

Masculinity and Social Boundaries: An Analysis of Stigma and Navigation towards Friendship between Men

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Abstract

This article takes a closer look at gender equality through an issue that is sometimes considered less significant: same-sex friendships (men). Because in a way, friendships between men and men are viewed negatively compared to friendships between women and women. We are also invited to study the factors that cause the presence of stigma in same-sex friendships between men. In these cases, they are often the object of negative stigma labeling when it comes to same-sex attracted relationships. Compared to friendships between women, friendships between men are more problematic. This stigma also has an impact on the LGBT community who often become 'scapegoats' and are often criticized, bringing horror to the welfare of the community. Using participant observation and in-depth interviews, this study explores how heteronormative society views same-sex friendships, as well as the LGBT community's response to the problem as the party attributed to the phenomenon, which then shapes the stigma, as well as new terms such as 'bromance' into the dialogue in this new era. Using Erving Goffman's lens on stigma, this article also reveals the process, influence, and impact of the stigma formed amidst the toxic environment of masculinity and homophobia in Semarang, Central Java.

Keywords: Stigma, Friendship, Gay, LGBT.

1 Introduction

What is the true meaning of 'normal'? Does it actually exist, or is it just a form of fantasy dressed in rules? Somehow It has been implanted in the minds of society that heterosexuality¹ is the natural orientation, especially if the society has conservative normative principles, where sexuality other than heterosexual is considered a deviation. Like how LGBTQ+ has broadened society's perspective on relationships. Some people see this as something to be ashamed of, so they try to navigate themselves to prove to others that they are not part of the LGBTQ+ community. This

¹ Heteronormative is a term used to describe a social system or perspective that assumes that heterosexuality is the 'normal', 'natural' and 'assumed' form of sexual orientation, and rigidly assigns gender roles based on the male-female binary.

affects the stigma among same-sex friendships, especially among men. There are certain expectations in any men or women friendship. However, we found that in men friendships, certain behaviors are carefully performed or avoided - especially in public - to prevent these misunderstandings. Behaviors that are perceived as less reflective of masculinity expectations, often in men friendships, can be misinterpreted. Whereas, in the case of women friendships, the societal view is different, where physical touch with other women is seen as normal, so women friendships are less prone to stigma.

Foucault[1] stated that modern society is perverse, not because it recognizes and tolerates a certain number of perversions, but because it is built around certain mechanisms of power that produce the truth of sex. Through this statement, we are encouraged to alter our way of thinking. There is no doubt that society is capable of doing anything that is out of the norm especially when it comes to relationships, but that is not the reason why society is 'perverse'. Instead, it is perverse because society devotes an excessive amount of time to classify, study, and control it. The system that we live in is shaped by powerful fields — such as law, medicine, education, and psychology — and this system has given society a considerable amount of influence to shape how we understand sex.

A series of inquiries have been raised for further exploration. How does the perception of society particularly affect the expression and behaviour of same sex friendships? What are the impacts on these individuals by cause of societal judgement? Through these questions, we are led to this discourse. A number of interviews were carried out in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of this matter.

This research starts from the presence of close same sex friendship, and somehow forms a different view in friendships between men's and women's. This phenomenon then raises further questions regarding why men friendships shape stigmas that refer to homosexuality (often considered shameful)? Why does a feeling of shame arise when something is associated with LGBT+? How can unwritten rules regarding friendship boundaries become a navigation for someone to remain heteronormative? With these questions, we will examine the diverse relationships of men friendships in Semarang, some of which have interesting dynamics and perspectives on their own same sex friendship, to the point where their friendships are thrown with stigmas about non-hetero sexuality.²

2 Methods

² Nonheterosexual is a sexual orientation or sexual identity other than heterosexual.

