



“THE FUTURE OF SUPPORT” FOCUS GROUP REPORT 2017

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents the findings of a focus group exercise that was conducted as part of a broader project to understand the needs of LGBT youths. We ran a survey conducted on the internet, using snowballing sampling through as many networks and channels we could get. We then ran focus groups to get a closer look at the findings from the survey, discovering that gender was increasingly more a concern for LGBT youths, than non-normative sexuality. The focus group was loosely structured, with four main topics for participants to discuss, namely, “Gender & Sexuality”, “Queer Spaces”, “Community Involvement”, and “Mental Health”. results/conclusions.

INTRODUCTION

Young Out Here (YOH) is an LGBT youth community group, and for the past decade has been running 6-month long support group programmes for young LGBT persons. Over the years, YOH members have witnessed generational changes in mindsets, thoughts and dreams accelerated by the advent of social media. Starting in 2016, we embarked on a mission to survey the youths of today, to find out who they are, what do they need, and how we can improve our support for this sector of the community.

From November to December 2016, we put out an open questionnaire to collect responses from LGBT youths—the more responses, the better. This questionnaire would give us an overview of LGBT youths today, notwithstanding the limitations of this collection method, which will guide us for subsequent, more qualitative surveying processes. Following from that, we conducted a focus group project, guided by the findings from the initial survey, to better understand our respondents, and how we can address key concern areas.

This report is best read accompanied with the attached results of the broad questionnaire. Here, we briefly explain the survey method, and summarise the results of the focus group discussions, while highlighting key trends or sticking points with the participants. After that, we will present some general interpretations of what this means for the LGBT community, and finally, make some preliminary recommendations on what actions we, YOH, and the broader LGBT community, can take.

Disclaimer: We note that the results contained herein are only the opinions of the focus group participants and the conscientious yet untrained, analysis of the authors. Whilst the opinions expressed represent a selection of viewpoints, we acknowledge that they are not fully representative of all possible perspectives. It is important to be aware of this limitation as you read this report. We would also like to reiterate that we are not professional academics but are part of a volunteer organization passionate about championing the causes of queer youth in Singapore. Nevertheless, we hope that this study would provide some insight (however incomplete) into the Singaporean queer youth perspective today.



METHODOLOGY

This study involves the conducting of focus group sessions, with a planned duration of 2 hours each. As our objective was to capture as much as we could of participants' views, complications and all, each group was allowed extensions of their discussion beyond the planned duration, upon request. The entirety of the discussions was audio-recorded with the written consent of participants.

Effort was made to select as large a sample of participants from a variety of backgrounds and gender/sexual identities through snowball sampling. However, we were unable to find many participants, and encountered problems resolving scheduling conflicts. While this limits the extent to which we can claim our findings to be representative, we hope this will be the starting point for stakeholders to engage more closely with our youths.

In total, we recruited 7 LGBT youths as participants, who each participated in one of two group discussions. Each group discussion was broadly guided by four themes of three questions each, and otherwise open in format, to allow discussions to evolve as directed by their participants. The themes are "Gender & Sexuality", "Queer Spaces", "Community Involvement", and "Mental Health". These themes were identified as salient points with LGBT youth, following from the questionnaire responses.

The table below shows the composition of each group session, identifying each participant's age, gender, sexual identity, and economic status.

Participant #	Age	Gender Identity	Sexual Identity	Economic Status
Focus Group Session 1				
1	18	Cis-female	Lesbian	Undergraduate
2	18	Cis-female	Bisexual	Polytechnic student
3	20	Trans-female	Asexual	National Service
4	20	Cis-male	Pansexual	Undergraduate
Focus Group Session 2				
5	26	Cis-male	Gay	Working
6	19	Cis-male	Gay	National Service
7	23	Cis-female	Lesbian	Undergraduate



FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

The focus group sessions were conducted with a series of questions, which were derived from an analysis of the questionnaire results. The questionnaire consisted of a general demographic section, followed by questions based off concerns that had long filled the lists of discussion topics in YOH's regular support group programmes. Chiefly, the questionnaire attempted to uncover the extent to which each of the various issues that were ever--even fleetingly--discussed during support group sessions, have changed for youths.

Condensed, there are four broad key youth concerns tackled by the support group programme: gender and sexuality identities, queer spaces, mental health, and community involvement.

Ideas and experiences of gender and sexuality, and how they influence participants' identities, have always been a big part of YOH's programming. Typically, our programmes began with foundational sessions on the self and identifies, which teenagers grapple with most in this stage of their lives. For most of our history, sexuality, or more specifically, the homosexual attraction, its attendant influence on one's identities and social awareness, have dominated participants' interest and discussions.

In the last couple of years, however, support group facilitators have noted that former concerns of what it means to be gay and lesbian, or a man or a woman, and finding personal acceptance, no longer appear as contingent. Participants for example, no longer struggle as much with coming out (or not). They also seem less concerned with perceptions of one's lack of masculinity if one enjoyed anal penetration during sex, in another case. We had also accepted a trans¹ applicant to be a participant for the first time, and found our facilitators ill-equipped to facilitate dialogue and discussion for the setting to remain comfortable for the participant--a first for us.

This was the impetus for us to find out the needs of today's youths--those who could have been participants in the last couple of YOH programme runs and in future ones--as compared to those of earlier programme runs. On top of gender and sexuality, and understandings of the LGBT community, we had sought to find out what youths think of queer spaces, and if there's a need for it. One of YOH's stated aims is to provide a queer-friendly, secular, and sex-free safe space for participants, so it would be helpful to know what sort of queer space is needed these days, if at all. Finally, mental health remains an area of concern, partly through our experience with the support group programmes, and partly from the results of the NLSC² of 2013, which found LGBT persons to be of exceptionally higher risk of mental health issues than the general population.

