

Sexual Orientation and HIV/AIDS Awareness of Thai Youth in the Cyber-World

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1. Introduction

‘Sexual Orientation’ is a word that might sound unfamiliar and might be hard to comprehend. In the language of Thai, it is still a word which has no definite meaning. The word ‘Sexual Orientation’ can be divided into three compartments. The first is Homosexual or the preference of someone of the same gender, the second is Heterosexual or the preference of someone of the opposite gender, while the third is Bisexual or the preference of both genders. Sexual Orientation depends on personal preferences including emotions, gender preferences, sexual desires, and the need to be with someone.

The reason that the word ‘Sexual Orientation’, especially the words Homosexual and Bisexual, has become a hot topic in Thai culture is because there is a wider network of homosexuals being developed and also an encouragement for the population to better understand that homosexuals can play an integral part into establishing the community and bring benefits into society and their workplaces. Furthermore, there has been more media coverage of events such as transvestite beauty pageants, e.g. the Miss Tiffany competition. The winners of these competitions go on to become famous in show-business and so they are looked at as role models for the Thai younger generation who want to become like them. (Jitrapee, 2002)

The latest situation that has been brought to national attention is the rising trend that more and more homosexual males aged between 14-16 years are getting sex-changing operations to remove their testicles and transform themselves into females. This is due to the belief that sex-changing operations work better while the patient is still young. They believe that they can retain as many female effects to their body as possible. However these operations often require a lot of money as they also require breast implants and also parental consent.

This revelation is very concerning for the health of Thai youths as Thai doctors have proven that these operations can have growth deficiency effects to the bodies of the Thai youths. Thai doctors do guarantee that the effects of a sex-change at that age will lead to the removal of all male hormones or the retention of female qualities while they do however prove that by removing the testicles, over 80% of male growth hormones are produced in the testicles and by removing them, the body may have growth deficiencies. Effects include the incomplete growth of bone which can lead to weaknesses in old age, baldness, and Alzheimer’s disease. (Matichon Daily, 2008)

Other than that there is also the old argument which is regularly brought up, it is the argument of whether homosexuality is a disease or whether it is considered as normal. This question is frequently asked in printed media such as magazines and newspapers and also in the cyber-media. These questions will include “Am I gay?” “Am I abnormal because I like someone of the same sex?” “How do I stop being gay?” “Can homosexuality be cured?” and “Are there any treatments to stop me from being gay and how much will they cost me?” (Teerapap, 2000) This confusion in society leads to many answers from society including answers that explain the

curiosities of homosexuality to society and also answers that explain that heterosexuality and reproduction are the traditional ways of human life.

This paper will focus on the Sexual Orientation of Thai Youths in the Cyber-Age. Currently, in Thai society, youngsters are given independent and unlimited access to the cyber-media including sexual media in cyber-space. The internet is a place where youths can self-educate about sex and so therefore it is considered as a very important factor in sex-education and sexual orientation. If youths have access to sexual information without being taught how to reason, it may lead to them becoming sexually confused and can lead to them duplicating what they see in sexual media and therefore it can lead to unhealthy sexual behaviour.

This paper uses the secondary data from the “Project on the Prevention of HIV Infection in Adolescents through Life Skill Training and Community Counseling Service” conducted by the Institute for Population and Social Research, Mahidol University, collaborates with the Department of Mental Health, Ministry of Public Health in 2004. This research is randomly selecting a total of 411 adolescents of ages 12-24 studying at Grade 9, Occupational Collage year 1-2, and Undergraduate year 1-2 in and around 17 schools, universities and colleges around Bangkok and Central, Lampang province in the North, Khon Kaen province in the Northeast and Nakhon Sri Thammarat province in the South.

The purpose of this paper is to better understand the sexual orientation of Thai youths which can result in appropriate guidelines for the public into understanding sexual orientation which can be used in Thai society and so people who have different sexual orientations can understand each other and live together in harmony.