Participant observation is the best method to observe this matter, which will then be transcribed into a qualitative composition that discusses this matter thoroughly. Menurut Musante & DeWalt[2] dalam ranah antropologi dan ilmuwan sosial, observasi partisipan merupakan metode di mana seorang pengamat mengambil bagian dalam kegiatan sehari-hari, interaksi, ritual, serta acara suatu kelompok sehingga menjadi salah satu sarana untuk mempelajari kebudayaan kelompok tersebut. This method is often considered appropriate as the author ought to engage directly in the environment where the participant's act of friendship takes place. Through observation, the author is able to notice tone, body language, and other forms of nonverbal communication. Interactions and gestures between same-sex friendship could be observed for the author to receive subtle information. Apart from participant observation, semi-formal in-depth interviews were also carried out. This method allows the author to be flexible with the participant which could result in more detailed data. The participants are also provided the space to express themselves freely and comfortably which could help the author to understand deeper into their perspective and experience as they open up to their stories.

3 Result and Discussion: Friendship Frontiers among Society

During a night out, we went to a crowded spot known as one of the most famous bar in Semarang. We walked to our appointed sofa, while we were enjoying the atmosphere we could not help but notice a group men near us. Among that group was two of men who seemed really close with each other. Their friends were throwing jokes on how close they are and one of them blared "you two stick to each other like balls³." We were astounded by his utterance. However, the two men only laughed as if they did not take it seriously. Our curiosity won us over and we took the urge to talk to them. We asked them what special relationship they have with each other, they responded "We're just friends, but it's not the first time that others would think otherwise." Through this interaction we exchanged social media accounts and became familiar with each other. Before we went home, we all decided to proceed the night by looking for a meal along with our new friends. We carried on our conversation along the way and learned about the experience these two teenage men undergo regarding their close friendship.

We acquire significant insight from them through this. Jack (pseudonym) told us how he started becoming friends with Azis (pseudonym). They first met in college a couple years ago, at first Azis was a private person but as they got closer they started to open up to a certain extent with each other. Jack described his friendship with Azis

³ Men's reproductive organ.

to be healthy or low-maintenance. He told us that they help each other out equally and do not take advantage of one another.

On a separate occasion, we were also given the chance to have a discussion with an acquaintance from our environment. Putra (pseudonym) shared his story on how he met his best friend since elementary school and how their friendship remained to this day. He said they spent their time twenty four hours a day and seven days a week until they got separated at college, but still managed to keep in contact and would visit each other when they had the chance to go back to their hometown. Putra mentioned that oftentimes, he would introduce his friend to other circle of friends, including his college friends, and they would all hang out. He confessed that throughout their friendship there were certain moments where the emotional sense of subtle jealousy was felt by him if his friend left him out on some occasion, though Putra convinced us he would respond to this situation playfully and displayed a dismissive attitude. This circumstance demonstrates their devoted relationship with each other. Their friends would often call them 'gay' for being this close.

3.1 Reinterpret Men Friendship

Friendship between women are undeniably different compared to friendship between men. Women are known to be more emotional and sensitive towards each other. On the contrary, it is considered atypical for men to do the same. Therefore, once men conduct themselves in this manner, people perceive it differently. Foucault[1] declared that the institutional codes, the established social relationships, the obligatory frames of family life and marriage—all these things have always tried to control, limit, or exclude the friendships between men. This statement is not limited to sexual or romantic relationships, it is also focuses on deep friendships, especially between men, that could be meaningful and emotional. Society sets expectations and rules on many aspects, including friendships, which often restrict or discourage men to build a deeper bond emotionally between themselves.

The level of masculinity between men is also one of the factors of judgement. Certain hobbies or habits that are classified as masculine affect people's perspective on men characters. Jack told us that one of the factors that led him to have a close relationship with Azis was because they are one of the few members from their circle of friends that does not smoke. He further stated that due to this, there are certain times where he and Azis were left out by their friends on some occasions to smoke, which actually made them closer. People often have the tendency to assume things easily, and Azis believed that these behaviours that are considered masculine could be one of the ways an individual could navigate themselves in order to prove to society that they are masculine and may not be a subject to the LGBTQ+ community.