¹ We use "trans" or "transgender" as an umbrella term to refer to persons whose "gender identity and/or gender expression differs from what is typically associated with the sex they were assigned at birth" GLAAD Media Reference Guide, <https://www.glaad.org/reference/transgender>

² "The national LGBT Census 2013 in Singapore" https://miceapps.com/client/EventAttendeeAbstracts/iframe_view_published_abstract/142/468/4463

A. GENDER & SEXUALITY

We were surprised to discover that a large percentage (approximately 30%) of respondents identified as non-cisgender. This was a high figure in comparison to the oft used 5-10%³ as a gauge of the proportion of homosexuals in a general population. There is also gaining prominence of gender issues being brought to the forefront through the debates on 'bathroom bills'⁴ in the United States (U.S.) and increased representation of trans, or non-cisgender characters in popular television⁵. Hence it would be enlightening to explore this topic further given the increased spotlight on the trans-community.

With regards to sexuality, contrasting findings also emerged whereby 79.9% of respondents were comfortable with their sexual orientation yet many still feel that sexuality has either strongly inconvenienced them (37.6%) or they find it difficult to talk to someone regarding sexuality (38.7%). Also, 62.1% of respondents have encountered some form of discrimination on the account of their sexual orientation. These results suggest that despite increased self-awareness and personal acceptance with regards to sexuality, social pressures are still creating an 'unsafe environment' for queer youths. Thus although there is progress in terms of the basic foundation of self-acceptance, we wanted to find out what specific externalities of this generation are still causing sexuality to remain a big issue for youths.

Questions:

1. From our survey results, we found that approximately 30% of respondents identify as non-cisgender. With the proliferation of new labels for gender identity, what are your thoughts about this?
2. In your opinion, would you say that sexual orientation is less of an issue now than compared to the past? Why/Why not?
3. There is a noticeable trend whereby greater emphasis is placed on gender issues and identity versus sexual orientation. Why do you think that there is this topical shift towards gender?

³ Based on the Alfred Kinsey studies: *Sexual Behavior in the Human Male* (1948) and *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female* (1953). More recent research by Gary Gates, a former research director at UCLA's Williams Institute, and organizations such as Gallup's daily survey of 1,000 Americans, also suggest that about 5% of the population identifies as LGBT. Note that the statistics quoted are based on the U. S. population due to the lack of similar data in the Asian/local context.

⁴ A bathroom bill is the common name for legislation or a statute that defines access to public facilities – specifically restrooms – by transgender individuals allowing them to use the public facilities corresponding to their gender identity. The purpose was to protect such individuals from discrimination and make public restrooms safer for them. These bills have been debated and eventually passed or rejected in a number of U.S. States such as California, Florida, Kentucky and also in Canada. Source: Wikipedia

⁵ Of the 278 regular and recurring LGBT characters on broadcast, cable, and streaming programs in the U.S., 16 (6%) are transgender. This is a significant increase from 7 characters from last year according to GLAAD's annual report on LGBT inclusion report for season 2016-2017. Source: http://glaad.org/files/WWAT/WWAT_GLAAD_2016-2017.pdf

B. QUEER SPACES

In the survey results, there was a clear contrast between the perceived sufficiency of physical spaces versus online spaces. For instance, 84.5% of youths feel that existing physical spaces were insufficient whereas only 28.4% of youths felt the same way for online spaces, suggesting a greater lack of physical spaces. Querying the perceived access to these two types of spaces also resulted in similar disparity, with online spaces registering a higher 56.9% perception of accessibility versus 10.0% for physical spaces.

Given the importance of queer spaces (online or physical) as a key outlet for self-expression, it was crucial to find out how youths these days were utilizing the online spaces and what improvements they hope to see for physical spaces. Answering these questions would enable community groups to better cater their programs to meeting these needs.

Questions:

1. YOH runs a support group for queer youths in a safe and secular space. This is an example of a safe space for queer youths. What is your ideal safe space like?
2. From our survey, 84.5% feel that there are insufficient physical spaces. What kind of physical spaces would you like to see in Singapore?
3. From our survey, half of respondents feel that online spaces are sufficient and accessible. What do you use these online spaces for?

C. COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

One of the objectives of this survey was to find out the type of events that would appeal to queer youths. To our knowledge, there is no survey done so far to understand the needs/wants of the queer youths in respect to community events, which are largely conceptualized from the organisers' vision of 'what would be appealing'. Hence survey questions were crafted to probe participants' preference towards different characteristics of an event e.g. the preferred type of activity (social, political, dating-focused), target demographics and personal preferences towards commitment, time and volunteering involvement.

As it turns out, events with dating themes was the worst received and only preferred by 31.0% of participants. The most 'popular' type of events were those that advance LGBT acceptance with 88.9% of participants preferring to go for such events. These results were surprising compared to anecdotal observations. Queer events are 1 of the few outlets to meet potential partners in a physical setting and thus accordingly, dating-focused events were expected be popular (although the authors are also aware that individual pride and the desire to not portray oneself as 'romantically desperate' to attend such events might be at play here, even in an anonymous survey).

On the other hand, it is difficult to sustain volunteers in LGBT organizations despite this high interest in activism-related events. One explanation is that today's youths are interested, but the keenness to contribute only falls short of their personal appetite for commitment as 76.4% of participants prefer one-off events with a low level of commitment. By structuring focus group questions in this area, further ideas in terms of motivation and youth engagement can be obtained.

Questions:

1. Our survey results indicate that about 80% of people would be interested to participate in events with a social-political focus. However, such events (e.g. Pink Dot⁶) requires many volunteers and volunteering is hard work. Do you feel that you will have the time or the energy to contribute to an event of this nature?
2. Given that volunteering is hard, and that there is a high demand for events that are social-political in nature, how do you suggest we can entice more people to volunteer?
3. One of the main reason why people attend queer events is to find a romantic partner. Do you agree?

D. MENTAL HEALTH

The survey results appear to indicate that we are facing a crisis of mental health with 71.1% of participants facing mental health issues. In the open-ended responses received, anxiety, depression, gender dysphoria and mood swings were the most prevalent issues, although not exclusively triggered by gender or sexuality issues. Besides the existing resources available, it would be helpful to find out what resources are currently lacking, how the youths perceive their future here and how they think they can contribute to improving it.

