Young Generation’s Perceptions of Same-Sex Sexuality and Attitudes Toward Same-Sex Marriage in South Korea

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Abstract
It is important to pay attention to the rights of lesbians and gay men within the global context of antidiscrimination. This study focused on the young generation’s perceptions of same-sex sexuality and their attitudes toward same-sex marriage with revisiting Korean Confucianism as a conceptual framework. A total of 110 college students residing in the Seoul metropolitan areas of South Korea participated in this study. The study used participant-generated imagery and face-to-face interviews for data collection. Data were examined using a hybrid approach of thematic analysis that relied on deductive and inductive coding. The results highlighted young Koreans’ conflicting perceptions of same-sex sexuality and ambivalent attitudes toward same-sex marriage. Young Koreans perceived lesbians and gay men as marginalized in spite of democratic transition and social movements in South Korea. They showed tolerance to same-sex sexuality under a human rights–based approach. At the same time, the results revealed that they still held on to traditional Korean Confucianism. There are young Koreans opposing same-sex marriage because of their rationale of Confucian heteronormativity, value of social order within collectivism, and belief of familism. The results suggest a reinterpretation of the young generation’s ambivalence regarding same-sex sexuality in the light of Confucian-family-oriented collectivism in South Korea.

Keywords
same-sex sexuality, same-sex marriage, Korean Confucianism, Confucian-family-oriented collectivism, young generation, South Korea

Introduction
Much of the world has become more accepting of same-sex relationships over the last decade. According to the 2019 Legatum Prosperity Index (Thomson Reuters, 2019), tolerance toward lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people, which was measured according to a Gallup poll involving more than 130,000 people globally, rose from about one in four people expressing acceptance a decade ago to almost a third in the latest report. In terms of legality, lesbian and gay rights have increased in many countries, including the expansion of same-sex marriage legislation. More than two dozen countries recognize same-sex marriages at the national level. Western Europe is the most progressive region in the world for the lesbian and gay communities, and Eastern Europe is actively trying to improve the legal rights of lesbians and gay men. On June 26, 2015, the U. S. Supreme Court ruled that same-sex couples could marry nationwide. Taiwan was the first country in Asia to legalize same-sex marriage on May 24, 2019.

South Korea remains, in many ways, less accommodating. For over 500 years of the Joseon Dynasty before the Republic of Korea formally established in 1948, Korea revered a rigid Confucian orthodoxy. The surviving Confucian heritage, wherein heteronormativity is the center of its epistemology, still dominates the society (Jung, 2020, p. 2). Only in the last 20 years has same-sex sexuality been openly mentioned, rather than ignoring or denying that “they” exist. In contemporary South Korea, the government has neither accepted any type of same-sex relationship nor had national laws criminalizing same-sex conduct. Lesbians and gay men do not face harsh punishments, but deal with the social stigma or public misunderstanding. Same-sex...
marriage also remains unaccepted because of limited legal support among political parties.

Recently, a trend of increasing tolerance toward lesbian and gay communities has been observed among South Koreans. The Asan Institute for Policy Studies, a prominent think tank in South Korea, reported Annual Surveys from 2010 (2,000 respondents) to 2014 (15,000 respondents) (J. Kim et al., 2015). The number of respondents who showed no reservations about homosexuality increased from 15.8% in 2010 to 23.7% in 2014. Concurrently, those who supported the legalization of same-sex marriages rose from 16.9% in 2010 to 28.5% in 2014. As another example, the Korea Institute of Public Administration (2018) conducted the “Korea Social Integration Survey” (8,000 respondents) and reported that those who said they “cannot accept same-sex sexuality” fell below 50% for the first time in the survey’s history. This percentage decreased from 62.1% in 2013, to 57.2% in 2017, and to 49.0% in 2018. In addition, the Pew Research Center (2020) surveyed 21 countries in 2002 and 34 countries in 2019 to examine changes in public attitudes toward same-sex sexuality. The 2019 survey reported that 44% of South Koreans suggested that same-sex sexuality should be accepted by society, compared to only 25% who claimed this view in 2002.

