



## **SOCIAL MEDIA BEHAVIOR ON LESBIAN AND GAY PEOPLE: CASES FROM SRI LANKAN LESBIAN AND GAY PEOPLE LIVE IN ITALY**

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The Sri Lankan gay and lesbian communities who have moved to Italy do not know about the role of mobility and spatial setting in constituting their sexualities. Social media plays a major role in interacting homosexuals with and heterosexuals and providing information related to LG people. Most of the lesbian and gay people use YouTube as their coming out social media platform. Accordingly, this paper investigated the social media behavior to the relationship between migration, private space and sexual expression of the Sri Lankan gay and lesbian community who have relocated to Italy. This study employs a secondary-based qualitative research methodology to investigate the relationship between migration, private space, and sexual expression among Sri Lankan gay and lesbian individuals who have relocated to Italy. Accordingly, those aged 20–33 range 4 couples who live in Italy and who have YouTube channels were selected as a sample. I observed and collected data from YouTube posts and comments made by Sri Lankan lesbian and gay individuals living in Italy. The qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify and explore recurring themes related to migration experiences, private spaces, and sexual expression. This method allowed us to systematically examine the content and comments to uncover patterns and insights into how these individuals navigate their identities and interactions in the context of their experiences and social media presence. This paper revealed emergent themes on the contribution of migration and private space to constituting sexual identities. Therefore, Cultural expectations for marriage, social stigma about homosexuality and a lack of private spaces for sexual exploration, has been constrained the participants' sexual expression in Sri Lanka. These factors have underpinned some lesbian and gay people's migration decisions. Finally concluded that living away from family and country of origin provides private spaces and greater freedom, this 'came out' through social media and their expression. However, revealed that homosexual interests within a private domestic space in Italy are not always easy or possible.

Keywords: Sri Lankan LG people, social media behavior, migration, private space, sexual expression

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### **INTRODUCTION**

Under the socio-cultural, religious, and political conditions of Sri Lanka, LGBTIQ-related matters are, in general, not an issue to discuss openly (Gamage, 2020). Discrimination against lesbian and gay people on social media in Sri Lanka is unfortunately prevalent and reflects broader societal attitudes towards lesbian and gay individuals in the country. Due to cultural and religious influences, Sri Lanka remains a conservative society, and many people hold negative views towards non-heterosexual orientations. More than 80 countries, including Sri Lanka, have enacted laws criminalizing homosexuality and third-gender identities (Gerber, 2014; Gerber, Paula & Gory, 2014; Ungar, 2000). On social media platforms, such discrimination can manifest in various forms, including hate speech, derogatory comments, cyberbullying, and the spreading of harmful stereotypes. LG individuals may be targeted with harassment, threats, and even violence online, leading to psychological distress and social isolation. There are some special words for gay people ‘*samanalaya*’, ‘*ponnaya*’, ‘*kolukaraya*’ ...etc. Over 90% of adults in the United States have at least one social media account, and lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) persons are more socially active on social media than heterosexuals (Escobar. et.al., 2018).

As a member of the Commonwealth of Nations, Sri Lanka has maintained the 'sodomy laws' introduced by the British during colonization. These laws, codified in Sections 365 and 365A of the Penal Code, criminalize homosexuality and any sexual activities that do not conform to heterosexual norms (Ellawala, 2019). Furthermore, the legal framework in Sri Lanka does not provide adequate protection for LGBTQ+ rights, which can embolden individuals to express discriminatory views without fear of repercussions. Section 365A of the Sri Lankan Penal Code does criminalize same-sex sexual activity, contributing to a hostile environment for LGBTQ+ individuals both online and offline. This legislation significantly impacts the social and legal landscape for LGBTQ+ people in Sri Lanka, perpetuating stigma and discrimination. Some of the complexities associated with social media use among LGB persons have been studied in relation with parenting and gender transition (Blackwell.et.al., 2018).

