

Narratives of “coming out” among self-confessed members of the Filipino LGBTQ community

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ARTICLE INFO	ABSTRACT
<p>DOI:10.46223/HCMCOUJS.soci.en.14.1.3105.2024</p> <p>Received: November 30th, 2023</p> <p>Revised: January 30th, 2024</p> <p>Accepted: February 07th, 2024</p> <p>Keywords: coming out; gender identity; heteronormativity; homosexuality; LGBTQ</p>	<p>Heteronormativity is institutionalized and the LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) community often faces challenges because of their sexual orientation and gender preference. The process of coming out is contested and negotiated. With this observation, this study explores the salient experiences of selected members of the Filipino LGBTQ community regarding their coming out as homosexuals. A qualitative approach was used to gather and analyze data to comprehend the experiences of gay and lesbian individuals as they navigate their coming out journey. The study engages 25 participants through referrals. Findings reveal that non-heterosexual females exhibit a greater degree of fluidity in their gender identity, compared to non-heterosexual males, who primarily identify as gays. The process of “coming out” is deeply intertwined with the presence and acceptance of non-heterosexual individuals within the family.</p>

1. Introduction

The closet embodies a state of homosexual oppression arising from a condition of heterosexual dominance (Seidman, 2013). “Coming out of the closet” is the act of revealing one’s sexual orientation which was kept hidden to avoid societal fear and prejudice against gay people (Gorman-Murray, 2008; Maniago, 2018; Pedro & Bacud, 2020). It represents the process of identifying oneself as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, signifying a transition in one’s sexual identity (Gorman-Murray, 2008).

Individuals generally become aware of their sexuality when they experience same-sex attraction, typically between ages ten and fifteen, coinciding with the onset of heterosexual individuals’ sexual interest but may be delayed considerably longer if the individual perceives risks associated with coming out (Smith, 2016, as cited in McNabb, 2020).

The “coming out” process can be challenging as it deals with social norms, expectations, and possible risks (McNabb, 2020). Gay men fear association with heteronormative society, leading to closeted behavior in social and physical spaces (Choomgrant, 2014). Coming out liberates but does not erase shame and guilt (Seidman, 2013). Members of the LGBTQ community face challenges when sexual preferences are not widely accepted (Maniago, 2018; Pedro & Bacud, 2020). “Doing gender” maintains heteronormativity, subordinating homosexuals to heterosexuals in society (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). Heteronormativity refers to social standards that perpetuate traditional gender roles for men and women (Herz & Johansson, 2015). Social media plays a significant role in maintaining heteronormativity by promoting heterosexuality. In Malaysia, the media reflects a naturally homophobic culture, as seen in news coverage research (Aritatpokin, 2022).

Coming out is influenced by age, religion, disability, ethnicity, and LGBTQ identity (Leung, 2021). Older LGBTQ individuals from stigmatized eras may be less likely than the younger generations to disclose their sexuality openly (Leung, 2021). In India, non-heteronormative individuals face marginalization due to societal taboos and pressures favoring heteronormativity (Biswas & Chaudhur, 2019). Malaysian media often overlooks local homosexual activities despite their presence (Ho, 1998, as cited in Subir, 2019). Italian LGBTQ youths face family rejection due to strong cultural norms and traditional gender roles (Baiocco et al., 2015). Jackson (1999) recognizes the challenges in comparing same-sex experiences globally due to diverse cultural influences.

Baiocco et al. (2015) discovered a link between poor family dynamics and negative parental reactions to disclosing sexual orientation. Acceptance of LGBTQ parents in the traditional families is influenced by access to a circle of supportive friends and family, counseling services, and connections with other parents who have lesbian and gay children (Ghosh, 2019). The LGBTQ community represents a diverse spectrum of sexual preferences, including non-cisgender individuals assigned different genders at birth (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009).