These surveys suggest that South Koreans have become more accepting of same-sex sexuality, even if conservative attitudes remain dominant. Younger generation might show greater approval of same-sex sexuality than older generations (Phillips & Yi, 2020; Youn, 2018), considering they have been more familiar with civil rights programs. According to the Korean Youth Human Rights Survey data of elementary, middle, and high school students from 2013 to 2015, the participation rate in human rights education has increased every year (Ha, 2020). They have also witnessed the LGBT movement based on globalized connectivity via the internet and social media.

However, there is also resisting force to protect Confucian heritage, which appears to conflict with lesbian and gay protections. In 2015, the Ministry of Education introduced sex education standards that forbid the teaching of same-sex sexuality and alternative sexual identities. Same-sex sexuality and sexual minorities are not mentioned in the sex education guidelines because they are considered as “contra bonos mores.” In 2016, the Korean Constitutional Court handed down a decision finding Article 92-5 of the old Military Criminal Act constitutional. Article 92-5 prescribes up to 2 years in prison for soldiers who “commit sodomy or other disgraceful conduct.” This decision has a significant meaning especially for Korean context where military conscription has existed since 1957. Korean male citizens between the ages of 18 and 28 are required to perform compulsory military service. Moreover, conservative lawmakers keep introducing an amendment that would remove “sexual orientation” from the mandate of the National Human Rights Commission of Korean (NHRCK), a body tasked with examining discrimination issues (Thoreson, 2019). The amendment would weaken its ability to prevent discrimination against sexual minorities in employment, education, and other areas of social life. Considering the legal affairs related to same sex sexuality, it is hard to deny that Korean Confucianism remains undiminished and enduring as one of the cultural foundations even for the young generation.

Revisiting Korean Confucianism as a Conceptual Framework for Same-Sex Issues

Confucius taught that there was a basic order in the universe and a natural harmony linking man, nature, and the cosmos (Chan, 1963). The system of Yin and Yang was conceived as a way of explaining the universe and human relations. Yin is the receptive principle and Yang the active principle, seen in all forms of change and difference such as the annual cycle (winter and summer), sociopolitical history (disorder and order), sexual coupling (female and male), and the formation of both women and men as characters. Professor Zeng Yi of Tongji University, who is one of the most active leaders in Mainland New Confucianism circles, once stated that any Confucian should view “homosexuality as a crime against humanity” (Van Norden, 2015). He claimed that traditional gender identities are an immutable reflection of cosmic principles.

Confucius also claimed that [heterosexual] marriage lies at the foundation of government. The heterosexual family is not just an emotional and physical entity but also a prototype of social consensus in Confucian patriarchy (P.-H. Lee, 2016). Heteronormative marriage and reproduction are a means to accomplish social harmony and national stability (Adamczyka & Cheng, 2015). Mencius, one of the most influential Confucian philosophers of all time, claimed that failing to have children is the most unfilial of all acts (Chan, 1963). Filial piety, respect for one’s parents and veneration of them after death, is considered the most fundamental of Confucian values (Park & Chesla, 2007). These Confucian teachings have become embodied in the form of Korean familism, which is a term referring to a unique social character among Koreans to regard the family as the most important unit in a social system and to emphasize blood ties of one’s immediate family (D. Lee, 2018). A prime example of Korean familism based on the bloodline is the notoriously low rates of domestic adoption, which is only about 50% and the remaining children were adopted to overseas (South Korea Ministry of Health and Welfare, 2019). In this sense, Korean Confucianism would appear to conflict with lesbian and gay rights, in which accepting same-sex sexuality involves giving up continuity of blood lineage. Lesbians and gay men could be regarded as nonconforming to Korean familism.

