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## Attitudes towards homosexuality and empathy among college students in Odisha: A gender-based analysis

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### Abstract

Homosexuality is still not widely accepted in the Indian society and is considered a taboo, sin, abnormal behaviour, etc. The present study examined the role of gender on the attitude towards homosexuality and empathy. It also explored the relationship between attitude towards homosexuality and empathy. A survey was conducted, in which 202 students including 89 males and 113 females from different colleges of Odisha had participated. The measures used in this study were Homosexuality Attitude Scale and Toronto Empathy Questionnaire. The results showed that females had a more positive attitude towards homosexuality and had a higher level of empathy than males. The two dependent variables were also found to have a positive and significant correlation.

**Keywords:** Attitude towards homosexuality, empathy and gender

### Introduction

A person's experience or sense of their own gender is called their gender identity. Gender identity is a complex phenomenon and in the case of gender identities some are widely accepted and considered "Normal" while there are others that are treated as abnormal behaviour or "Beyond normative". People with these gender identities are not accepted by all and are dominated by those genders that take the centre of the society. Homosexuality is one such gender identity which according to the dictionary of the American Psychological Association, is defined as "sexual attraction or activity between members of the same sex" [1]. People who are attracted by the same sex have faced discrimination, prejudice, stereotype, stigmatization, violence, abuse, etc., ever since the concept of homosexuality has reached people worldwide. Most of the people prefer not to talk about homosexuality regarding it as a disorder, abnormality, sin, taboo, or psychological problem.

Every individual holds a certain attitude towards everything and everyone around them, the dictionary of the American Psychological Association defines attitudes as "relatively enduring and general evaluation of an object, person, group, issue, or concept on a dimension ranging from negative to positive" [2]. Similarly and undeniably there are various attitudes that people have towards homosexuals and the LGBTQIA+ community as a whole. The attitude towards homosexuality differs from nation to nation, individual to individual belonging to a different religion, cultural, societal and educational background, etc. while, for example, same-sex marriage is permitted in Canada, Belgium, and the Netherlands, homosexuality is illegal and gay marriage is unthinkable in most African nations [3].

Globally, there is still a lot of contention over the acceptableness of homosexuality, the laws governing same-sex relationships, and the penalties imposed for same-sex behaviour. Religious beliefs are frequently considered a significant indicator of views towards homosexuality. In nations like the United States, where there is a strong self-expressive cultural orientation, religious beliefs have a bigger influence on views about homosexuality [3]. In India, the prevalence of homosexuality can be traced back to the ancient Indian text - Kamasutra written by Vatsyayana, which consists of an entire chapter on erotic homosexual behaviour. A broad range of sexual practises are listed in the Arthashastra, in which homosexual relations were not prohibited but also viewed as a comparatively minor offence. [4]. The existence of homosexuality can also be seen in the carvings of the temples all over India, including the Jagannath temple in Puri, the Sun temple in Konark, and the temples of Khajuraho.

Empathy is the ability to put oneself in the position of another individual in order to comprehend their experience. Empathy, as a socially learned behaviour, is important for every individual, male or female, homosexual or heterosexual, adult or an infant. There is evidence that, in general, empathy and/or sympathy are significant correlates of and likely contributors in focusing on other people's pro-social behaviour, the inhibition of aggressive and antisocial behaviour, and the quality of interpersonal interactions [5]. Furthermore, it was found in one of the research that, homosexual males reported significantly lower levels of physical aggression and greater levels of empathy but report similar levels of indirect aggression, and other forms of direct aggression, to heterosexual males [6].

The present study is conducted on the attitude towards homosexuality among the adolescents and adults, in the age group of 18-25 years. This research aims to establish a relationship between the attitude towards homosexuality and empathy in the participant and ascertains the role of gender, on the attitude that an individual has towards homosexuality and empathy.

### Objective

1. To study the role of Gender on Attitude towards homosexuality and empathy in the age group of 18-25 years.
2. To examine the relationship between attitude towards homosexuality and empathy of the participants in the age group of 18-25 years.

### Hypotheses

1. Female participants will have a more positive attitude towards homosexuality than the males.
2. Female participants will have a higher level of empathy as compared to males.
3. There will be a significant and positive relationship between the attitude towards homosexuality and the level of empathy.

### Method of Study

#### Design

This research adopted a cross-sectional study. The independent variable of the study was Gender (male and female). The dependent variables of the study were Attitude towards Homosexuality and the Level of Empathy of subjects in the age group of 18-25 years.

#### Sample

The present study consisted of 202 subjects, including 89 males and 113 females, in the age group of 18-25 years. Random sampling was used to include the participants in the

study. The samples were collected from different educational institutes in Odisha.