Questions:

1. More than 70% of respondents indicated that they've faced mental health issues. Anecdotally, we find that more physical spaces for queer youths can have a positive impact on mental health. Apart from this, what else do you think can be done to improve mental wellbeing?
2. What do you think is the value of having mix-gendered space for queer youths?
3. Queer issues have been gaining visibility and coverage on mainstream media lately. However, it seems that there is a decline in physical spaces for queer people to interact, particularly with the closure of prominent nightclub "Play"⁷ amongst others. In tandem, we have a surge of online queer spaces. On the political front, 377a⁸ remains despite various legal and political challenges. Considering this current situation for the queer community, what do you feel is your future here in Singapore as a queer person? To what extent do you think you can contribute to better the lives of everyone in the queer community?

⁶ Pink Dot SG is an annual, non-profit, free-for-all event which started in 2009, in support of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) community in Singapore. Attendees of Pink Dot events gather to form a 'pink dot' to show support for inclusiveness, diversity and the freedom to love. Source: Wikipedia

⁷ After 5 years of operation, dedicated gay nightclub Play closed in 2014. It used to host a diverse range of parties that catered to both the gay and lesbian population, and was one of the largest venues for queer nightlife in Singapore. Source: <http://popspoken.com/out-about/2014/02/3-gay-parties-in-singapore-now-that-play-is-closed>

⁸ Section 377A of the Penal Code of Singapore is the main remaining piece of legislation which criminalises sex between mutually consenting adult men. It originated from British laws as a result of colonialism in South-East Asia and is present in several Penal Codes in the region. England & Wales, the former British colony of Hong Kong, and Australia have since repealed laws prohibiting sex between men in 1967, 1991 and 1997 (in the state of Tasmania, the last Australian state to do so) respectively. Elsewhere in East and South-east Asia, Singapore, Myanmar, Malaysia and Brunei, all former British colonies, and recently Indonesia's Aceh province (applicable only to Muslims), continue to criminalise sex between men. Source: Wikipedia

RESULTS

In this section, we summarize the various discussion points raised for each question posed. At the end, we will also relate our opinion of what this means for the larger community, including suggestions for strategies or courses of action that community groups may consider.

A. GENDER & SEXUALITY

Gender is an increasingly important topic for youths and we noticed a new chasm that seems to be growing between the older generation who view gender with significantly less interest and the younger millennials for whom gender is as important a part of self-exploration and identity as sexuality. To better understand this development, we asked the following questions:

Question 1: From our survey results, we found that approximately 30% of respondents identify as non-cisgender. With the proliferation of new labels for gender identity, what are your thoughts about this?

As a whole, participants have a diverse view on gender, straddling traditional interpretations as well as being more than just a product of biology.

“People are coupling gender less and less with sex.” (trans-female, asexual, age 20)

“Gender to me means either male or female.” (cis-male, gay, age 19)

“Identity is something you assume for yourself, it is not a given.” (cis-male, gay, age 26)

“Sex is what you are made up of, gender is what you identify with. That’s why you have male/female and all the in-betweens that you identify with.” (cis-female, lesbian, age 23)

Based on anecdotal observations, the question of gender identity has long been associated exclusively with the transgender community. But beyond gender dysphoria, another reason was suggested by the participants for the recent proliferation of newer gender identities. Youth nowadays don’t want to be limited by the restrictive stereotypes of typical cis-gender labels, such as the traditional expectations of what masculinity and femininity means, hence deciding on a new identity for themselves.

“They wouldn’t want to fall under the stereotypes that people usually give to males and females, so like if people were to say you are male, so there are certain things that you must be... They don’t want to have people tell them what to do” (cis-male, gay, age 26)

“There is a lot more complications to that, while I’m not comfortable labeling myself as non-cisgender, I’m not comfortably labelling myself cleanly as cisgender...having something more than the binary⁹ is useful” (cis-female, lesbian, age 18)

⁹ The gender binary, also referred to as gender binarism (sometimes shortened to just binarism) is the classification of sex and gender into two distinct, opposite and disconnected forms of masculine and feminine. Source: Wikipedia

“Rare for a person to fit completely into the mold [of traditional gender roles]” (trans-female, asexual, age 20)

Drawing upon the participants’ responses, it appeared that this pressurising social expectation to conform to mainstream definitions can sometimes leads to an accumulation of negative feelings, becoming a sort of emotional burden. Over time, this would give them the impetus to get rid of this burden by claiming a new gender identity that better represents themselves (neither linearly masculine or feminine). Hence newer gender identities could have formed due to cultural catalysts than stem from a physiological imperative.

In general, mixed feedback was received towards these new labels. Most agree that the newer gender identities probably existed subconsciously ages ago but are only showing prominence now. They also recognize that labels beyond the binary (e.g. male/female, gay/straight, cis/non-cis) contribute positively to having a more nuanced representation of our diverse community.

“Back then, non-binary wasn’t a thing in most of our vocabularies” (cis-female, lesbian, age 18)

“Back say a 100 years ago, there won’t be any transgender issues around because people won’t even talk about it...people are becoming more open to the idea of feeling both a little bit male or a little bit female or either” (cis-female, lesbian, age 23)

“[My friends] know the existence of people like that, but they can’t fully say what that person identifies themselves. They can only identify the more prominent ones, like gay, lesbian, transgender. I think that’s the basic they can tell.” (cis-male, gay, age 26)

“You don’t have to fit in a box” (cis-male, pansexual, age 20)

“Seeing more representation is always good, because you have more stories to relate to.” (trans-female, asexual, age 20)

However, they also raised a few issues that are problematic with having a wider spectrum of gender labels:

1. The increased spotlight on gender identities do not correspondingly lead to increased resources or acknowledgement of non-cisgender people. For instance, typical job applications and other form-filling requirements in the Singapore context still falls strictly under the male/female binary. The same goes for legal implications which only recognizes the binary personhood.