“Even in contemporary Korea, the Confucian tradition remains intact” (Choi, 2010, p. 34). Still, Korean people value the collective needs, social harmony, conformity, and
family honor, which predetermine relationships among family, friends, and society as a whole (Y.-G. Kim & Hahn, 2006). This is mainly because of the compressed modernization. Scholars have argued that it took only 60 years for Korea to achieve modernization, compared to 200 years for western countries (Chang, 1999). As the advanced countries underwent gradual modernization, their people were able to adapt their old customs to the new circumstances. However, Korean government-led industrialization and institutionalization have occurred without regard for the everyday life experiences of ordinary people. It has been difficult for Korean people to reconstruct their sociocultural norms and to reach a new consensus in such a short time, while simultaneously dealing with the sudden waves of Western civilization. As a result, Korean people live amid contradictory beliefs because of the coexistence of Confucian tradition and western modernity. In particular, young Koreans learn equality, human rights, and respect for diversity in the official educational system but are still restricted by traditional Confucianism in family life. They seem to hold up Confucian ethics and, at the same time, try to embrace progressive perspectives to human rights and democratic freedoms.

Little is known about how young Koreans manage, digest, and integrate Confucian ethics and current same-sex sexuality issues. This study contextualized a country-specific culture that may play a significant role in crafting young generation’s perceptions and attitudes regarding same-sex sexuality issues. The scope of the present study does not cover the roles of multiple religions. It is worth noting that roughly 56.1% of South Korea’s population identifies as nonreligious, 19.7% as Protestant, 15.5% as Buddhist, and 7.9% as Catholic (Statistics Korea, 2016). Considering nonreligion and religious diversity in South Korea, Conservative Christianity seems to have its limits. This study contributes to offering a one-dimensional but in-depth understanding of young Koreans and same-sex sexuality issues while revisiting Confucianism as a conceptual framework. Specifically, the study focused on how young Koreans perceived same-sex sexuality and what their attitudes were toward same-sex marriage.

Method

The qualitative research methods were chosen to capture ethnographic nature, which described, analyzed, and interpreted the Korea-specific culture related to same-sex sexuality. A hybrid approach of deductive and inductive analysis was used with adopting Korean Confucianism as a conceptual framework.

Participants

The purposive sampling method was used to recruit college students from middle-class communities in South Korea. A total of 110 participants, with the mean age being 21.6 (ranging from 19 to 24), were recruited from various majors of universities in Seoul and surrounding areas. Initially, 98 college students (32 men = 32.7% and 66 women = 67.3%) participated in the draw-and-write activity. An additional 12 college students (six men = 50.0% and six women = 50.0%) were then interviewed individually. None of the participants expressed that they were lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.

The appropriate ethical aspects of the study were addressed to obtain written informed consent from participants. The researcher explained the purpose of the study to college students, informed them of their rights, and assured them that their participation was voluntary. The researcher also tried to avoid heterosexual bias in language for recruiting participants and collecting data, following the Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Clients (American Psychological Association, 2012). However, participants’ own words were not changed or paraphrased for direct quotations.

Data Collection

The data collection of this study consisted of draw-and-write techniques and individual face-to-face interviews. There has been significant growth in visual research because images depict aspects of our social lives and cultures. Just as questions in an interview or on a questionnaire elicit meanings, the creation of drawings as a form of arts-based research can be considered an effective data collection strategy (Silver, 2013). It enables participant to enunciate what they know and reflect what they feel from their artistic actions. Participant-generated imagery is especially effective in decreasing social desirability bias on a sensitive topic (Leavy, 2018), such as same-sex sexuality issues. In this study, nonverbal image information was selected as a primary data source in addition to written texts. Individual interviews were also conducted to acquire more direct communication and concrete explanation about participants’ perceptions and attitudes related to same-sex sexuality. All the data collection processes were conducted in Korean.