“Azis and I are not smokers, so sometimes our friends left us out to smoke, but we don’t actually have a problem with them smoking, so we feel differentiated. It is like there is a form of masculinity that we can’t fulfill. But because of this, we actually grew closer to each other.” (Jack, 21 years old, Undergraduate Student).

Jack's statement shows that masculinity is constructed and negotiated in everyday social relations. In the case of Jack and Azis, the choice not to smoke, which is culturally associated with masculine behavior, places them outside the mainstream of masculinity norms in their circle of friends. This creates a mild form of social exclusion that actually strengthens their relationship. This phenomenon can be read through the lens of hegemonic masculinity proposed by R.W. Connell[3], where there is a hierarchy of masculinity that positions certain forms of masculinity (such as heterosexuality, toughness, or smoking) as dominant and ideal. When someone does not fulfill these attributes, they risk being marginalized or associated with subordinate masculinities, including stereotypes of the LGBTQ+ community. In this context, the emotional closeness between Jack and Azis is at once a form of resistance to hegemonic masculinity norms, while opening up space for alternative forms of masculinity that are more inclusive and relational.

3.2 The Gays and Prejudice

The complexity of human sexuality identity is a matter that raises contradictions, especially when society discovers that there are various sexual identities other than heterosexuality, which has been considered a common sexual attraction. This non-hetero sexuality then triggers several reactions that arise in society. With these reactions, a term called 'homophobia'⁴ was coined, which is often used to describe someone who has negative feelings towards the LGBTQ+ community. The term was first coined by psychologist George Weinberg[4] who described the prejudice of heterosexual people towards homosexuals, which is more common in heterosexual men than heterosexual women. Negative prejudice against the LGBTQ+ community then grows into discrimination that is manifested in both verbal and nonverbal forms. Often people consider something unusual, simply because it is different from what they believe, which is often how heterosexual people view the LGBTQ+ community, especially in conservative heteronormative environments.

A little flashback when we were writing this article in one of the cafes in Semarang, together with other friends. There was a question that we couldn't keep to ourselves so we asked one of our men friends why sometimes things that are associated with the LGBTQ+ community, such as when intense men friendships bring up the stigma that they are a gay couple, become a shameful thing? He disassociated himself from the

⁴ Homophobia is an irrational fear, hatred or prejudice against individuals who identify as lesbian, gay or bisexual. It can manifest in many forms, including negative stereotyping, social rejection, discrimination, and acts of violence against the LGBTQ+ community.

previous activity, paused for a moment then stared out the window, the next moment looking ready to answer.

“I think that things like gayness or homosexuality have been represented as negative from the start, especially if it involves religion, which is something that is most forbidden in religion. I would also feel annoyed if people thought I was gay just because I often play with my men friends, like why judge people but not think about other people's feelings? Especially if it's someone you don't know.” (Aslan, 19 years old, Undergraduate Student).

Aslan's background living in an environment where religion plays a big role, religious beliefs are one of the main factors influencing the notion that things associated with the LGBTQ+ community are shameful. Religion has a huge influence in Indonesian society, including in Semarang City, where the majority of religious believers believe that same-sex attraction is a form of deviation from nature. Therefore, non-heterosexual sexual identities are often not seen as common and tend to be considered deviant. This makes talking about the LGBTQ+ community a sensitive topic in everyday conversations. Within this framework, heteronormative religious views form social constructs that suppress expressions of identity outside of heterosexual norms. Such constructions result in social stigma being attached to individuals or behaviors that deviate from heteronormative norms. In accordance with Goffman's theory of stigma[5], stigma arises when certain attributes are considered deviant from social expectations and result in the discredit of the individual or group. In this context, too-close men friendships are often misconstrued as part of LGBTQ+ identity, and are thus affected by the stigma. The LGBTQ+ community is unfairly scapegoated as the source of social concerns or discomfort that are actually rooted in institutionalized heteronormative constructs.