2. The Cyber-world and Homosexuality

In today’s world, the internet is a highly efficient tool used for communication and education throughout the world. One of the reasons that the internet is used as a vital tool in homosexual media is because in 2001, the Ministry of Culture condemned homosexual media as pornography and so it was banished to the internet as it would have violated the law set by the Ministry of Culture. After that point, homosexual media is widely available on the internet and can be considered as a place to share thoughts and knowledge and experience. It can also be considered as a place for troubled homosexuals to seek refuge from the hardships that they may face. In 2003, the Sapaan group, which is a group that was organized together to bridge the differences of all sexual orientations, gathered together a list of interesting website as follows:

Table 1: A list of Homosexual, Bisexual and Transgender Thai websites and others

Lesbian	Gay	Transgender	Other interesting websites
Bann TomDy	Rainbow Sky Association of Thailand	Thai Lady	AIDS Access Foundation
Ping_Fa_Vi_lan_Da	www.geocities.com	BoYz. net	Teenpath
Saan_Fun	Love is Blue	Miss Lady	Thai Mental
Sapaan	Bangkok Rainbows	Boy	Thai Indy
2002ac	Gboard	Thai DVD	Midnight University

Romanticgals Sao-E-Saan Happy People Tour	Gthai Thailandout AboutG	Prachathai Website Thai NGOs Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Center Foundation For Women Friend of Women Foundation The Women's Health Advocacy Foundation Thai NGO Coalition on AIDS www.Baannok.Com
An_Ja_Ree	AdamSociety Gaypatong www.bangkokpride.org Thai Queer Resources Centre	

Source: The Sapaan group's website: <http://www.sapaan.org/link.html>

There is also a web-board where people can share their emotions, thoughts and emotions on various subjects. The web-board is considered as a very accessible way for homosexuals, bisexuals and transsexuals to discuss their thoughts. It is a very popular way because of the anonymity of participants which also leads to many personal views and emotions being shared online. Currently, there are many columns about sexual orientation and homosexuality which invites people to learn more about different sexual orientations through the experiences of others. This kind of learning experience cannot be obtained inside a classroom.

The cyber-world is a very personal place for youths to browse for their information. Other than providing information, the internet is also a place for people to exchange information and words of advice to each other. Youths may find role models on the internet which are both appropriate and inappropriate. The internet is a good source of information for youths who are still finding out their sexual orientations and it is a place where they can freely communicate with each other.

To summarize, the most important point in this study is how to stop homosexual youths becoming confused with their sexuality and to help them adapt to their orientation. We also have to teach them how to live in harmony with people of different sexual orientations. Also we have to try and make them understand that there are many reasons, physiological and mental reasons, that make people choose different sexual orientations and also that homosexuality is not a disease or sickness. Even though there are many homosexuals who are able to lead normal lives, there are those who do seek to alter their sex through transgender operations. Different environmental factors such as the reactions of friends and family may contribute to this. Therefore, it is necessary to teach them the appropriate information so that they are able to form their own opinions on the subject. They will be able to have their own reasons and therefore will not be severely affected by other people's thoughts.

3. Results

3.1 Sexual Orientation of Thai Youths (Table 2) 91.4% of Thai Youths are heterosexual while only 5.2% are bisexual and 3.4% are homosexual. This is not surprising as in Thai culture, it is expected that most people are to be heterosexuals. That is what is considered as 'normal'. It was found that 5.4% of females are homosexual, 1.5% more than the males (3.9%). Also, 8.4% of females are bisexual which is four times more than males (1.9%).

The results suggest that females are more open about their sexual orientations than males. According to a sexual behaviour survey conducted in 2006, the results suggest that females actually are more open about their sexual orientations than males. (Apichat, et al, 2007). Likewise, the previous survey conducted in 1996, of teenage industrial workers in the Bangkok area, the results showed that 2.0% of females were homosexual while 4.0% were bisexual, 0.9% of males were homosexual while 0.4% were bisexual. (Ford and Sirinan 1996)

From Table 2, it can be concluded that even though the majority of Thai youths are heterosexuals, there are still many homosexuals within each age group. 17-19 year olds have the highest percentage of homosexuals with 4.6%, 12-14 year olds have 3.4% while 15-16 year olds have 3.3% and 20-24 year olds have 2.2%. Regarding bisexuals, 12-14 year olds have 8.4% while 17-19 and 20-24 year olds have a very little percentage of bisexuals. 15-16 year olds have no percentage of bisexuals.