“In terms of laws it’s going to be difficult, it’s easier with male and female [distinctions].” (cis-male, gay, age 26)

2. Despite more labels, the community also faces a lack of representation for each of these individual labels. For instance, if one identifies as ‘pangender’¹⁰, they may not encounter many others who similarly identify as ‘pangender’. Thus such niche identities may result in more youths feeling excluded rather than included as their particular peer group is less common and it is difficult to find connection from other groups.

¹⁰ Pangender is a non-binary gender defined as being more than one gender. A pangender person may consider themselves a member of all genders. Source: Wikipedia

This is also exacerbated by the human instinct to focus concern primarily on one's own identity group (e.g. People of cis-gender may not care as much for the transgender community as they belong to a separate peer group). Since the cis-gender demographic is the largest, it is possible that the majority of the community might tend to be apathetic towards these new identities.

"I think people just categorise because they are confused...even if you identify as non-binary, people still don't understand, and if you don't identify like anything, is it even harder to explain especially now with society... if I don't understand you, you're not a person that's very clear so I don't want to talk to you. That sort of mindset." (cis-female, bisexual, 18 years old)

"The problem is with people who aren't in the community and think the [gender] spectrum thing is bullshit" (cis-female, bisexual, 18 years old)

"If you bring it [gender identity issues amongst cis-gender friends] up, it gets kind of weird." (cis-female, lesbian, age 23)

3. From their responses, there might also be a pushback against having a wider spectrum of identities due to the confusion stemming from (a) the need for the gender binary as a benchmark, (b) commodification of the labels and (c) the lack of consensus about the definitions of each label. Lastly, the issue of political correctness also accompanies these problems.

a) Inherent dependence on the gender binary

It seems that the deconstruction of the binary is still reliant on the binary as a benchmark as a necessary marker for distinction. Also, the purpose of creating new identities (or the rejection of old ones) also misses the point when it no longer becomes meaningful as a tool of differentiation.

"The mold is getting more and more broad... People are trying to go outside of this mold... then male and female starts to lose its significance, and so your association to cis gender, transgender and non-binary [labels] also starts to lose its significance." (trans-female, asexual, age 20)

"It is quite problematic if we go just into this no-label territory because there will always be labels... we are at the point of redefinition of binaries so boys can wear dresses, boys can do this... but there's also been backlash, when you redefine these stuff [the binary]. Once you have redefinition of the 2 binaries, why is there still a need to identify as non-binary or non-cisgender... It makes distinguishing who is a marginalized person and who isn't difficult." (cis-female, bisexual, age 18)

b) Commodification and exploitation of labels

To illustrate this point, some participants pointed out interesting developments in social media relating to these new labels, that are neither positive nor helpful to the general queer community. For instance, certain social media personalities have hijacked identities outside cisgender norms to appear cool but yet don't personify what the label represents (as much as can be agreed upon). One example is the 'coming out' fad on Youtube whereby influential Youtubers enact physically coming out of rooms/closets but not actually representing the cathartic act of coming out for a queer person, despite using the associated term of 'coming out' in their videos. Thus we see a commodification of gender

labels where social media personas put on a false façade for the sake of popularity whilst still maintaining ‘passing privilege’¹¹. In what appears to be a co-opting of queer spaces by otherwise cis-gender heterosexual-presenting persons, it leads to the loss of the essential ‘queerness’ of our spaces. On top of that, calling out someone for ‘pretending’ to be genderqueer risks backlash for insensitivity, compounding the problems associated with protecting what appears to be the progressively diminishing queer qualities of queer spaces. Since labels are increasingly not uniformly definitive and identifiable, or no longer have a shared meaning amongst individuals of various communities, the usefulness of having a label is greatly diminished.

“Straight people use it as click-bait, which is like really awful.” (cis-female, lesbian, age 18)

“A lot of people who identify beyond LGBT... I don’t know how I feel about that but sometimes that’s because straight people want to fit into our labels to look cool... people get quite sensitive if everybody starts saying that ‘oh, I identify as a queer person but actually all my actions and whatever I do’ and internally that person identifies as cis-gender just like any other straight person but somehow they want to represent to other people that they are part of the LGBTQ+, so that’s what gets people very irritated and sensitive about because for us it is a real thing.” (cis-female, lesbian, age 23)

c) Lack of consensus on the list and definition of labels

The traditional queer community also rejects these labels because of the lack of familiarity and clear definitions. This can lead to situations when uncommon labels / groups are incorrectly addressed or are misrepresented. YOH ourselves encountered this during the quantitative survey process. In the form requesting for the respondent’s gender identity, our initial selection was only limited to three choices: male, female and transgender. This was called out by a participant as being discriminatory and excluding other gender categories. We remedied this oversight by increasing up to 7 categories plus an open-ended form. However, even such attempts to cover and list all possible identity groups may not always be feasible as there is still a high possibility that some might be left out. A stop gap solution suggested by a focus group participant was to create an umbrella term of “Others” to be more inclusive. However, at YOH we felt that doing so would present new challenges in encouraging diversity in a meaningful way. For example, YOH has always had an equal-gender-split policy (assuming binary gender), as part of efforts to improve community support for girls and women. Though it may be restrictive to insist on a shared understanding of what each gender category refers to, this is a necessary condition for us to identify exactly which group of youths need special attention. In the case of the survey, using an “Others” category would have significantly increased the complexity of analysing the data, and perhaps even to an extent that would have made the data non-meaningful, where aggregation and analysis is concerned.

¹¹ Passing privilege is the ability of a person to be regarded as a member of the (in this case) mainstream heterosexual class, which is different from their own. Other instances of passing privilege can also apply to racial identity, ethnicity, caste, social class, gender, religion, age and/or disability status. Source: Wikipedia

“Situation where I was with my friends, and there was someone identified as pansexual...at that time we were not knowledgeable enough to know what is pansexual.” (cis-male, gay, age 26)

“I feel that we are diversifying too much into all these labels that it becomes too confusing.” (cis-female, lesbian, age 23)

“The non-binary used to be more of an ‘Others’ category e.g. I am genderqueer, I am agender. So I still feel that there needs to be an Others category rather than create many little boxes for what you can think about.” (cis-male, pansexual, age 20)

Question 2: In your opinion, would you say that sexual orientation is less of an issue now than compared to the past? Why/Why not?