Contrary to previous findings, Filipino youths mostly receive family support upon “coming out”, signaling acceptance (Pedro & Bacud, 2020). Similarly, Tang, Khor, and Chen (2020) found the legal recognition of same-sex partnerships in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Japan. When family members welcome and nourish sexual differences, heteronormativity is challenged, the family home is queered and non-heterosexual identities flourish within it (Gorman-Murray, 2008). In Southeast Asia, homosexual men faced impediments due to prevailing societal attitudes characterized by negative social constructions regarding homosexuality (Choomgrant, 2014).

This study evaluates the experiences of the self-confessed members of the Filipino LGBTQ community on their “coming out” experience with the following objectives: 1) describe participants’ gender identities; 2) determine the factors that shaped their gender identity; 3) determine the challenges and constraints of coming out to their family; and 4) identify the **coping mechanism they employ in** dealing with the challenges they faced in “coming out”.

2. Theoretical basis

The queer theory, according to Jagose (1996), is a theoretical lens that examines various culturally marginalized self-identifications that have evolved from the more traditional studies of lesbian and gay identities. Queers encompass other gender identities such as bisexuals, transsexuals, and transgenders. According to Jagose (1996), Queer theory challenges fixed identities, advocating fluidity shaped by social and cultural practices, and questioning the concept of identity.

Green (2007) identified two main aspects within queer theory: radical deconstructionism and radical subversion. Radical deconstructionism dismantles traditional views on sexual orientation, offering unconventional practices. Conversely, radical subversion challenges sexual orientation norms, emphasizing non-traditional behaviors as resistance. It disrupts our usual expectations and rules regarding sexuality. Gorman-Murray (2008) explored queer theory in home geographies, highlighting homes as supportive spaces for young LGBTQ individuals, not places of homophobia.

In this context, queer theory will be used to examine how participants perceive their gender identity in relation to the politics of sexuality. This analysis aims to ascertain whether their gender identity functions as a form of resistance or if it questions the fundamental concept of sexuality. Additionally, the exploration of the “coming out” process involves the study of the geographies of sexuality, to understand how individuals experience, express, challenge, and regulate their sexuality.

3. Methodology

This qualitative study analyzes the experiences of gay and lesbian individuals navigating coming out within the LGBTQ community. The study involved 25 LGBTQ individuals aged 18 - 25, focusing on their “coming out” experiences, a critical stage transitioning from adolescence to adulthood.

Participants consented to phone/video interviews after discussing the study’s nature. Interviews lasted 40 minutes to 1 hour, following an interview guide questionnaire. It consisted of three sections: personal background, coming out journey, and disclosure challenges. Section 1 covered gender identity, orientation, age, religion, and relationship status. Section 2 explored the realization of homosexuality, factors, and family reactions. Section 3 focused on challenges in disclosing gender identity and resolving them, including social acceptance from family and friends.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed, facilitating the coding process, as questions were organized around the study’s themes. To compare the narratives of non-heterosexual females and males, transcriptions were analyzed by group. This approach ensures that the analysis is based on the informants’ responses in the same gender category. The participants’ responses were systematically documented in a matrix to identify response patterns, which was the basis for generating thematic analysis. These emerging themes effectively encapsulate the most notable aspects of their experiences.

4. Result and discussion

4.1. Result

Exploring their gender identities: Non-heterosexual females and males

The fluid identities of the participants are reflected in their gender expressions. They are attracted to both men and women at different points, mainly when motivated or when these individuals express interest first. They are drawn to bisexuals for their blend of masculine and feminine traits, ability to embody both genders, and inclusive attitude toward others.

Bisexual females in same-sex relationships often maintain consistent femininity without major role changes. Their responses commonly reject extreme stereotypical femininity; some even perform tasks associated with men.

Non-heterosexual male participants express their gender identity through various expressions. Gays are attracted to men, not romantically interested in women. Gays embrace femininity, participating in traditionally female-associated activities. For example, they take on household chores like cleaning, cooking, and laundry, displaying meticulous and organized tendencies similar to those of women. These participants exhibit behaviors and interests commonly associated with femininity.