For the draw-and-write activity, the researcher distributed a set of draw-and-write worksheets to each participant (98 college students). The first page of the worksheets provided drawing space and a half-page of writing space to explain their drawing. A few additional pages were provided for writing answers to open-ended questions about same-sex sexuality issues. Specifically, the researcher asked participants to draw “whatever the word same-sex sexuality brought to mind” and describe their drawing in detail. Then, they wrote answer to questions, such as “What do you think about people who have same-sex sexual orientation?” “Do you support same-sex marriage? Why? Or why not?” “How would same-sex marriages affect Korea?” and “What makes you think that way?” Participants were requested to bring the worksheets home, take time to complete them without any references, and turn in the worksheets in a few days. This way, participants were able to reflect on their thoughts and feelings about an unfamiliar topic such as same-sex sexuality.
Additional 12 college students were interviewed individually using the same open-ended questions as those of the draw-and-write worksheets. Then, each participant was further questioned based on their responses, focusing on the values, beliefs, and norms underlying their perceptions and attitudes regarding same-sex sexuality issues. The average time of each interview was about 60 minutes, and all interviews were transcribed verbatim.

**Data Analysis**

Data was analyzed using a hybrid approach to thematic analysis; such a hybrid approach is a combination of deductive and inductive coding (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). First, a deductive, a priori coding scheme was created using a list of core concepts of Korean Confucianism such as social harmony, collectivism, conformity, heteronormativity, patriarchal gender roles, familism, and so on. Participants’ responses were coded according to these a priori categories. For example, one participant drew a picture of a gynandromorphic character, half-man and half-woman, and described same-sex sexuality as “deviant.” This kind of response was coded under “Related to heteronormativity.” Second, the researcher applied an inductive approach for more in-depth analysis to identify emergent subcategories within these a priori categories. For example, there were subcategories, such as bloodlines, filial piety, family honor, and so on, emerging from the category of “Familism.” Third, categories and subcategories were then correlated, and a modified coding scheme was developed. Each of the participants’ drawings and descriptions, written answers to questions, and interview transcripts were re-examined in detail according to this modified scheme. The combination of deductive and inductive coding identified Confucian influences underlying participants’ perceptions and attitudes toward same-sex sexuality that repeatedly appeared across the data.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, the researcher paid attention to any disconfirming observations and repeated to revise the coding scheme. Cross-sectional comparisons were also conducted, verifying qualitative similarities and differences in the data. It should be noted that the analysis of drawings excluded any evaluation of the participants’ artistic talent or sensibility.

**Results**

The results explored the young generation’s perceptions of same-sex sexuality and their attitudes toward same-sex marriage. The interpretation of data was provided in the light of Korean Confucianism as a conceptual framework.

**Young Generations’ Perceptions of Same-Sex Sexuality**

The results show young Koreans’ perceptions of same-sex sexuality from the draw-and-write activity. The researcher considered each picture and relevant descriptions as a unit, and classified imageries thematically based on both latent and manifest contents. As participant’s drawings tend to include various scenes on one page, all subjects, figures, and activities illustrated in each picture were exclusively counted. Participants’ imageries of same-sex sexuality were divided into three categories; symbols representing same-sex sexuality, the stereotyped portrayals of lesbians and gay men, and various heterosexual people around lesbians and gay men.

In the first category, the most frequent symbols of same-sex sexuality were the rainbow flag (26.5% of the 98 pictures) and queer parades (15.3% of the 98 pictures). A small number of Korean LGBT activists hosted the first Queer Culture Festival in 2000, and they have continued to hold it ever since. Each year, the queer parade has been staged amid clashes between supporters and critics, followed by police interventions and media reports. Some participants depicted disturbing scenes of queer parades, and other participants described the celebratory carnival-like atmosphere of queer parades.

The second category of the participants’ imageries included opposite stereotypes of lesbians and gay men. There were participants perceiving lesbians and gay men as “abnormal and pitiful” (23.5% of the 98 pictures). Figure 1 presents lesbians
and gay men, who were described as “prisoners behind bars with no freedom (#9)” or “disabled persons in wheelchairs who cannot see, hear, or speak (#78).” Perceiving lesbians and gay men as depressed characters might excite the sympathy of people, which could affect their advocacy of lesbian and gay rights. At the same time, these negative stereotypes might make people despise the lesbian and gay communities.