(Insert Table 2)

3.2 Sexual Experience of Thai Youths Thai society in this day and age of cyberspace is steadily evolving into one where youth are sexually independent. Reports, surveys and even the media all reflect the views that Thai youths see sexual experience as a normal part of their lives. However, results from questionnaires say that Thai youths do not like to “kiss and tell” as it were, as there is a very small percentage who openly revealed that they were sexually active. The survey yielded results of three-quarters of the youths interviewed stated that they already had a lover or a partner, however only a quarter of that number revealed that they were sexually active with their partners. (See Table 3)

80.0% of 20-24 year olds have partners while half of that number have admitted that they are sexually active with their partners. There was a trend of a higher percentage of sexual activity the people get older, according to the results of this interview, especially with 15-19 year olds who have a percentage of higher than 80% being sexually active. 10% of 15-16 year olds and 29.9% of 17-19 year olds admit that they are sexually active. The youngest age group, 12-14 year olds, yielded these results. 39.2% have partners without being sexually active, 0.6% have partners and are sexually active and 60.2% have never had partners and are not sexually active.

(Insert Table 3)

3.3 Sexual Orientation and Sexual Experience of Thai Youths The majority of youths who are sexually active are heterosexual (90.4%). Only 6.8% are homosexual and 2.7% are bisexual. 95.8% of people with partners but are sexually inactive are heterosexual. 3.2% are homosexual while 4.8% are bisexual. Of people who have never had partners and are therefore sexually active, 91.2% are heterosexual, 2.0% are homosexual and 6.8% are bisexual.

(Insert Table 4)

It was found that there were no males who were bisexual and were sexually active with their partners, contradictory to females, where 7.8% were bisexual and were sexually active. 13.9% of females were homosexual and were sexually active while only 2.3% of males were homosexual and were sexually active.

(Insert Table 5)

3.4 Sexual Orientation and Social Trends Tables 6 & 7 show that both male and female youths believe that homosexuality of both sexes is not wrong and is not sexually risky. However when asked how they would react if a close friend was revealed to be homosexual, 25.6% answered that they would be able to accept it while 42.2% answered that they would not be able to accept it.

In Thai youth culture, over $\frac{3}{4}$ of people say that homosexuality is not an abnormal thing. However, if it is something that occurs to someone who is very close, almost half of those people would have a hard time accepting it. It was found that females would have a harder time accepting this fact with only 18.5% answering that they would be able to accept it compared to 32.7% of males.

(Insert Tables 6&7)

The results of Table 8 show that 61.4% of people who have partners and 80.7% of people who have never had partners and are sexually inactive agree with the fact that protection against HIV is very important and should be more focused on.

(Insert 8)

The results of Table 9 show almost half of homosexual Thai youths see that male homosexuals are not abnormal and are not at risk of HIV, while around $\frac{1}{4}$ of Thai youths see that female homosexuals are not abnormal and are not at risk of HIV. Also, a small percentage think that it is not abnormal to have a close friend who is homosexual. This contrasts to bisexual Thai youths, where although most of them do see that homosexuals of both sexes are not at risk of HIV, a higher percentage of bisexual youths think that it is not abnormal to have a close friend who is homosexual. For heterosexual Thai youths, 75% think that homosexuals of both sexes are not abnormal. However, there is a higher percentage who think that male homosexuals are more acceptable than females. Around $\frac{1}{4}$ think that it is not abnormal to have a close friend who is homosexual.

(Insert Table 9)

3.5 Sexual Media There are currently many ways for youths to communicate about sex. These include by talking to someone that they know and trust or through the mass media such as printed media, radio and the internet. Table 10 shows the results of Sexual Media and Thai Youths. By Sexual Media we mean sex education, contraception, talking about pre-marital sex and pregnancy, and sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV and AIDS. It was found that around $\frac{1}{3}$ of the subjects preferred to discuss their sexual matters through printed media and radio. It was found that females discussed or looked for advice about this matter more than males. Also, 15-16 year olds discussed this matter more than any other age groups.

The results of Table 11 shows that $\frac{1}{3}$ of bisexuals and $\frac{1}{3}$ of heterosexuals discussed this matter through the media. Only $\frac{1}{4}$ of homosexuals discussed this matter through any form of media.