Among some bisexual females, cross-dressing is a relatively subtle expression of their sexual orientation. This is because wearing items like their brother’s clothes or caps appears unremarkable and is common among heterosexual women. They were similarly, lifting one leg while eating is performed with a sense of casual coolness. Other bisexual females do not feel like cross-dressing or mimicking behaviors and practices typically associated with the opposite sex. They remained true to themselves, wearing clothing that brought them comfort, with the only notable change being their expanded range of sexual attractions.

Among gay participants, there are a variety of approaches to dressing. Some of them choose to dress in a feminine manner, particularly during significant events. For instance, when participating in a beauty pageant, they wear women’s attire as a requirement to compete and potentially win. Similarly, they opt for a more feminine wardrobe at school events or gatherings. However, it is

essential to note that not all gay participants follow this pattern. Some prefer to maintain a masculine style, sticking to unisex t-shirts and casual jeans. They do not feel the need to crossdress, as they believe that it is not a necessary condition for being a part of the LGBTQ community. For them, wearing what is considered standard for straight men is perfectly acceptable.

On the other hand, not all lesbians envision adopting a masculine wardrobe; instead, they prefer to maintain their current appearance to break free from the stereotype that suggests lesbians should exclusively wear men's clothing. Their shared characteristic is their attraction to women. They engage in role-switching as they explore their desires and interests, refusing to confine themselves to societal expectations of what most women should do. Pansexuals are in the process of exploring their sexual orientation. Their gender identity encompasses "she" and "they" indicating they are not cisgender or heterosexual. They are still in the process of figuring out their gender identity as they are exposed to non-binary concepts of gender identity. Lastly, gender queers are not limited to those categories people used to identify themselves as part of the LGBTQ community nor those traditional binary understandings of both males and females. The only category that defines them is engaging in same-sex relationships.

The gender expressions, actions, activities, and perspectives of these participants serve as the foundation for their self-identification as members of the LGBTQ community. These aspects of their identity manifest in their daily lives, becoming visible to those around them who observe their various activities.

Factors associated with their gender identity

One respondent was confident of her lesbian identity as early as the age of four because she found herself attracted to girls who were like her. Furthermore, some gay participants expressed a substantial certainty about their gender identity, establishing it as early as the age of six and below. These participants firmly believe that no external factors influenced their gender identity. They assert that they inherently knew they were gay from the outset, feeling as though they were born with this particular gender identity.

For others, their understanding of their sexual orientation did not develop until they were in elementary or high school. Initially, they had a sense that there was something distinct in their gender identity. However, due to a lack of comprehensive knowledge and information about gender identity and sexual orientation at the time, they did not immediately recognize that they were gay. Over time, their understanding of their gender identity evolved, influenced by various factors that gradually shaped their self-awareness. The factors influencing their gender orientation often include their family, peers, and exposure to the LGBTQ community.

Non-heterosexual women believe that by spending much of their time with their male cousins and brothers within their family and being closely attached to their fathers, they gradually adopted their way of thinking and their perspectives on gender roles. Having a lesbian sister who is bringing home her girlfriend and the presence of other lesbians and bisexuals in their family provided the context where one participant became aware of the LGBTQ community.

The insights gathered from interviews with non-heterosexual men are closely intertwined with the factors influencing the gender identity of women. For example, one of the gay participants pointed to the significant influence of their female cousins. Spending much time with them affected their gender identities. Having sisters is also significant in the development of gay identities. Playing together with feminine toys contributes to their identity formation. Growing up under the care of one's grandmother is also a factor in the development of gay identity. Thus, acceptance and approval from family members can be instrumental in shaping one's gender identity. In one case, the support and

acceptance of family members played a pivotal role in the development of gay participants' gender identity. This acceptance allowed him to move freely within the household and behave in alignment with his gender identity.

