a perpetuating question around marriage, such as, “Why are you not getting married?” They always ask me if I am in a relationship. Then who is my boyfriend, and what does he do? They always thought my partner would be a male just because I am a PFAB (Person Assigned Female at Birth). They see me through a lens as if there is a consistent tendency to fit me in the box.

Sue and colleagues (2007) mentioned that microaggression might emerge through microinvalidations, that is, when one invalidates or negates marginalized group members' feelings and experiential reality. In the above narrative, the interviewee's colleagues invalidated her sexuality by constantly attempting to fit her in the heteronormative box.

In the current study, micro-aggressions have also occurred through dignity injury characterized by feeling violated, indecent remarks, and a lack of freedom to exercise one's will. Interviewee 9, a full-time engineer, who identifies as gay, experienced severe encroachment of personal space. These are often perceived as “micro” and come from workplace friends. He shared that,

There is a lady in my office. She likes me and cares for me. She says that she is aware of and accepting of homosexuality even when she is strictly religious Christian. However, again, she will openly ask me to practice celibacy which I think violates my personal life.

Similarly, other participants mentioned how people often show interest in their very intimate personal space, such as their sexual positions, number of sexual partners, sexual role divisions, and so on. These insensitive comments also include sexual humor, homophobic jokes, and questioning one's professionalism.

Subtheme 2: Social Ostracism

Social ostracism is one form of subtle discrimination that lies opposite of microaggression. While microaggressions are "acts of commissions" (DeSouza et al., 2017), social ostracism is based on "acts of omissions" or exclusions. Some instances made LGBT persons feel excluded. In the current study, participants have consistently reported feeling excluded in the office spaces and from office parties and gatherings. Interviewee 1, a full-time teacher, shared that she felt left alone since she was the only one not included in an office party. She mentioned,

There is constantly whispering and gossiping about you. There was a marriage ceremony or social gathering arranged by one of the colleagues, and then I came to know that everyone else was invited except me; these are the realities that we face.

Theme 2: Disclosure Dilemma

Disclosure of identity is undoubtedly a multilayered experience. The process is further complicated for the disclosure decision of LGBTQ persons in the workplace since it might lead to serious negative consequences such as discrimination (Omarzu, 2000). In the current study, participants have mentioned a dilemma regarding disclosing their sexual orientation and gender identity to their colleagues when they enter a workplace. A disclosure dilemma is a multilayered decision-making process involving strategy formation, risk perception, and fear of discrimination while choosing/ not choosing whether/how/where/when to disclose sexual identity at the workplace. Participants mentioned encountering a dilemma, and most of them have decided not to disclose anything. Interviewee 1 shared,

I did not (disclose my LGBTQ identity). Since there is no provision to officially disclose it in education institutions, it is difficult anyway since you are constantly under the radar once you disclose it. Anything beyond the heteronormative pattern is not perceived in a positive light, so there is a fear of exclusion that stopped me.

Some participants have developed a strategy where they have disclosed their gender identity only to a few people in the organization rather than being completely open about it. In cases of such selective disclosure, they mentioned providing the highest priority to the characteristics of the target listener, such as the person's trustworthiness, his/her ability to maintain privacy, and intimacy level. A decision of non-disclosure, on the other hand, is determined by fear of discrimination and anticipation of not being understood. Interviewee 6, a 30-year-old gay person who works in the fashion industry, mentioned,

If I have to disclose it to somebody, it should be the person I am most comfortable with and who is my friend. I am not open to anybody since I think they will not understand even if I tell them.

In some cases, aversive consequences of disclosure in the past have impacted one's disclosure decision. Interviewee 1 shared how disclosing her sexual identity in a previous workplace led to negative experiences, which, in turn, led her to leave her employment. She mentioned,

Once, I shared this with a colleague, and it created many hassles in my life, so after that, I decided not to come out. In a weak moment, I shared this with a colleague, and then I realized that she had made it public, and then I realized that there is a lot of public discussion around it in my workplace. And at the end of the day, the experiences were so bad that I had to leave my job.

Similarly, Interviewee 7, a 31-years-old gay man, who is a marketing professional, mentioned.

Once I came out to a workplace, I found that the behavior of my male colleagues changed. They started hanging out less with me; probably, they thought I would approach them sexually, which was absurd. But I regretted my decision to disclose since I lost some connections.

Theme 3: Dressing and Appearance Norms

External control from the organizational authority and colleagues in maintaining gender-binary takes place through maintaining strict dressing and appearance norms. Organizational sexuality is a "social practice which lays down explicit and culturally elaborated rules of behavior and local validity" (Gherardi, 1995, p. 187), and dressing is the most crucial mechanism. Dellinger and Williams (1997), too, suggest that it is essential to understand dressing as a part of gendered organizational culture.

In the current study, dressing has emerged as one crucial tool for endorsing and maintaining gender-binary and compulsory order of sex in the workplace (Butler, 2011). Most participants reported that dress codes were not explicitly provided in their organizations but were established through verbal and nonverbal cues. Regarding verbal cues, there are regular comments, questions, and reminders from heterosexual employees that confirm the gender binary. When employees defy the gendered appearance norms regarding the type/color of cloth or use of make-up, they encounter suggestions of dressing more sex-appropriate or ridicule for not doing so.

Interviewee 1 regularly received appearance-related questions such as "Why are you uncomfortable wearing a saree?" "Why don't you put on lipstick?" or "Why don't you grow your hair?" She mentioned that although there is no written dress code in her school, she has encountered informal enforcement of gender-based dressing through such queries.