Question 3: There is a noticeable trend whereby greater emphasis is placed on gender issues and identity versus sexual orientation. Why do you think that there is this topical shift towards gender?

The shift in focus from sexuality to gender identities is due to greater representation in social media, leading to more awareness of these issues which were largely unspoken of a decade ago. With homosexuality increasingly being portrayed positively in media, the participants get the sense that sexual orientation is less of a controversial issue as opposed to gender issues, which are relatively novel and perhaps more unconventional, as homosexuality of itself is slowly being accepted into the mainstream. However, participants caution that the issues surrounding sexuality are no less important nor diminished.

“We are more open to accepting of people of different cultures, different orientations, slowly opening but keeping the traditional value. Western media obviously has a huge influence on how Singaporeans behave, slowly introducing people like us. Pop culture influences us as well. ...when more people come out, it’s not so much of a threat rather than I come out alone... Even though society is more open, you don’t know when it will backfire.” (cis-male, gay, age 26)

“It still is an issue; a lot of people are still lost in the dark.” (trans-female, asexual, age 20)

Based on the responses and our interactions with the community, the prevalent issues that youths in Singapore face these days are not as blatant as physical violence from homophobia, but more insidious and subtle in nature. For instance:

1. The unspoken racism within our own community, the prejudice and stereotypes against bisexuals and the intersectionality of labels (e.g. Chinese queer vs minority queer, social economic hierarchies). Some of these issues carry negative connotations that are hard to eradicate.

“Bisexual people get more of that judgement because I feel like girls won’t like me as I see boys and the boys won’t like me as I see girls.” (cis-female, bisexual, 18 years old)

“There is more on our plates as compared to the past, because in the past it’s more about just getting sexual orientation to the forefront... There is more intersectionality, people are starting to talk more not just about sexuality but also about gender, people are talking about race, people are talking about how these things are interlinked” (cis-male, pansexual, age 20)

2. Subtle homophobia – The ‘normalisation’ of homosexuality has become a double-edged sword as it becomes less politically correct to be outwardly homophobic. People may portray an appearance of tolerance while harboring homophobic mindsets, making it hard to identify true allies and determine who is safe / who is not. Sometimes, subtle homophobia can come in the form of caricature or mockery by heterosexuals who are ignorant of its hurtful impact. As a result, the participants feel that they have to navigate a social environment that is less clear-cut and potentially harder to trust.

“Some people say they are accepting but inside they are not, so it is conflicting.” (cis-female, lesbian, age 23)

*“I don’t like when straight guys act gay, like they are mocking us... Make it as a joke”
“they think it’s okay” (cis-male, gay, age 19)*



B. QUEER SPACES

To better serve the needs of youths, we wanted to find out the adequacy of existing safe spaces and what youths would like to see in the future.

Question 1: YOH runs a support group for queer youths in a safe and secular space. This is an example of a safe space for queer youths. What is your ideal safe space like?

For cis-gender heterosexuals, everywhere is a safe space and is a given in their lives. From heterosexual romantic movies to the institution of marriage, most spaces are de facto heteronormative so there is not even the question of need. However, for queer youths having to navigate through a heteronormative world, safe spaces are crucial for connection and self-expression without judgement. Due to the allegedly 'subversive nature' of such safe spaces in mainstream society, they can be hard to find. This scarcity is reflected in the initial difficulty by participants in comprehending the concept of a safe space. It was simply something that did not cross their mind, especially the possibility that such a place could exist for them. Participants tended to define their safe space as a place where they can be themselves, with like-minded people. It need not be a physical space.

"I didn't know what a safe space is supposed to mean, supposed to feel like...I never went looking for one, because I assumed there would be none" (cis-female, lesbian, age 18)

"I never really thought of where I would find to be safe...the LGBTQ+ topic does not really come up often for me in my life...sometimes I see events but I'm like whatever, like I'm not going to walk into a bar...I find it hard to find places to talk about these [topics]...this [focus group session] is the first time I am together with the people of the community" (cis-female, bisexual, age 18)

"It's a place where you can bounce ideas off people who can understand you, accept you." (trans-female, asexual, age 20)

"A safe space need not be a physical thing... it can be anywhere, it's more a gathering of people who understand what's going on... it need not only include gay people, it can also be allies." (cis-male, gay, age 26)

"The most important is you should feel that you can voice out your thoughts without being judged or mocked for it." (cis-female, lesbian, age 23)



Question 2: From our survey, 84.5% feel that there are insufficient physical spaces. What kind of physical spaces would you like to see in Singapore?

In general, participants felt that there are insufficient physical spaces for the whole community, and thought it worse for certain groups such as those underage (i.e. lack of alcohol-free places) and a few find the existing places intimidating.

“All these places are alcoholic, for 18+” (cis-male, pansexual, age 20)

“We do have [physical spaces] but not as many and not as well known. We need more underage spaces for queer youths because all these alcohol-dominated spaces, and people dealing with alcoholism, it might not be the best place... You might want a more innocent interaction,” (cis-female, lesbian, age 18)

“A lot of spaces, if you are single, it is intimidating, like if you don’t have a partner and turn up alone. Or a lot of events have a lot of people like Pink Dot. If you go alone, it’s very intimidating... A lot of the events have no continuity, no connection. A bit superficial, you just turn up and there is no actual friendship. I don’t want to go alone cos I am single. Need to wear pink ah, very troublesome. No time.” (cis-female, lesbian, age 23)

The participants hoped to see more of spaces are (1) confidential and private; and (2) holistic, continuous and sustainable (i.e. a regular, dedicated safe space). However, participants also question the efficacy of providing such spaces superficially and temporarily, due to limits to the types of activities that could be held, and the contrived nature and superficiality of social events.