Having been acquainted and being friends with the members of the LGBTQ community is considered by the participants to have influenced their gender identity. Having spent a lot of their time with their gay, lesbian, and bisexual friends influenced the way they frame their gender identity. For instance, in the everyday school life of the gay participants, almost all of their companions in school are girls. They hang out every day with their girlfriends.

Prominent social media personalities who openly identify as gay or lesbian can influence the process of coming out for others. By identifying with these figures, participants began exploring and acknowledging their same-sex interactions. In addition to social media influencers, actors portraying characters in the Boy Love series have played a role in shaping the gender identity of one gay participant. This influence is attributed to the widespread popularity of Boy Love stories, commonly referred to as the BL series, which has contributed to developing individuals' gender identities.

The experience of coming out

The coming out experience is a gradual process for many non-heterosexual females. Commonly, participants experience hesitation, fearing judgment and not feeling ready to share their true selves with the world. Concerns about disappointing their parents and the potential non-acceptance of their gender identity are common. According to previous studies, these concerns emanate from the observation that parents typically elicit adverse reactions to the sexual disclosure of their children (Aguilar & Rungduin, 2022).

Additionally, those who have seen their homosexual siblings face disappointments from their parents also worry about similar reactions if they were to reveal their gender identity. Even individuals who have been open with their families about their sexuality may still hesitate to reveal their gender identity.

Certain non-heterosexual females have not engaged in personal conversations with their families to discuss their true selves. They explained that since no one inquired, they chose not to disclose their gender identity personally. Instead, some revealed their identity through actions and behaviors, yet family members did not question these changes. For instance, they express their aversion to wearing dresses of extremely feminine attire typically associated with heterosexual females. They also preferred not to engage in traditionally feminine activities.

The narratives of non-heterosexual male and female participants are similar. For instance, gay participants did not explicitly disclose their gender identity to their families. Instead, they believe that their family members could deduce their sexual orientation based on their behavior and actions. These gay participants were confident that their families had already formed an understanding of their gender identity through their observable actions within the household. This included their choice of household chores, the gender of their friends, preferred games, toys, and favorite colors.

One specific experience of a gay participant in the study revealed that when he eventually came out to his family, they were not surprised. According to his family, they had been waiting for confirmation because they had already observed and perceived his sexual orientation right from the beginning. This observation indicates that their families had an intuitive understanding of their gender identity based on their actions and behaviors in the household.

Their family's acceptance of their gender identity

Several non-heterosexual females made the courageous choice to disclose their gender

identity to their mothers, hopeful that their mothers would be understanding. Fortunately, their mothers not only comprehended but also wholeheartedly accepted their decision. This newfound support bolstered their confidence, empowering them to open up to their entire family about their sexuality. Some are grateful that their families accepted them immediately upon sharing their gender identity, and a few even received reassuring words acknowledging that their sexuality is an inherent part of who they are, something beyond their control. For instance, according to one gay participant that the researcher interviewed, when he confessed about his gender identity, he was so happy because his family members accepted him. He was so glad to know that his family members encouraged him not to conceal his true gender identity and that he must show what he truly is. He must show to everyone that he is gay. According to him, being the sole son in his family makes him feel loved and supported by them.

Family support is a powerful expression of acceptance for individuals who are homosexuals. Some of these powerful expressions from family members are life advice that they give to non-heterosexual family members. Members of the LGBTQ community receive life advice from their families. It demonstrates their perception that nothing is inherently wrong with being gay and lesbian as long as one is not engaged in any harmful actions or harmful behaviors toward others. This life advice from family members helps this transgender male and females to continue doing good to others. For instance, the parents of one of the gay participants of this study stated that his mother advises him to show who he is while maintaining acts of good to others.

Moreover, this acceptance from one's family highlights their commitment to fostering their children's happiness by embracing their true selves. Several individuals are open with their families regarding their sexuality because their families are naturally inquisitive about their lives, making it unnecessary to conceal their identity. One participant even shared that her family was aware of her attraction to bisexuals, gays, lesbians, men, and women. Her sexual relationships have never posed any problems with her family.