(Insert Tables 10&11)

The results of Table 12 show the discussion of sexual topics on the media source of the internet. It was found that around 1/3 of Thai youths discussed sexual topics over the internet. It was also found that females would discuss sexual topics more than males, especially through the website of Hi5. One noticeable fact was that there isn't really too much difference between the percentage of 15-16 year olds (48.3%) and 20-24 year olds (50.0%) who discussed on the internet. 1/3 of 17-19 year olds would discuss through the internet while only 1/4 of 12-14 year olds would discuss through the internet.

The results of Table 13 show that 46.2% of homosexuals, 40.0% of bisexuals and 34.6% of heterosexuals think that the internet is the best source of media where youths of all sexual orientations can find educate themselves about sex.

(Insert Tables 12&13)

4. Conclusion

- Not many adolescents in the Cyber-era reveal themselves to be homosexual or bisexual. However, there is an increase as the age increases. Also, females tend to be more revealing than males.
- For sexually experienced people, the perceptions of homosexuality and bisexuality are different. However, preferences of sexual orientations follow the same trends. The majority are heterosexual, while homosexuals are the minority. However, sexually inexperienced people admit that they are open to the concept of bisexuality.
- Thai adolescents prefer to use the internet to find information and to obtain sexual knowledge and advice more than written media, especially for homosexuals and bisexuals, who tend to use the internet for these purposes much more than heterosexuals.

5. Suggestion

- The organizations responsible for education, social life and culture of adolescents must collaborate to formally induce a stronger understanding in sexual orientations on Thai adolescents. They must incorporate this understanding into Junior/Primary school education so that children can understand sexual orientations and the way Thai society operates.
- Homosexual adolescents have been targeted by marketing corporations such as cosmetics, beauty pageants and the entertainment business so much so that organizations and families have to collaborate to help adolescents have a good understanding of the importance of a good and safe lifestyle. Businesses such as cosmetics, beauty pageants and the entertainment business have to consider how their actions as a business is affecting the lifestyles of adolescents and also the ethics and morals of the way they are approaching their target market.
- There must be widespread activities to promote the acceptance of homosexuality also to present homosexuality in a non-discriminating manner.

The media and the internet must also act accordingly. There are those who accept the fact that they are homosexuals, they will enjoy life more and they will enjoy self-acceptance and also the acceptance and admiration of others. However, there are also those who cannot accept the fact that they are homosexual and therefore, they will lose faith and lose respect for themselves. They will suffer psychological diseases such as depression, aggression, physical abuse of themselves and of others.

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Table 2: Percentage of Sexual Orientations of Thai Youths distributed by gender and age

Sexual Orientations	Total	Thai Youths					
		Male	Female	12-14	15-16	17-19	20-24
Homosexual	3.4	1.5	5.4	3.4	3.3	4.6	2.2
Heterosexual	91.4	96.6	86.2	88.2	96.7	92.7	94.5
Bisexual	5.2	1.9	8.4	8.4	0.0	2.8	3.3
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	411	206	205	179*	30	109	91

* missing 2 cases

Table 3: Percentage of Sexual Experience of Thai Youths distributed by Gender and age

Sexual Experience	Total	Thai Youths					
		Male	Female	12 – 14	15 – 16	17 – 19	20 – 24
With a partner and sexually active	17.8	21.4	14.3	0.6	10.0	29.9	40.7
With a partner and sexually inactive	45.7	47.1	44.3	39.2	73.3	52.3	41.8
Never had a partner	36.4	31.6	41.4	60.2	16.7	17.8	17.6
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	409	206	203	181	30	107	91

Table 4: Percentage of Sexual Orientation of Thai Youths distributed by sexual experience

Sexual Orientations	Sexual Experience of Thai Youths		
	With a partner and sexually active	With a partner and sexually inactive	Never had a partner
Homosexual	6.8	3.2	2.0
Heterosexual	90.4	92.0	91.2
Bisexual	2.7	4.8	6.8
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	73	187	149

Table 4: Percentage of Sexual Orientation of Thai Youths distributed by sexual experience of males and females