On the contrary, there are opposite stereotypes of lesbians and gay men who are confident, assertive, or even aggressive (18.4% of the 98 pictures). For example, there are lesbians and gay men celebrating Pride and marching around with rainbow flags. Some are all dressed up and armed with toy guns (Figure 2). In addition, same-sex couples in love appeared in 24.5% of the 98 pictures. Intimate behaviors of same-sex couples, such as hugging, touching, or kissing each other, were distinctively visible in participants’ imageries. Public displays of affections in Korea are not as common as some other parts of the world.

The third category of the participants’ imageries was about the relationships between heterosexual people and lesbian and gay men. Participants drew lesbians and gay men blending in a large crowd where they were indistinguishable from heterosexuals (17.3% of the 98 pictures). Such an image can be interpreted in ambivalent ways. Lesbians and gay men might be perceived as “just ordinary people like us (#20)” regardless of their sexual orientation. On the contrary, they could not be recognized by others because they were “hurt and withdrawn (#58)” or “hidden in their shells like a snail (#2).” For example, one participant (#84) drew a gay couple who “barely date at night, down a dark alley.” It is also worth paying attention to the heterosexuals around lesbians and gay men from the participants’ imageries (19.4% of the 98 pictures). Participants drew various heterosexuals to support, criticize, or show indifference to lesbians and gay men. Figure 3 depicts several different heterosexuals, who watch a sexual minority person trying to join the majority. The heterosexuals seem to objectify the person outside the majority.

Young Generations’ Attitudes Toward Same-Sex Marriage and Revisiting Korean Confucianism

The results show young South Koreans’ attitudes toward same-sex marriage and Confucian influences underlying their
attitudes. The majority of the 98 participants in the draw-and-write activity expressed more positive opinions about same-sex marriages. About 64.3% of participants (23 out of 32 men = 71.9% and 40 out of 66 women = 60.6%) supported the legalization of same-sex marriage, while 35.7% disagreed. An additional 12 interviewees showed more mixed attitudes by pointing out the pros and cons of legalizing same-sex marriage. This in-depth analysis revisited Korean Confucianism related to same-sex marriage such as the concept of heteronormativity, the value of social order within collectivism, and the belief in family functions based on familism.

Confucian heteronormativity. The concept of normality appeared as one of the essential bases influencing young Koreans’ attitudes toward same-sex marriage. Participants against same-sex marriage explained that same-sex marriage was “not normal,” which violated the laws of nature, rejected a universal phenomenal, and threaten the perpetuation of the human race. They believed that one’s biological sex, which was assigned at birth based on genitals and chromosomes, was synonymous with gender. They claimed that gender binary was natural, gender roles based on their biological sex was universal, and only heterosexual intimacy was normal. One of the opponents said, “Gender cannot surpass biological sex (Interviewee #4).”

It can be presumed that Confucian dualism of Yin and Yang affects participants’ conception of normality. Heteronormativity fits for Confucian normality while same-sex marriage cannot fall into a binary system based on biological sex. Following this Confucian heteronormativity, the below quotations were repeated in the participants’ responses.

A man and a woman love each other! It is a universal phenomenon. This is a normal idea for everybody. Legalizing same-sex marriage means abnormal homosexuality is recognized as normal. (#6)

Same-sex marriage is abnormal against the laws of nature. There is a reason why human beings are divided as male sex and female sex. Every living thing needs sexual reproduction for the sake of its species. Coupling is meant to be the birth of life. (#55)

Ironically, some participants, who believed sexual orientation as an innate disposition rather than one’s choice, expressed their support for same-sex marriage. One participant (#10) said, “Same-sex marriage is normal to homosexual people because they are born with it [homosexuality].” If some people define normality as following one’s innate characteristics and believe sexual orientation is inborn, it seems logical for them to support lesbians and gay men. This conception of normality is related to the more fundamental question of whether sexuality is a choice or a result of genetics.