These results align with previous research, such as the study by Pedro and Bacud in 2020, which indicates that modern Filipino families increasingly embrace and support their members who openly express their gender identity. This represents a significant step in challenging conventional heterosexual norms within households. As Gorman-Murray (2008) suggests, the social acceptance of non-heterosexual individuals within families not only fosters the growth of diverse sexual identities but also contributes to the transformation of family dynamics towards greater inclusivity and diversity.

Support, acceptance, and approval from family members play a crucial role in the lives of LGBTQ individuals, enhancing their self-confidence and allowing them to express their true selves. Family support is invaluable, as evidenced by two gay participants who acknowledged the backing and acceptance of their gender identity by their relatives. This positive dynamic was primarily attributed to the fact that some of their family members, including cousins, aunts, and uncles are also part of the LGBTQ community. This shared experience fosters an open, understanding environment within these families, enabling them to support their gay family members wholeheartedly.

The acceptance of LGBTQ individuals by their family members is deeply rooted in a focus on their character, personhood, and potential, rather than merely their gender identity. These families appreciate the positive attributes these gay individuals bring to their lives, such as humor and happiness, significantly contributing to their acceptance. They serve as a source of joy and contentment for their families. Furthermore, gays are seen as individuals with immense potential, capable of effecting positive change within their communities. Despite their gender identity, they are recognized as valuable contributors. For example, one participant with numerous achievements highlighted how his family focused on his accomplishments, not on his gender identity. His family

took pride in his achievements and supported him wholeheartedly. Trust plays a vital role in the equation as well. Family members trust that their LGBTQ members will not engage in activities that tarnish the family's reputation. This trust is built on the foundation of their daily good deeds and acts, leading to a sense of assurance and security within their family.

Outside the family, social acceptance is also demonstrated. Surprisingly, some churches have also taken a positive stance towards LGBTQ individuals. This acceptance within religious communities contributes to a more supportive environment for LGBTQ individuals, allowing them to pursue their true selves without fear of judgment and discrimination.

Experiencing rejection is part of the process

For non-heterosexual female and male participants, the fear of rejection is a significant aspect of their reluctance to come out. Some participants expressed how excruciating it is when this rejection comes from their family or their partner's family. One participant recounted her experience when her parents discovered she had a girlfriend, and they initially did not accept it. Afterward, she and her girlfriend had to navigate the challenging process of seeking their approval for their relationship.

Another participant felt hurt by her father's inability to accept her bisexuality, leading to judgment rather than understanding. One participant has devoutly religious relatives, and they advised her to overcome her homosexuality through fervent prayers, suggesting that she is missing a connection with God. This aligns with the experience of one gay participant, who shared that his family's religious beliefs reject homosexuality. Consequently, he frequently received advice regarding adjusting his behavior to conform to their religious views, particularly during family gatherings. Another gay participant also cited religion as a significant factor in his decision not to disclose his gender identity to his family. For these individuals, religion serves as a substantial obstacle to coming out, as they fear the potential lack of acceptance both within their religious community and within their own family.

Several of the participants experienced rejection from their partner's family. They encountered a cold reception, indicating clear disapproval of the relationship. Despite their determination to fight for their relationships, some eventually ended them.

Some of them have suffered from depression due to the discrimination, disapproval, and rejection they have faced. It is also painful to hear people talking behind their backs, making disparaging comments about how their girlfriend is seen as a disappointment to her family because she has chosen to be in a relationship with a woman.

Gays experience rejection, discrimination, and bullying in school and community. They shared that they endure bullying in school, with classmates subjecting them to hurtful taunts and derogatory language related to their sexual orientation. This discrimination posed a significant obstacle to their ability to engage in activities to express their true selves. In response to these hostile behaviors, some gay individuals felt compelled to conform to the actions and behaviors expected of heterosexual individuals, solely to evade discrimination and hurtful remarks from their peers.