“So long as there is adequate confidentiality...confidentiality is the biggest issue for young ones.” (cis-female, lesbian, age 18)

“After the event there is no continuity... there is no connection. A bit superficial, you just turn up there is no actual friendship... I think we should have some spaces where we can feel like, oh, totally okay to go alone and then after that there is some continuity.” (cis-female, lesbian, age 23)

“If ... activists provide spaces; would people actually go? That’s the issue that we need to consider. I mean there is no point on having more spaces if nobody goes to them. what else can we offer with the space, other than counselling, other than meeting new people, is there anything else that we can actually do there.

The concern is that people don’t connect with each other... even though you have spaces where people can meet but they don’t connect with each other on a more personal level... what happens after that we don’t know. Do they become friends after that? Do they keep in touch? In my experience, they don’t keep in touch with each other unless there is physical attraction.. the circle is superficial... it is a realistic thing to say that people are connected by physical attraction. Maybe if people go to this place and find that the people there are not my type, they wouldn’t go for that kind of [event]” (cis-male, gay, age 26)

Question 3: From our survey, 49% of respondents feel that online spaces are sufficient and 56% feel that it is accessible. What do you use these online spaces for?

Living in the internet age and constrained by the lack of physical spaces, many youths also turn to the flourishing realm of mobile apps for their queer spaces which provide safe exploration through anonymity, and are outlets for crucial information, entertainment and dating.

“Knowledge and networking...making friends...getting advice from people who would understand...Talking to people who get it...most of my friends are straight and LGBT-friendly but I feel like sometimes talking to them is very tiring because I have to explain a lot of things...I just want to be able to talk to people who get it and I don’t have to flesh it out for them” (cis-female, lesbian, age 18)

“For transgender people, for concrete resources e.g. Reddit¹²...Reddit is very U.S based. You can’t really find a lot of info about Singapore, you can only get the info if you take the plunge and see a doctor about it. Even then, the government tries very hard to hide the gender clinics, or you have a friend” (trans-female, asexual, age 20)

However, the participants also felt that increased accessibility compromises one’s safety and that there is a tradeoff between accessibility and confidentiality.

“More accessible means it can also be easily infiltrated.” (trans-female, asexual, age 20)

“Because any homophobic straight person can just ... go [join Meetup¹³ groups that cater to the Singapore queer community]” (cis-female, lesbian, age 18)

¹² Reddit is an American social news aggregation, web content rating, and discussion website. Reddit’s registered community members can submit content such as text posts or direct links. Source: Wikipedia

¹³ Meetup is an online social networking portal that facilitates offline group meetings in various localities around the world. Meetup allows members to find and join groups unified by a common interest e.g. hobbies, politics. Source: Wikipedia

C. COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

Sustaining a non-profit voluntary organization (NGOs) is not easy as it depends on donations of money and effort by volunteers. Given that the social-political climate in Singapore is still rather hostile towards the community, progress for us depends on NGOs pushing for change on our behalf. As the next generation comes of age and forms the next batch of leaders, we at YOH were curious about their engagement with the community and activism. We also wanted to touch on the topic of romance as a reason for attending queer events.

Question 1: Our survey results indicate that about 80% of people would be interested to participate in events with a social-political focus. However, such events (e.g. Pink Dot) requires many volunteers and volunteering is hard work. Do you feel that you will have the time or the energy to contribute to an event of this nature?

Participants were largely satisfied with the status quo in Singapore, and the desire to attend events with a social political focus did not necessarily extend to volunteering or organizing such events. The preference for a passive role was due to the fear of exposure and concerns regarding commitment and confidentiality. There was also the sense that ‘someone else would do it’, and it need not be them.

“I don’t think I would feel very strongly for it because I am not directly impacted...I would feel very strange to be an activist for 377a. If you think about it, maybe one person thinks if I help it’s just me, never mind lah just leave it to the other people. They will do it. We always assume that there are other people out there that will do it. But if we don’t help in then how? Then, end up, nobody will do it.” (cis-female, lesbian, age 23)

“There is still a taboo within my [Malay-Muslim] community to be seen as doing these kind of things... even if you bring it up to the school... I would assume that there are not many people who would go for [volunteering] even amongst the young adults, they till have that feeling that what if I go and people recognize me.... They [also] have to find time and money.” (cis-male, gay, age 26)

“Sometimes I can even forget that ... 377a exists, because I get inspired by other countries like US, like there is all this acceptance.” (cis-male, gay, age 19)

Question 2: Given that volunteering is hard, and that there is a high demand for events that are social-political in nature, how do you suggest we can entice more people to volunteer?

Suggestions by participants to attract more volunteers include:

1. **Innovative branding** – On a superficial level, having a good marketing angle and ‘glossier’ advertisements can make such events more enticing for volunteers
2. **Strong community connection** – If there were a stronger tether (feeling of belonging) to the community, the chances of volunteering would be higher. Hence it is best to spread the call to volunteer through friends or word of mouth as one might be inclined to volunteer if their friends are already involved.

3. **Duration and Commitment** – If the event requires a low commitment level of time and effort, it would be easier to attract volunteers.
4. **Vision and Goal** – Conversely, if volunteers can perceive a long-term and clear objective to their efforts, they would be more willing to commit because they can empathize with the goal that everyone is collectively working towards. In other words, a structured and long term voluntary commitment might paradoxically be desirable as well if there was a clear alignment with the volunteers' own vision / self-actualisation goals.
5. **Type of activity** – Current volunteering activities are quite uninspiring, with little value-add for volunteers, and common (e.g. chaperoning, ushering, manpower and logistics). If more interesting activities were devised that required a more diverse or specialised skill set from volunteers, they might be more enticed to volunteer, attracted by the novelty of experience and differentiation of event(s).

Question 3: One of the main reasons why people attend queer events is to find a romantic partner. Do you agree?

Participants quite unanimously agree that it is likely that the main reason people attend queer events, is to find a romantic partner. This would be a practical move, as queer events are one of the few real-life avenues where there is a guaranteed chance of meeting someone queer. Others mention having had bad experiences with online dating apps, which we inferred could have been a motivation for people to prefer meeting potential partners through such events instead.