Sexual Orientations	Total	Male Youths			Total	Female Youths		
		With a partner and sexually active	With a partner and sexually inactive	Never had a partner		With a partner and sexually active	With a partner and sexually inactive	Never had a partner
Homosexual	1.5	2.3	2.1	0.0	5.5	13.9	4.4	3.7
Heterosexual	96.6	97.7	95.8	96.9	86.1	79.3	87.8	86.8
Bisexual	0.0	0.0	2.1	1.0	8.5	7.8	9.8	8.5
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Amount	206	44	97	65	201	29	90	82

Table 6: Percentage of social trends of homosexual behaviour of Thai youths distributed by opinion

Social trends of homosexual behaviour	Opinion			Total (411)
	Agree	Undecided	Disagree	
Female homosexuals are normal	70.5	17.1	12.4	100.0
Female homosexuals are not at risk of HIV	59.3	21.6	18.9	100.0
Male homosexuals are normal	78.3	12.7	9.0	100.0
Male homosexuals are not at risk of HIV	69.0	16.1	14.9	100.0
Having a close friend who is homosexual is not abnormal	25.6	32.2	42.2	100.0

Table 7: Percentage of social trends of homosexual behaviour of Thai youths distributed by gender and age

Social trends of homosexual behaviour	Gender		Age			
	Male	Female	12-14	15-16	17-19	20-24
Female homosexuals are normal	69.3	71.7	76.2	63.3	66.7	65.9
Female homosexuals are not at risk of HIV	59.5	59.0	63.5	53.3	52.8	60.4
Male homosexuals are normal	77.6	79.0	81.2	80.0	74.1	76.9
Male homosexuals are not at risk of HIV	70.2	67.8	68.0	63.3	66.7	75.8
Having a close friend who is homosexual is not abnormal	32.7	18.5	27.6	26.7	19.4	28.6

* Only showing the opinions of people who agree

Table 8: Percentage of social trends of homosexual behaviour of Thai youths distributed by sexual experience

Social trends of homosexual behaviour	Thai Youths		
	With a partner and sexually active	With a partner and sexually inactive	Never had a partner
Female homosexuals are normal	28.6	73.5	42.9
Female homosexuals are not at risk of HIV	28.6	61.4	42.9
Male homosexuals are normal	42.9	80.7	57.1
Male homosexuals are not at risk of HIV	42.9	71.0	47.6
Having a close friend who is homosexual is not abnormal	7.1	27.1	14.3
N	14	373	21

* Only showing the opinions of people who agree

Table 8: Percentage of social trends of homosexual behaviour of Thai youths distributed by sexual orientation

Social trends of homosexual behaviour	Thai Youths		
	Homosexual	Heterosexual	Bisexual
Female homosexuals are normal	28.6	73.5	42.9
Female homosexuals are not at risk of HIV	28.6	61.4	42.9
Male homosexuals are normal	42.9	80.7	57.1
Male homosexuals are not at risk of HIV	42.9	71.0	47.6
Having a close friend who is homosexual is not abnormal	7.1	27.1	14.3
N	14	373	21

* Only showing the opinions of people who agree

Table 10: Percentage of the use of media distributed by gender and age

Printed media/Radio	Total	Gender		Age			
		Male	Female	12-14	15-16	17-19	20-24
Used	37.0	32.7	41.6	31.2	51.7	39.4	41.0
Never used	63.0	67.3	58.4	68.8	48.3	60.6	59.0
Amount	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	389*	199	190	54	15	41	34

* missing 22 cases

Table 11: Percentage of the use of media distributed by sexual orientation

Printed media/Radio	Total	Sexual Orientation		
		Homosexual	Heterosexual	Bisexual
Used	37.2	28.6	37.5	38.9
Never used	62.8	71.4	62.5	61.1
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	387*	14	355	7

*missing 24 cases

Table 12: Percentage of the use of media distributed by gender and age

Printed media/Radio	Total	Gender		Age			
		Male	Female	12-14	15-16	17-19	20-24
Used	34.8	31.2	38.5	24.4	48.3	36.2	50.0
Never used	65.2	68.8	61.5	75.6	51.7	63.8	50.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	394*	199	195	176	29	105	84

*missing 17 cases

Table 13 Percentage of the use of the internet distributed by sexual orientation

Internet	Total	Sexual Orientation		
		Homosexual	Homosexual	Homosexual
Used	34.9	46.2	34.3	40.0
Never used	65.1	53.8	65.7	60.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
N	392*	13	359	20

* missing 19 cases