Despite these challenges, there are also voices of support and activism on social media advocating for LG rights and equality in Sri Lanka. Grassroots movements, online campaigns, and advocacy organizations play a crucial role in raising awareness, challenging discriminatory attitudes, and promoting acceptance and inclusion of LG individuals in the digital sphere and beyond.

Discrimination against Sri Lankan lesbian and gay people living in Italy on social media can take various forms, including hate speech, derogatory comments, exclusion from online communities, and even threats of violence. This discrimination may stem from cultural biases, stereotypes, and misconceptions about LG individuals, as well as from personal prejudices held by some members of society.



On social media platforms, individuals may face harassment, bullying, and trolling based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. This can have significant negative effects on their mental health and well-being, leading to feelings of isolation, anxiety, and depression.

Furthermore, discriminatory attitudes and behaviours on social media can contribute to a hostile environment for LG individuals, making it difficult for them to express themselves freely and participate in online discussions without fear of backlash or abuse.

Efforts to combat discrimination against Sri Lankan lesbian and gay people living in Italy on social media may involve promoting awareness, education, and empathy-building initiatives, as well as enforcing policies and regulations that prohibit hate speech and harassment. Additionally, creating safe and supportive online spaces for LG individuals to connect, share experiences, and seek support can help mitigate the negative impacts of discrimination on social media. The main purpose of this paper is to investigate how migration and spatial settings influence the sexual identities of Sri Lankan gay and lesbian individuals who have relocated to Italy.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study employs a secondary-based qualitative research methodology to investigate the relationship between migration, private space, and sexual expression among Sri Lankan gay and lesbian individuals who have relocated to Italy. Given the scarcity of existing literature on this population, particularly regarding the influence of mobility and spatial settings on their sexualities, a qualitative approach is deemed appropriate to explore these nuanced experiences in depth.

Data were collected through observational methods and content analysis of social media interactions. The primary data sources were YouTube channels, as this platform is frequently used by Sri Lankan gay and lesbian individuals to 'come out' and share their personal stories. Supplementary data were gathered from Facebook and Instagram, platforms that are commonly used by these individuals for further social interaction after their initial YouTube introductions. The sample consisted of four couples aged 20–33 years living in Italy who actively maintained YouTube channels.

The observational data were collected from posts, comments, and interactions on these social media platforms. This included analysing the content of the videos, the nature of the comments received, and the discussions that emerged from these interactions. The focus was on identifying themes related to the contribution of migration and private space to the constitution of sexual identities. Specific attention was given to cultural expectations for marriage, social stigma about homosexuality, and the availability of private spaces for sexual exploration.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data, allowing for the identification and interpretation of patterns and themes within the data. This method facilitated an in-depth understanding of how migration and the creation of private spaces in Italy influenced the participants' sexual expression and identity formation. Additionally, the study examined the role of social media in providing a platform for 'coming out' and the challenges related to stigmatization and discrimination faced by the participants on these platforms.

By focusing on the lived experiences of Sri Lankan gay and lesbian individuals in Italy, this study aims to shed light on the complex interplay between migration, private space, and sexual expression, contributing to a better understanding of the unique challenges and opportunities faced by this community.



## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study reveal that migration and the establishment of private spaces in Italy significantly influence the sexual expression and identity formation of Sri Lankan gay and lesbian individuals. Participants reported that the physical distance from their families and the societal expectations of their home country provided them with a newfound sense of freedom and privacy. This private space enabled them to explore and express their sexual identities more openly than they could in Sri Lanka. However, the process of 'coming out' remained complex and fraught with challenges. Many participants utilized YouTube as an initial platform for 'coming out,' finding it an empowering medium to share their stories and connect with a supportive community. Subsequently, Facebook and Instagram were used to maintain and expand their social networks. Despite these opportunities, the participants faced significant stigmatization and discrimination online, reflecting broader societal prejudices.