"I think that's one of the main reasons... if you stay in your own space, it's very hard to find a partner but if you venture out... there's also the possibility of making friends but I think a lot of people would say that's a secondary reason" (cis-female, lesbian, age 23)

"It's just a matter of seeing who is out there, available for them to connect with. That's the reason why." (cis-male, gay, age 26)

"I've had a bad run with dating apps." (cis-female, bisexual, age 18)

D. MENTAL HEALTH

The survey results regarding mental health amongst queer youth was largely dismal. This is not unexpected as the social climate in Singapore is still quite conservative and the current legal framework poses obstacles for providing a more holistic mental health approach. Against this backdrop, it is crucial to understand how we can practically help and how the youths perceive their future here.

Question 1: More than 70% of respondents indicated that they've faced mental health issues. Anecdotally, we find that more physical spaces for queer youths can have a positive impact on mental health. Apart from this, what else do you think can be done to improve mental wellbeing?

It appears that societal expectations and external stresses exert a negative influence on the mental well-being of queer youths. Participants shared the anguish of their formative years that was directly attributed to the lack of acceptance of their sexual orientation. They spoke of coping mechanisms but also lament the toll on their emotional lives.

"I would cry on a regular basis. You don't know if you are normal because I'm not aware of what it means to be a lesbian ... My family is quite traditional, you need to find a good husband, good boyfriend. But when you keep hearing this kind of things and you have your own thoughts, it becomes conflicting, it's quite depressing for a while." (cis-female, lesbian, age 23)

"Primary school I was bullied, people called me gay, they called me that because I was effeminate.. I try to stay positive but it's not easy. I've changed my mindset, not caring how people feel and it makes me feel better." (cis-male, gay, age 19)

"It's just difficult to lead two lives." (cis-male, gay, age 26)

Participants felt that the gap in mental health resources can be bridged with the following:

1. **School resources** – Mental health issues cannot be solely attributed to one cause. It is often a multitude of triggers that leads to problems. Counsellors need to be better equipped to handle the intersection of sexuality/gender identity with other issues, when addressing the mental wellbeing of students.
2. **Prohibitive cost** –the cost of professional help is perceived to be high and too prohibitive for those who need it the most (e.g. youths from low-income / single parent / disadvantaged homes), thus limiting the access to help.
3. **Consent** – Currently underage youths need to obtain parental consent before seeking help through official channels. This is counter-productive if it is parental issues that are contributing to the lack of mental wellbeing. Perhaps the requirement for parental consent can be removed, or more awareness can be provided to queer youths that there are unofficial channels they may access without parental consent for confidentiality and privacy.
4. **Online apps** – Given the popularity of using mobile apps for everything these days, an app dedicated to youth mental health can be developed for easy access and information.

5. **Personal Resources** – The act of journaling has been helpful for some participants. Thus such tools that one can practice on their own should be promoted further amongst the youth.

“All of these people have gone to school counsellors and it has always been a bad experience... it sucks, the school counselling.” (cis-female, lesbian, age 18)

“If you are underage it is a problem because you have to get parental consent, and that was actually why I waited until I was 18.” (cis-female, lesbian, age 18)

“Finances is an issue... \$70 per hour is about the market rate for counselling sessions... the cost is quite prohibitive.” (cis-male, pansexual, age 20)

“I have this notebook where I will jot down things that make me feel good.” (cis-male, gay, age 19)

Question 2: What do you think would be the value of having mix-gendered space for queer youths?

A handful of participants have never attended a mixed-gender queer event and largely stick to their own peer group when engaging with the queer community. They felt that there is value in mixing with those outside their peer groups for the following reasons:

1. Such spaces tend to be less sexually charged with less ‘dating’ pressure. It offers a much more neutral environment to make new friends on a platonic level, unlike the usual meeting joints such as queer pubs and clubs.
2. There is a chance to gain new perspectives when mixing with different community groups as same gender spaces can often seem insular. The exposure to different groups would also create more empathy and connection within the community.
3. For pre-op transgender persons who are often left out of community events that targeted binary and cis persons, mixed gender spaces are more inclusive as they wouldn’t have to worry about which male/female space is appropriate for them to join.

“Going to gender specific bars is easier because you don’t have to be cautious and it’s more or less same identity people. When it comes to non-alcoholic and non-party atmosphere, I honestly think mixed gender is better, simply because it [same gender spaces] can be a bit insular ... It cultivates prejudice, it’s not very good... It’s like an echo chamber... they would have a lot of stereotypes.” (cis-female, lesbian, age 18)

“They would have a lot of stereotypes [of other groups in the community] ... if you do have mixed co-ed events, it lets people who are not like you understand you.” (cis-female, bisexual, age 18)

“Don’t have to worry about which one to go for... Especially like pre-transition, you don’t know which one you should go for” (trans-female, asexual, age 20)

Question 3: Queer issues have been gaining visibility and coverage on mainstream media lately. However, it seems that there is a decline in physical spaces for queer people to interact, particularly with the closure of prominent nightclub “Play” amongst others. In tandem, we have a surge in the number of online queer spaces. On the political front, s377a remains despite various legal and political challenges. Considering this current situation for the queer community, what do you feel is your future here in Singapore as a queer person? To what extent do you think you can contribute to better the lives of everyone in the queer community?

The participants presented largely pessimistic views on their future in Singapore, due to the current lack of freedoms. The common issues brought up include fear about their sexuality/gender identities affecting career prospects and potential need to live a double life. They don't foresee same-sex marriage being legalized in Singapore in the near future, maybe not even in their lifetimes, despite their relative youth. As a result, they are resigned to singlehood for their future selves and do not envision having families in the traditional sense (marriage, children etc.). In such a hostile climate, some feel highly restricted, disenfranchised of a voice in their own country and are considering the possibility of emigration.