3.3 “I’m Just Ken”: Hegemonic Masculinity to Navigate Men’s Heteronormativity

The iconic Ken doll in the movie Barbie is an example of how masculinity is portrayed in society, although some scenes are quite exaggerated. 'Macho' behavior is prominently displayed by the Ken's to show that they are patriarchal masculine. Masculinity is often repressed as a natural men trait, so it's understandable that men reflect masculine gestures, dress or behaviors. But if we think about it, masculinity is something that is shaped and performed so that certain genders typically have to appear masculine. But what constitutes masculine? Are there certain standards that must be met for a role to be considered masculine?

It's not surprising to see men's passion for soccer, cars, smoking, casual sex, and aggression. In contrast to men, women are associated with softness, the color pink, and makeup. These two camps of elements support the dichotomy of what these two genders should display in society. In same-sex friendship interactions, kinship applied by women when with their same-sex friends such as holding hands, hugging, or

blowing kisses becomes something that is seen as a type of healthy friendship, fun, strong intimacy. If these gestures or behaviors are applied by men, it becomes less tolerable.

“In same-sex friendships, I see that it's normal for women to cheek kiss on both cheeks, but maybe in men friendships there is a habit of cheek kissing on both cheeks too, but if you do it in public, you're embarrassed and afraid of being thought weird, I think it's been constructed by society anyway. For me, as a masculine man, I don't do certain actions so that I won't be mistaken for a homosexual, I rather act as I like, because if I act as if I'm not mistaken for a homosexual, it will only increase people's suspicion that I'm a homosexual, and I think a masculine man is a man who looks after and loves women, not being a woman” (Putra, 21 years old, Undergraduate Student).

From Putra's statement, who identifies himself as masculine but has been the object of ridicule as a homosexual because of his closeness with men friends, it is clear that masculinity in society is constructed as a natural trait that must be inherent in men. Within this social construction, there is an expectation that men must distance themselves from attributes or behaviors associated with femininity or homosexuality in order to be considered in accordance with heteronormative norms. In Connell's hegemonic masculinity perspective[5], this behavior of maintaining a masculine image is part of a man's strategy to navigate his identity in order to remain in line with the dominant standard of masculinity. Also this is in line with Goffman's stigma theory[5], which explains that individuals who do not conform to social attributes that are considered 'normal' will experience negative labeling and symbolic discrimination. In this context, the emotional closeness between two men becomes a form of deviation from hegemonic masculine norms and triggers the stigma of homosexuality, even though there is no indication of this sexual orientation. Goffman[5] mentions that stigma arises when society discredits a person's identity based on attributes that are considered deviant, and this encourages individuals like Putra to maintain a certain gender performance to avoid this negative label. Thus, Putra's efforts to maintain his masculine image are not only personal, but also a response to social pressures that stigmatize overly intimate men relationships as abnormal.

4 Conclusion

This research reveals that friendships between men are often bounded by social constructs regarding heteronormativity and masculinity. Physical touch, emotional proximity, and the intensity of relationship between men are frequently misunderstood as an indication of homosexuality—a label that is considered a disgrace. This stigma not only restrains the ability for men to express their emotion freely, but it also fabricates the LGBT community as the scapegoat over behaviours

that are truly humane. By using methods such as participant observation and in-depth interviews, this research exhibits how numerous men undergo healthy friendships, yet they are under the impression that they are obligated to navigate themselves in order to not get labeled as out of the ordinary. This shows the existence of 'kinship of shame' that is internalized and inherited socially. The fundamental critic that emerges from this research includes: should being a part of LGBT be made as a laughing stock? Does intimacy between men should automatically be viewed in a sexual framework? These questions challenge society to reflect back on the values and limits that have shaped the perspective towards gender, sexual orientations, and relationships between humans. It is time for us to unlock a more inclusive space, where emotional intimacy does not have to be limited by fear towards stigma.

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