Another distressing aspect of their school experiences was the prevalence of misconceptions surrounding being gay. Straight male classmates initially held prejudiced beliefs, viewing homosexuality as if it were a contagious disease. Fortunately, through continued interaction, these stereotypes eventually faded, as their classmates came to understand that being gay did not make them any different from others or carry a contagious aspect.

Beyond the school environment, gays faced rejection within their communities. They perceive a lack of readiness and openness towards the LGBTQ community, attributing it to the narrow-minded thinking of their fellow community members. This narrow-mindedness results in the derogatory use

of the term “gay” in public spaces and even catcalling directed at them while walking down the street. In one instance, a gay participant running for a position in his community encountered skepticism from the community, which questioned his capability based on his gender identity. This prevailing bias produces the thinking that their opportunities are limited compared to their heterosexual counterparts, prompting some to make extra efforts to excel and avoid potential failures.

Coping mechanism associated with their experience

Some of the gay participants do not have issues with regard to their gender identity. They do not experience struggles in their “coming out” because they are accepted by their family, relatives, friends, and community. One female bisexual participant considers being bisexual as more advantageous than being lesbian or gay. She observes that society seems to have a harder time accepting gays and lesbians because they pose a challenge to heteronormativity. These groups often face discrimination and are looked down upon by closely-minded individuals. She felt fortunate for not having experienced such suffering herself. However, it also saddened her to know that there were members of the LGBTQ community who were enduring such unfair treatment.

However, some participants still have bad experiences in terms of their coming out. They have coping mechanisms to help themselves manage the painful and challenging emotions that they feel from discrimination, bullying, and rejection of people around them. From the narratives of non-heterosexual female participants, three key themes emerged: 1) prioritizing their well-being by disregarding criticisms and negative feedback, 2) embracing their true selves and acknowledging the challenges that come with it, and 3) building a support network.

One way of shielding themselves from the impact of hurtful words is to allow these hurtful words to pass through one ear and out on the other ear to ensure that they will not suffer or become affected by them. Another way of doing it is to ignore these “dramas” and remind themselves not to make a big issue. They must remind themselves of the impossibility of pleasing everyone because self-entitled, opinionated, and insensitive people populate the world. In essence, they allow society to voice its negative criticisms, enabling the expression of differing opinions without letting these opinions affect them. Rather than subjecting themselves to unnecessary stress, they engage in household chores to keep themselves occupied and avoid dwelling on negative thoughts.

Participants embrace their gender identity, understanding that not everyone will accept them. They prioritize self-acceptance as the most critical aspect of their journey. However, self-acceptance is easier and less complicated when supported by one’s family and friends.

Some gay individuals rely on their friends as a vital source of support and resilience. These friends serve as coping mechanisms, offering advice, motivation, and emotional solace during times of distress caused by the bullying and rejection they often endure from others. This unwavering support from their friends empowers gay people to persevere in their endeavors. Openness with their friends is paramount, as it not only allows them to feel at ease but also enables their friends to reciprocate support. For instance, one gay participant shared his practice of inviting both straight male and female friends for casual gatherings, emphasizing not concealing one’s life and this act of sharing fosters an environment of mutual support.

In addition to relying on their friends, gays also find strength within themselves. They demonstrate their sense of agency by becoming vocal advocates for LGBTQ issues, actively engaging in social media, school, and local communities. Recognizing that many people remained closed minded about LGBTQ matters, some participants dedicate their time to elucidate the rights, privileges, and opportunities within the LGBTQ community when relevant issues arise on social media platforms. Their participation in PRIDE marches exemplifies their commitment to solidarity

with fellow LGBTQ community members. This advocacy is vital for upholding the rights and ensuring the protection of LGBTQ individuals.

Moreover, personal and character development is considered an essential aspect of coping with the challenges of being gay. By broadening their perspectives and envisioning a future where LGBTQ acceptance is observed, these individuals foster a sense of inner strength. They also seek to understand the underlying reasons behind negative attitudes and actions directed towards them without losing sight of self-recognition. Self-awareness and understanding of their capabilities become crucial in navigating the trials of coming out and remaining resolute, even in the face of societal resistance.