### Instruments Used

In the present study, two measures were used to find the Attitude towards Homosexuals and the level of Empathy of the participants.

#### 1. Homosexuality Attitude Scale (Kite & Deaux, 1986) [16]

This scale consisted of 21 items, to which the subjects had to respond on a 5- point scale. A response of 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 indicated that the respondent "strongly agree", "agree", "neutral", "disagree", and "strongly disagree", with the items, respectively. The total score ranged from 0-105. There was reverse scoring for the items 1, 2, 6, 8, 13, 14, 15, 18, 19, 20, and 21. A higher score on the scale indicated a more positive attitude towards homosexuality. The internal consistency of the scale was 0.71.

#### Toronto Empathy Questionnaire (Spreng, et al., 2007) [15]

This scale consisted of 16 items, to which the subjects had to respond on a 5- point scale, as Never (N), Rarely(R), Sometimes(S), Occasionally (O), and Always (A). The participants' responses ranged from 0-4 and the total score ranged from 0-64. There was reverse scoring for the items 2, 4, 7, 10, 11, 12, 14, and 15. The higher score in the scale indicated a higher level of empathy. The internal consistency of the scale was 0.81.

### Procedure

The investigator personally interacted with the participants and the data were collected individually from the subjects. Written Informed consent was obtained before administering the tests. The subjects were informed about the instruments and the rating procedure. The participants were given assurance about the confidentiality of their information and that the information collected will only be used for the research purpose. No time limit was imposed on the respondents. Furthermore, participants were made aware of their rights to withdraw from the research at any given point if they feel uncomfortable.

### Result

An Independent sample t-test was calculated for the statistical analysis by using IBM SPSS 21 version. Mean, standard deviation and t-values were calculated, for both male and female participants, on the attitude towards homosexuality and empathy. Correlation, between the two dependent variables, was performed to establish a relationship between the attitude towards homosexuality and empathy.

**Table 1:** Mean, Standard Deviation, and the t-value of male and female participants for the dependent variables

Variable	Male		Female		T-Value
	M	SD	M	SD	
Attitude Towards Homosexuality	83.77	12.07	91.53	10.93	4.77**
Empathy	44.38	7.18	49.10	7.21	4.62**

\*\* $p < 0.01$ , DF = 200

Result Table 1 revealed that gender has a significant effect on attitudes towards homosexuality ( $T=4.77$ ,  $DF = 202$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) and empathy ( $T=4.62$ ,  $DF = 148$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). It indicated that female subjects have better attitudes towards homosexuality

( $M=91.53$ ,  $SD=10.93$ ) than males ( $M=83.77$ ,  $SD=12.07$ ). Likewise, Mean empathy scores showed that females have higher empathy ( $M=49.10$ ,  $SD=7.21$ ) than their male ( $M=44.38$ ,  $SD=7.18$ ) counterparts.

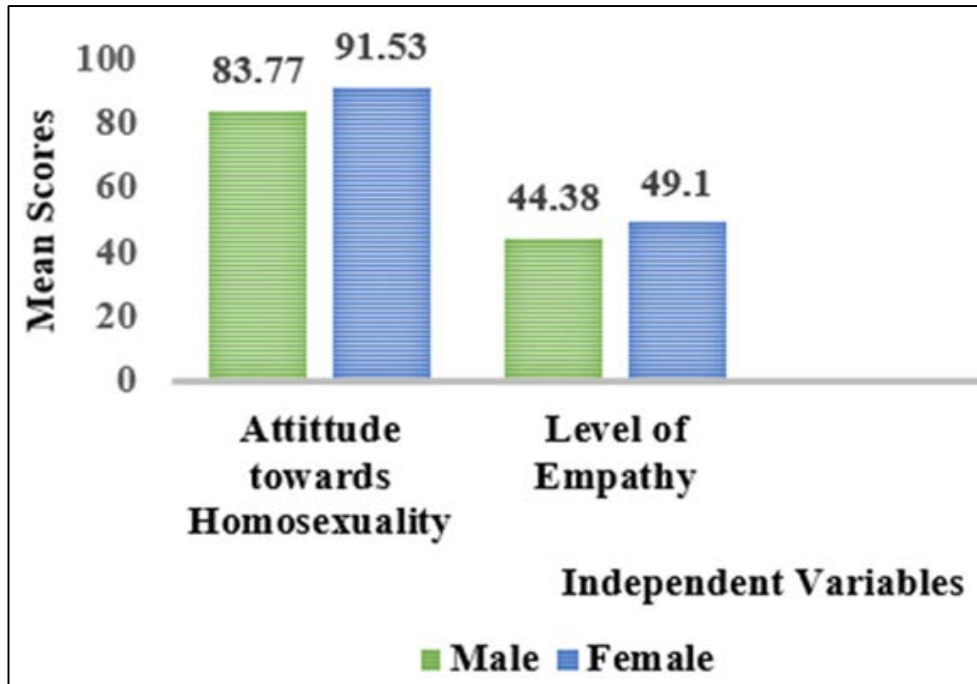


Fig 1: Showing the Mean scores of Attitude towards homosexuality and Empathy of male and female subjects