Homosexuals do not have a choice of their sexual orientations. We need to accept them as human beings with different tendencies. If not, it is a violation of human dignity. We are supposed to recognize same-sex marriage. (#30)

Social order within Confucian collectivism. Confucius was mainly interested in how to bring about societal order. He envisioned a society based on a hierarchical system and emphasized conformity. In this sense, people need to control “deviant” individuals for the sake of collective goals. If some lesbians and gay men openly calls for same-sex marriage, they might be accused of disrupting the established order and undermining the value of conformity. In this study, participants against same-sex marriage were worried that same-sex marriage would weaken the social consensus on heteronormativity.

Same-sex marriage will destroy our existing family system. All our family laws are premised on heterosexual marriage. The legalization of same-sex marriage would cause a lot of social confusion and problems. (#5)

Today, they [same-sex couples] can date each other and live together. Should we really let them get legally married? If we let it happen, it would threaten the existing social order and harm regular people like us. (#70)

On the contrary, there were many participants who supported same-sex marriage under a human rights-based approach. Proponents mentioned freedom, equality, the pursuit of happiness, and antidiscrimination as reasons to support same-sex marriage. They stated that same-sex marriage ban is discriminatory, and claimed that people should protect other people’s rights. They emphasized that a democratic society should protect individual freedom rather than demand individual sacrifices for the good of the collective. One participant (#38) said, “Our society has an obligation to protect the rights of minorities.” Even there were ambivalent participants by saying, “Personally, I oppose same-sex marriage. But I know the country should legalize same-sex marriage for the fulfilment of human rights (Interviewee #2).”

A ban on same-sex marriage is a violation of equal rights. It exacerbates discrimination and prejudice. They [same-sex couples] are all human beings and entitled to protection for their dignity. It is logical that same-sex couples have the same rights to pursue their happiness. Just like the love between men and women, their love should be respected. The country needs to ensure all members receive equality and freedom no matter what their sexual orientations are. (#92)

It should be noted that there was one condition, “as long as same-sex marriage does not bother heterosexual people,” repeated from participants supporting same-sex marriage. Their attitudes seem to be based on individualism, which is contrary to Confucian collectivism.

It is entirely up to the individuals to choose whom they love. The laws should not step in when no one gets hurt. Does same-sex
marriage hurt anyone? As long as no one gets hurt, I agree with legalizing same-sex marriage. (#62)

At the same time, some participants criticized individualism, which made people indifferent or in favor of same-sex marriage. They claimed that increasing individualism weakened the sense of community and threatened Korean values. One participant (Interviewee #4) said, “They don’t care whether women love women or not. Does no one get hurt? More and more people don’t care about community. It is individualism that brings about this kind of moral decline.”

Family functions based on Korean familism. The attitudes toward same-sex marriage partly depend on how the young generation conceptualizes marriage and family function. Participants, who believed romantic love was a necessary and sufficient condition for marriage in a modern society, supported same-sex marriage. Same-sex marriage looks like a realization of the ideal romantic love because two people make their way through difficulties.

Why does a person’s sex matter for marriage? It is far more important to fulfill one’s family roles as spouse and parent. If someone is willing to take family responsibilities, the person has the right to marry whomever he or she loves. (#29)

On the contrary, opponents of same-sex marriage claimed that the essential function of marriage is to build parent–child relationships through childbirth. They pointed out that same-sex marriage fails to have a child inherited bloodlines from both parents. One participant (#79) said, “Marriage is not only a love story between two people but also a union of two families. There should be lineal descendants of the two families.” Participants expressed that it is unfilial to stop family bloodlines related to ancestor veneration. They also claimed that the ideal family based on Korean familism is a child-centered family, not a couple-centered family.