The thematic analysis highlighted several emergent themes: cultural expectations for marriage, social stigma about homosexuality, and the role of private spaces in sexual exploration. Cultural expectations in Sri Lanka, such as the pressure to marry and uphold family honour, were identified as primary factors driving the decision to migrate. In Italy, participants experienced greater freedom and privacy, allowing them to live more authentically. However, the online environment presented new challenges.

**Commenter:** “Your lifestyle is against my beliefs, and I don’t think its right to promote it. You should reconsider sharing these things online.”

This comment was made on a video discussing the participant’s daily life and challenges. It represents a more overtly negative reaction based on personal beliefs.

**Commenter:** “I’m so inspired by your courage to share your story. Italy is definitely more open-minded, and it’s great to see you living your truth.”

This comment was posted in response to a video where a Sri Lankan lesbian individual shared her experiences of coming out in Italy compared to Sri Lanka. The supportive tone reflects a positive reception and encouragement from the community.

Second theme is social stigma about homosexuality. While social media platforms facilitated initial 'coming out' experiences and provided a space for connection and support, they also exposed participants to negative comments and harassment.

**Commenter:** “I don’t really understand everything you’re going through, but I respect your decision to be open about it.”

This comment was made on a video discussing the challenges of coming out. It shows a neutral stance, acknowledging the participant’s experiences without overt support or opposition.

Thirdly, the role of private spaces in sexual exploration. These findings suggest that while migration and private spaces can enhance sexual expression, the virtual space remains a contested arena where acceptance and discrimination coexist. This study underscores the importance of addressing both physical and virtual spaces when considering the sexual identities and well-being of migrant gay and lesbian individuals.

**Commenter:** “I don’t think this is appropriate to share publicly. Keep it private, it’s not something everyone needs to know about.”



This comment was posted in response to a video about personal experiences with sexuality. It reflects discomfort or disapproval of the public nature of the content.

**Commenter:** “It’s good that you’re sharing your story, but some people might not understand or agree. Just be prepared for mixed reactions.”

This comment was made on a video about the potential backlash of coming out. It recognizes the value of sharing personal experiences while also warning about possible negative responses.

In conclusion, this study emphasizes the need for a nuanced understanding of both physical and virtual spaces in addressing the sexual identities and well-being of migrant gay and lesbian individuals. While migration to a more accepting environment like Italy provides opportunities for greater freedom, the persistent challenges in digital spaces highlight the ongoing need for comprehensive support systems that address both real-world and online prejudices. This critical perspective underscores the importance of continued advocacy and support for the LGBTQ+ community, both within and beyond the physical boundaries of migration.

## CONCLUSIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

This study provides valuable insights into the complex relationship between migration, private space, and sexual expression among Sri Lankan gay and lesbian individuals who have relocated to Italy. The findings highlight that migration can offer these individuals a sense of freedom and privacy that is often unattainable in their home country due to cultural expectations and social stigma. The physical distance from family and familiar societal norms allowed participants to explore and express their sexual identities more freely. However, the study also underscores that while migration creates opportunities for greater personal freedom, it does not completely shield individuals from the challenges associated with 'coming out' and navigating their sexual identities, particularly in the online environment.

The use of social media platforms like YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram emerged as a double-edged sword. On one hand, these platforms provided a vital space for participants to share their stories, connect with a supportive community, and express their sexual identities. On the other hand, they also exposed participants to significant stigmatization and discrimination. This duality highlights the ongoing struggle for acceptance and the need for safer, more inclusive virtual spaces where gay and lesbian individuals can express themselves without fear of harassment.

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that while migration and the creation of private spaces can significantly enhance the sexual expression and identity formation of Sri Lankan gay and lesbian individuals, the journey towards full acceptance and freedom is ongoing. The role of social media is pivotal yet complex, offering both support and challenges. Future research should continue to explore the interplay between physical and virtual spaces in shaping the experiences of migrant LGBTQ+ individuals, with a focus on developing strategies to combat online discrimination and promote inclusivity. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for fostering environments where all individuals, regardless of their sexual orientation, can live authentically and free from prejudice.

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