Table 2: Correlation between the two dependent variables

	Empathy
Attitude Towards Homosexuality	0.503**
Empathy	

\*\* $p < 0.01$

Result Table 2 showed that there was a significant and positive correlation ( $r = 0.503, p < 0.01$ ) between the Attitude towards homosexuals and empathy of the subjects.

**Discussion**

The results revealed both the male and female participants differed significantly in their attitude towards homosexuality. Findings show that females had more positive attitudes towards homosexuality than males which is also supported by other research [7]. The influence of social and cultural norms plays a significant role in this regard. Women are frequently subjected to greater scrutiny and judgment when it comes to their own sexual orientation, which may increase their awareness of the negative repercussions of prejudice and discrimination. A greater level of acceptance and understanding of people who are also the targets of prejudice and discrimination may result from this increased awareness. Moreover, women frequently and actively participate in social justice groups and campaigns for equality, which would explain the reason that they have more favourable opinions on homosexuality. Numerous women have held prominent positions in the struggle for LGBTQIA++ rights, which may have impacted their opinions and attitudes. The findings of the present study was in tune with the findings of Lim & Vivien, 2002 [8]. Hence, the result supports hypothesis 1 which, proposed that females have a more positive, and supportive attitude towards homosexuality than males, is proved and accepted.

Empathy is a multifaceted quality that depends on a wide range of factors such as personality, past experiences, and the social setting. The result of the present study indicated female participants were more empathetic than their male counterparts. The socialization process plays an important

role in developing empathy. Males are frequently pushed to be more outgoing and competitive, whilst girls are frequently urged to be more loving and compassionate. This can result in girls developing a higher level of empathy. Men are usually socialized to repress their feelings and maintain a "tough" appearance, which can make it difficult for them to show empathy or emotionally connect with others. Women, on the other hand, are better able to connect with others on an empathetic level and express their feelings freely. In their families and communities, females are frequently expected to take on extra caregiving responsibilities, such as looking after young children, elderly relatives, or persons with disabilities. Given that caretakers must be able to comprehend and cater to the needs and feelings of others, this may result in a better development of empathy. The findings of the present study corroborate with the findings of other researchers [9, 10]. Hence, the hypothesis 2 which proposed that females have higher empathy than males is proved and accepted.

A positive and significant correlation was found between attitude towards homosexuals and empathy which indicates that people with high levels of empathy had a more positive attitude towards homosexuality. The above finding can be reasoned on the basis of the fact that empathetic people tend to be more open, optimistic and have a better understanding of the feelings of other people. These findings imply that opinions towards homosexuality may be significantly influenced by empathy. People who are more empathetic may be more inclined to respect the opinions and experiences of gay men and lesbians as well as be more supportive towards the LGBTQ+ community's right to equal rights and protections.

People who are more empathetic may also be more open to diversity in general. They could be more tolerant of disparities in sexual orientation as well as in other identifiers including ethnicity, gender, and religion. This tolerance for difference could result in more accepting views about homosexuality. Hypotheses 3 which proposed that there will be a positive and significant relationship between the attitude

towards homosexuality and the level of empathy is therefore proved and accepted.

Attitudes towards homosexuality and LGBTQIA++ as a whole, in the Indian society, is a big issue for many people who have different gender identities other than heterosexuality. Even though there are currently about 2.5 million openly gay people living in India, the vast majority of Indian households still do not accept homosexuals<sup>[11]</sup>. There is also a lack of research in India about the existing issues with homosexuality and how they can be overcome. These issues should be given equal attention and should be brought to the forefront like the other mainstream problems of the society. People should be made more aware of homosexuality and its normality. Society must recognize that societal stigma and subsequent discrimination against persons of same-sex orientation inflict significant suffering<sup>[12-14]</sup>. The legal community should take the lead in advocating for Indian citizens' rights to justice, equality, freedom, and dignity. Instead of criticizing people and creating differences in the society, people should learn to understand the importance of unity and uniqueness. Every individual has the right to live life like they desire, and rather than creating boundaries people should learn to create a place where everyone can feel safe, loved, and heard. People should strive to create a society where they can live freely, openly, and proudly as they are, without feeling embarrassed or trapped.

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