Opponents of same-sex marriage were reluctant to accept alternative ways, such as medically assisted insemination, surrogacy, or adoption for same-sex couples. They expressed their concerns about the welfare of children raised by same-sex parents. Participants expected that “children of same-sex parents would be wounded by social discrimination and stigma (#75)” or “would struggle with identity issues (#91).” A couple of participants alleged that same-sex parents “do not take into account children’s happiness (#26).” There were also participants who supported same-sex marriage but opposed same-sex parenting.

I agree with same-sex marriage. But I disagree that they [same-sex couples] should be able to adopt a child, get a child via artificial insemination, or use a surrogate mother. A child has no right to choose his or her parents. It is cruel that the innocent child has to go through the stigma. The child might experience a sexual identity crisis. “Do I have to live like my fathers or mothers?” It seems selfish and irresponsible for same-sex couples to have a child. (#91)

Discussion

This study paid attention to the Korean dynamic where young generations’ increasing understanding of same-sex sexuality coexist with traditional Confucianism. The results interpreted the young generation’s perceptions of same-sex sexuality and their attitudes toward same-sex marriage through the lenses of Korean Confucianism. The integration of the results was visualized in Figure 4.

In modern Korea, Confucianism has become a codeword for a set of widely held values such as loyalty to the family, subordination of the individual to the collective, commitment to dependence on authority (Mitu, 2015, p. 8). The results supported that Confucianism still underlies young Koreans’ perceptions and attitudes toward same-sex sexuality. Young Koreans showed their tolerance toward same-sex sexuality issues and, at the same time, their adherence to traditional Confucian beliefs and norms. In terms of perceptions of same-sex sexuality, young Koreans expressed their
conflicting perceptions of same-sex sexuality: negative or positive stereotypes of lesbians and gay men. Either way, most young Koreans perceived the lesbian and gay communities as marginalized and underprivileged. They depicted lesbians and gay men as segregated minorities objectified by the heterosexual majorities. They also categorized various heterosexuals into supporting, criticizing, or showing indifference toward same-sex sexuality issues. These categories of heterosexuals seem to be in line with the young generation’s own different responses to same-sex sexuality issues.

The results also highlighted young Koreans’ ambivalent attitudes toward same-sex marriage. Young people, who still respect Confucian teachings, try to maintain heteronormativity, social order and collective consensus, and the child-centered familism based on the bloodline. On the contrary, they are enlightened by modern democratic principles. These young people learn to be skeptical about social conformity over individual freedom regarding gender identity, sexual orientation, love, and marriage. The young generation’s changes in attitudes could be explained by their increasing awareness of human rights, acceptance of diversity, and understanding of the lesbian and gay communities.

As South Korea moves toward achieving democratic consolidation, it has signed the vast majority of the United Nations human rights treaties and condemned discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2020). The paradoxical rhetoric of “love is love, but your love is not love” (Chen, 2018, p. 556) is hardly accepted. This study partially supports the recent claim that tolerance toward the lesbian and gay communities seems to be increasing in South Korea, especially in the younger population (Rich, 2017; Yi & Phillips, 2015). Most participants, whether they agreed or disagreed with same-sex marriage, sensed that discrimination against lesbians and gay men is a human rights violation. They seemed to struggle with embracing sexual diversity and Confucian-family-oriented collectivism in Korea. The results support the claim that a country-specific culture shapes individual’s perceptions and attitudes regarding same-sex sexuality issues.

This study used a qualitative approach with a small number of young participants. Additional analyses on gender differences or religious differences in same-sex sexuality issues were not performed. Future research could benefit from using a larger sample for comparing gender or religious differences. Also, comparisons across generations or across cultures were beyond the scope of the study. Despite its limitations, this study makes a methodological contribution in the initial effort at using both participant-generated imagery and face-to-face interviews to investigate the participants’ “lived understanding” (Benner, 1994, p. 119) of same-sex sexuality issues. As suggested in this study, data triangulation using both imagery and verbal information can help researchers overcome some of the methodological constraints when studying people’s perceptions and attitudes toward sensitive issues. The results might contribute to paying more attention to the rights of Korean lesbians and gay men in a global atmosphere of anti-discrimination and human dignity.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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