

Motivations behind seeking religious and spiritual support and their impact on health and social outcomes for PLHIV in Singapore

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People living with HIV in Singapore are reluctant to disclose their HIV-status to members from their faiths because of existing prejudices against homosexuality, multiple concurrent sexual partnerships, and sex in their religions, rather than because their religions, religious leaders, or fellow practitioners condemn HIV or AIDS. Religion and spirituality are potential resources, but institutions might consider how messaging impacts support-seeking behaviours.

Introduction

Existing literature on religion and HIV identified that people living with HIV who have a religious or spiritual affiliation believe faith helps with coping with illness and finding a renewed sense of purpose in life. Religion is also used to overcome their sense of guilt and shame in engaging in risky behaviors. Singapore is a religiously diverse city-state with 80% of the local population having a religious affiliation. However, there is no existing study on religion and HIV in Singapore, much less a study on religion as a resource for treatment or support in clinical interventions for people living with HIV.

Methods

Semi-structured qualitative interviews were conducted with 73 participants. These included 56 people living with HIV (30 men who have sex with men, 23 heterosexual men, 3 women) and 17 stakeholders including healthcare workers, contact tracers, religious leaders, social workers, and volunteers. Of the 56 PLHIV participants, 40 reported having religious or spiritual affiliations (Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism) with varying degrees of practice. Interviews focused on PLHIV and stakeholders' perspectives or experiences of HIV diagnosis, navigating healthcare, attitudes towards HIV, and impact of HIV on relationships. Data were analysed through inductive thematic analysis.

Conclusions

Findings show that while religion has the potential to offer psychosocial support for participants, religious or spiritual communities can also be alienating. Participants find emotional support from their religions or faiths through social groups or individual practice. Concurrently, participants also anticipate discrimination from others regarding their sexual practices or behaviour, which they perceive as 'non-conforming' in their religious or spiritual environments. This alienating experience occurs despite religious leaders affirming that they are non-discriminatory in providing financial resources or community support for PLHIV. This suggests that while religion is a potential valuable resource for support, religious messaging hinders support-seeking behaviours and there is room for improvement in how religious institutions might support people living with HIV.

Key themes, subthemes, and illustrative quotes generated from qualitative phase of study

Themes	Subthemes	Illustrative quotes
Emotional support from religious communities for increased quality of life	Support from community members	"The people who brought me to the doctors and DSC, to the clinic, are actually all from church. So you know, you know, church being church, there's still the fact that I'm gay and all that stuff. But no, I don't really see that from them at all. And they really support who I am. They celebrate who I am and all. And they were really there for me at that point in time. [...] And they are willing to educate themselves and look more into this HIV for me. So it really depends on who you're with." (JDEU24, Christian)
	Support from community leaders	"Then, so very funny thing is the judge... that was... the judge that was supposed to be for me was my pastor (laughs). So he saw my case file. Yeah. So... but he has been supporting me a lot. A lot. Yeah. He's actually... yeah I don't feel any discrimination." (JDNC31, Christian)
	Ties between religion and family can be a double-edged sword	Supportive: "And it was, it was very difficult to tell them. So I think it was, I mean, because they're very staunch, staunch Christians. So, so it was, it was very difficult to, to tell them that number one, I've been sleeping with guys. And number two, I'm HIV, right? But they, but they were very supportive actually. Surprisingly, yeah. I didn't expect them to be supportive. I thought that they would cry and cry and cry and throw me out of the house. But they cried and cried and cried, but still care, and would care for me." (JDJO11, Christian) Alienating: "No, once you write down, actually the culture many friends, and some is relatives. So once you write down, I worried they know it. [...] So great great grandfather, grandfather, my father, so we got the member there. So if go and find, they will help you but... I don't dare to go and find. [...] But once they know...is very hard. Some more my family is big family." (JDHS15, Taoist)
Individual religious practices to cope with HIV	Internalising religious teachings	"I'm not scared of my life because I already- in Muslim we say 'redor'. Redor means is that, we already acceptance towards God, if he wants to take our life, we will accept. He will take, we will take. Because at that point, we have like um... say that 'God, if you want to take my life, go ahead. If you want me to live, I will live'. But I...I was very lucky enough, to say that... God has been behind my back." (JDDN28, Muslim)
	Prayer as healing	"Then almost fever very high then my blood pressure very low. So I was going to pass away but funny... my sisters, they come and pray for me la. Then don't know, a few days later, I get well again. I was deteriorating already. Almost, I almost going to go on. Then the doctor never told me anything about about the admission. [...] Miracle day. Miracle night. Saturday night, the miracle service. I... now I think I'm healed already. Because now I don't have this complication. Then my blood is always very good." (JDHS18, Christian)
Perceptions of HIV and people living with HIV in religious and spiritual contexts	Homophobia	"I don't get my HIV involved in my religion. Basically, because basically Christianity doesn't support, gays. So I tried to draw a line there, I separate them you know." (JDHS21, Christian) "Okay, I come from a Muslim family. So obviously that is this. I will, for the benefit, sake of my family, my parents, my siblings, there's no way I'm going to disclose my sexuality, one, HIV status definitely no." (JDIM13, Muslim)
	Prejudice against multiple concurrent sexual partnerships	"I have this admin lady at my unit who is really religious. She's as old as my mom. [...] But she holds these perceptions that, you know, she's against the LGBTQ population. And then she also thinks that only dirty people get HIV, if you're unfaithful. So that kind of shapes the way she also interacts. Because she does come across patients who come to our unit for interviews. So, and sometimes you can see that, that affects how she interacts with them." (RJAS05, contact tracer)
	Sex as taboo	"I mean, okay, first and foremost, there are religions that don't even tolerate homosexuality. And then when you talk about religion, you probably don't connect religion and sexual activity together. So in order to talk about HIV, you have to start talking about...you have to start normalizing sexual behavior first. But are religions able to do that? It's a question mark." (JDNC36, Hindu)
Morality and sin	Morality and sin	"I didn't ask for help from the church, because I didn't think the church would be...would understand. They would look at me 'Oh, this is a sin that you've committed, and this is the consequence of the sin that you've committed.' I still go to church, I still regularly attend Sunday Mass and everything. But like I said, my connection with this is my connection with God. Nobody else gets involved." (JDNC34, Catholic) "I think is just that... it's the way our people, especially Malay, they think is like, they always relate HIV with sin. [...] so what people always say is like, whenever they find out that we have HIV, they will say, 'Serve you right! This kind of sickness is due to your sin! This is your wrongdoing!' [...] when I say I was single mother all that, I went to one Islam Association. This is why I never asked for assistance anymore. The question is like, 'Why are you a single mother? Why your son look like this?' [...] And then 'Why are you not married? Why you have HIV?'. You know? 'How come? So are you like, you work as a prostitute before?'. You know these kinds of questions will make you shy away automatically." (JDHS12, Muslim)
	Dignity in death	"And usually for Muslim, we will open up our face our club and just kiss the face or the head. But for those people who live HIV when they die, they don't allow to do that; they will be covered totally and they can kiss not the head. [...] This is insulting." (JDMU04, Muslim)
Religious leaders still believe spaces are welcoming	Religious leaders still believe spaces are welcoming	"I'm not- I'm not telling you, oh, people should- no, no human being, fifth time I'm telling, no human being should be discriminated for his basic rights. But for the protection of the society, I must take note that he or she has been involved in such activities." (RJIH06, religious leader)