In addition to these verbal suggestions, questions, and comments, non-verbal cues such as judgmental looks, staring, and double taps are equally functional in maintaining appearance norms inside the organization. Williams and Britton (1995) mentioned the "corporate closet" process, where the organization encourages gay men to keep their sexual identities hidden. These verbal and non-verbal cues are the protectors of the corporate closet.

Interviewee 12 is a 31-year-old gay man who works as a manager in a multinational organization, experienced this kind of non-verbal control. He mentioned,

I love experimenting with my look. Initially, when I used to wear something different, like a red or a purple shirt with beautiful prints, some people asked, “What are you wearing?” or stared at me for a long time. I could hear whispers if I ever dressed like that when I passed.

When LGBTQ persons are forced to dress in a manner that contradicts their experienced gender, it impacts their overall comfort in the workplace. Experience of lack of freedom, in turn, leads to a sense of lack of job satisfaction. Interviewee 1, for instance, mentioned how this enforcement of the gender-binary dress code had affected her comfort and workplace satisfaction:

I feel extremely uncomfortable in this kind of dressing. However, I need this job. If I don't follow this dress, I might lose my job and face more violence. So, although I experience daily conflicts and bad feelings regarding the dress code, I cannot do anything.

Theme 4: Gender-Binary-Filter

LGBTQ employees often indulge in the internal process of managing their expression of gender by using a psychological filter of gender-binary through which one screens his/her/their behaviors' appropriateness in front of others. This filtering is similar to identity management which can be understood as “adaptive career behavior in that sexual minority persons must think about whether and how to disclose personal details about their sexual orientation due to the work-related consequences of these disclosures” (Tatum et al., 2017, p. 108). However, unlike identity management, the gender-binary filter becomes automatized for LGBT persons after years of conscious use. Whereas external enforcement of heteronormativity is familiar in the organization, the internal self-management of gender by screening one's behavior through the gender-binary filter is also observed. This is even more crucial to understanding this internal mechanism since it tremendously impacts psychological well-being. This gender-binary-filtration is most common among individuals who have concealed their sexual identity and orientation in the workplace. It begins with an internal fear of behaving in a gender-inappropriate manner. In most cases, the development of this filtration mechanism has a developmental origin. When experiences of bullying during school/college life were so traumatizing that to avoid that, individuals have gone to every extent to monitor their every behavior through the lens of gender appropriateness.

Interviewee 5 is a 45-year-old gay man who has taken help from a speech therapist to make his voice more “manly.”

I realized that if I have to survive in this society, I cannot handle it if everyone taunts me daily. So, I had to work on my walking and my speech. At first, I started making conscious efforts so that my sexual identity was not expressed through my walking; it was a control I had to make every time. And for my voice, I visited a speech therapist, and they suggested certain exercises, such as producing sounds in a certain manner, which changed my voice to a heavier one. Gradually, over the years, I realized that I no more walk like before.

Interviewee 4 is a 31-year-old gay man who works in the hotel industry. He mentioned the constant stress he experiences from concealing his authentic self. He avoids attending social gatherings (office parties) for fear of losing the mask of a heterosexual person.

In the Indian office, especially, it is a very stressful time...I was scared of going to office parties whenever they organized; I felt like, “What if I do awkward things in front of them?” “What if I walk like a girl?” “What if I dance too much?” “What if I dance like a woman?” So I had to keep myself inside the box.

Thus, using a gender-binary filter and behaving opposite to one’s experienced gender is stressful for one’s mental health and impacts one’s everyday interactions with others inside the organization.

Discussion

In 2018, a legal change through the scrapping of Article 377 altered the roadmap of the LGBTQ movement in India. This qualitative research was an attempt to explore the workplace experience of LGBTQ employees, post this legal revolution. Ghosh (2020) mentioned that till 2018, organizations could only focus on expressive goals (this focuses on the attitude change of heterosexual employees towards sexual minorities) since making any policy change was not possible due to legal restrictions at the national level. Contrary to this finding, the current study shows that although in most Indian organizations, there are “non-discriminatory policies,” aversive workplace experiences are still rampant; however, these experiences often emerge in subtle/covert forms. This came up as a surprise for the researchers since we expected overt discrimination to still be rampant. However, all the participants reported only subtle forms of discrimination. This finding might be considered one potential input for developing interventions for LGBTQ inclusion programs in Indian organizations. The policymakers must focus on building awareness programs around microaggressions and social ostracism.

In terms of the methodological point of view, this piece of qualitative research aimed at ensuring rigor, which “is a way of demonstrating the legitimacy of the research process” (Tobin & Begley, 2004, p. 390), through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. We have followed the process of reflexivity to monitor our epistemological standpoint and personal experiences that might influence data collection and interpretation. Every time there was the slightest scope of difference in understanding the participants' experience because of the researcher's existing theoretical lens and personal experience, the interviewees were asked twice if they meant what the researcher thought they might have meant. Credibility in qualitative research is ensured by checking the fit between the participant’s views and the researcher’s representation of those views. This clarification was necessary to ensure credibility. Also, I read and re-read the data several times and often returned it to the participants to ensure the data's credibility.

The current study, however, has the limitations of:

- a. Conduction of interviews only through a telephonic mode led us to miss out on many other non-verbal cues. Conducting an institutional ethnography would provide us with a greater understanding.
- b. The study does not include individuals from all the subsections of the LGBTQ community and focuses only on lesbian and gay individuals. Thus, it might be erroneous to generalize the findings to all sexual and gender minorities.
- c. Rather than focusing on one particular sector, the data is collected from participants from different industries, which provides the benefit of looking at this matter from a broader perspective; however, the challenges experienced by sexual minorities vary drastically across organizations and sectors.

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