“Why serve a country that doesn't serve me?” (trans-female, asexual, age 20)

“I'm very willing to contribute back to my country if only my country would allow me to begin with...the civil service is in a transitional period right now, people are trying to enter it and make it better and maybe make it not so stagnant but It's very difficult for people like us to join if there are such barriers, like in teaching for example I know of people who are fired from teaching simply because parents find them morally or ethically unfit because of their sexuality.

The future that I see is probably like if I'm staying single I will probably still stay in Singapore... if I plan to have a family or I plan to get married, for sure I have to go overseas at some point. Very little point of me staying here if I can get those benefits that I can get elsewhere... The other problem is housing, I don't want to wait till I'm bloody 35 to go and move out...I don't want to live with my parents in like a homophobic environment for the rest of my life so definitely have to work or move overseas somehow...” (cis-female, lesbian, age 18)

“I'm hoping that Singapore becomes more liberal in the future especially if our generation is stepping up, if they are stepping up... eventually we would move in the right direction it's just a matter of time.” (cis-male, pansexual, age 20)

“If there's really a need I will just lead a double life. I can't be, I don't think I can be out at work... what if they are not accepting?... I think that's how it's going to be until everybody is comfortable but I doubt that will be very soon.” (cis-female, lesbian, age 23)

“The status quo would not change, despite our attempt to educate people. We have to be realistic about things. After how many years of actively trying to promote and trying to educate people about such things, things have not changed. It's not very feasible.” (cis-male, gay, age 26)

“I want to be who I am but I can't, we all have to do it behind closed doors ...if you declare that you are gay in Singapore... you will be at a disadvantage... like housing, jobs.” (cis-male, gay, age 19)

OUR ANALYSIS

Firstly, we acknowledge that this project would do better with more rigour and scope, particularly in sampling size and beginning from broader sets of questions. As a result of our sampling method and sample size, there is a tendency for respondents to be amongst those more vocal, and more aligned with the latest trends in social justice discourses on the internet. However, we do still feel the information and observations arising from this project would be useful, as they express views often not discussed seriously amongst other older LGBT groups such as YOH.

Here, we include our responses and recommendations on how to go forward based on our interpretations of the data and personal experiences of volunteering. Community organisations can bear the results of this report in mind while structuring future programmes and long-term planning.

On Gender:

The majority of the community identifies as cis-gender. Hence it would be helpful to create greater awareness amongst us on new gender labels which are an increasingly important issue for the youths. Events / workshops / seminars focusing on gender issues with sharing by speakers can lead to greater knowledge and understanding of why these new identities are important and what they represent for the individual. We should not allow the misuse of newer labels in social media or our current lack of knowledge as a reason to reject these labels, because that would be a disservice to those who genuinely identifies as so.

The issues with regards to sexual orientation are nothing new – same-sex marriage, partnership and family rights are causes we have been championing for years. But the growing focus on gender identity will bring new challenges that we must face and address such as gender-neutral spaces and public restrooms. The results of the focus group and survey shows that we have a long way to go before understanding our non-cis gender peers, much less able to champion their causes as an integral part of the community struggle.

Not ignoring the fact that there are still many issues relating to sexuality, the community should also try to counter the white elephants that have long existed but rarely been discussed. For example, but not limited to: racism especially in dating apps or the unsafe, underground space of 'chem sex parties' (i.e. drug-fuelled orgies) where youths are particularly vulnerable. Moving our community forward is more than just legislation and representation in the mainstream, we need to also look inwards to the hidden struggles that we have been ignoring and tackle them with a concerted effort, starting with the young generation who have a chance to make a real cultural shift / change in our community attitudes.

On Queer Spaces:

We note that the youths do not have a constructive or definitive sense of what particular physical spaces they would like to see (e.g. type, format, activity, location etc.), only the emotional characteristics of it. Since the main problem appears to be insufficient quantity, perhaps we can look at improving access and quantity of the currently available community events. We can also explore providing more youth-friendly (i.e. less alcohol-charged) and gender-neutral events.

On Community Involvement and Mental Health:

Despite more than a decade working with youths, there is still much, *much* to be done. If there is a means to instill greater confidence, self-assurance and belief in the new generation that their future in Singapore holds promise, we need to explore how to do so. Although self-acceptance is on a high, youths may be overwhelmed by the existing lack of resources, repressive social structure of Singapore and feel defeated by the perceived hopelessness in fighting for a better Singapore. While access to resources and general acceptance of different sexualities and gender identities have grown in the past decade, we need to ensure that we are not neglecting this segment of youths that do need support but not in the traditional sense.

On an anecdotal note, we at YOH have noticed that young LGBT persons frequently do not identify with, or feel disconnected from, the broader LGBT community. This is in spite of their access to information or other LGBT persons on a much larger scale, through the internet and mobile apps. Youths are also unlikely to view activism, or volunteering in general, in a favourable light, though they express having difficulties or unhappiness with society's status quo.

Perhaps the crucial question for us is, "How could we inspire and empower youths to contribute for the betterment of their generation and those to come?". An answer to that is likely to be found in finding ways to make volunteerism more accessible to the youths and having active youth engagement programmes. Knowing what concerns youths, and the language they use to understand their reality, would be a first step to achieving this.

We also need to explore community-wide succession and mentorship programs that can develop our future leaders. Some community organizations are already facing succession issues due to lack of volunteers stepping up to the plate and taking on commitment-heavy responsibilities. Without proper structures in places to facilitate leadership renewal, much of what runs the queer community today would be unsustainable.

CONCLUSION

We hope that this study has been helpful to illuminate the mindsets and perspectives of today's queer youths as they are the future we cannot ignore. There are few studies that focus on the queer youth demographic in Singapore. Perhaps this project can serve as an impetus for more and better research to come.

In order to ensure that the community continues to grow in a holistic and meaningful manner, we also recognize that we need to work collectively with all segments of the queer community. This means having to continuously educate and seek better engagement with today's youths / tomorrow's leaders. By aligning their needs and wants with our shared goals, we can effect change together, both within the community and the larger Singapore society.