Embracing their gender identity and being confident about it enables them to confront any issues that may arise because of their affiliation with the LGBTQ community. Being assured of themselves and their identities allows them to confront the world with resilience and determination regardless of their challenges.

4.2. Discussion

As the boundaries of gender roles become increasingly fluid and less distinct, gender expression is often seen as a reflection of an individual's sexual orientation (Valsecchi et al., 2022). Individuals who display characteristics of femininity as males or masculinity as females are often categorized as gender-nonconforming, as they diverge from traditional gender stereotypes (Toomey, Ryan, Diaz, Card, & Rusell, 2010). However, despite this evolving fluidity of gender, non-heterosexual individuals may still harbor reservations about openly embracing and expressing their gender identity. This hesitance may stem from societal pressures or personal concerns. This highlights the complexity of gender expression and the impact of societal norms on individuals' perception of their identities.

Gender nonconformity persists despite the pervasive influence of cultural norms that promote adherence to gender stereotypes. The participants encompass a spectrum of gender identities, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, pansexual, and genderqueer. These gender identities encompass a range of expressions, from adhering to traditional gender binaries to challenging stereotypes associated with homosexuality (Walker, 2020).

According to Love (2016), lesbians express female masculinity not as a means of emulating men, but rather as a method through which masculine lesbians construct their gender identity. Contrary to the previous findings, it was found in this study that lesbians defy societal norms regarding female behavior without feeling the need to adopt traditionally masculine traits. They reject the notion that they must be overtly masculine to assert their gender identity, opting for a more nuanced approach.

In contrast, gay individuals often embrace feminine identity and engage in activities traditionally associated with women to express their identity. Villicana, Delucio, and Biernat (2016) found out that gay White men openly and verbally disclose their gender identity to connect with the broader gay community and to seek understanding and solidarity in their shared struggles.

Bisexuals, on the other hand, maintain a consistent expression of their femininity, even when attracted to individuals of different genders. Cross-dressing can serve as a notable sign of their sexual orientation, though some may adapt their clothing style to reflect the breadth of their attractions. In a qualitative study conducted by Pennington (2009) among bisexuals, it was found that bisexuals adhere to traditional models of masculinity and femininity in their relationship with both men and women while others resist these norms to a greater extent.

Pansexuals and genderqueer individuals occupy a particular fluid space in this spectrum, as their sexuality transcends conventional concepts of gender identity. It is worth noting that queer identities are primarily defined by individuals to whom they are attracted rather than how they perform gender through their actions and activities. In today's society, participants no longer feel the same pressure to constantly demonstrate their gender identity through speech, clothing, and interactions as they once did.

Researchers lack consensus on the factors contributing to the development of non-heterosexual orientation despite a multitude of research examining genetic, social, and cultural influences (American Psychological Association, 2008). In this study, while a few individuals believe that their queerness is inherent, that they were born to be queer, the majority attribute their gender identity to the influence of their family, peers, and exposure to the LGBTQ community. This influence often stems from interactions with the opposite sex, shaping their thinking and the roles they adopt in society. Spending substantial time with these individuals profoundly impacts their gender identity. Notably, having other queer individuals within their family and peers has heightened their awareness of the LGBTQ community.

Social media influencers advocating LGBTQ rights, along with the portrayal of homosexuality in television series and print media, collectively exposed the participants to various aspects of queer identity. For instance, the prevalence of boy love series/dramas in Thailand creates a safe space within a heterosexual society, showcasing the possibility of same-sex desire and fostering discourse on same-sex relationships (Zhang & Dedman, 2021). Although boy love series originated in Japan, they have become an integral part of popular culture in Thailand (Lacap, 2023). In contrast, such series are limited in their visibility within mass media or social media platforms in the Philippines, leading younger Filipino viewers to gravitate toward the Thai BL Series (Lacap, 2023).

The process of "coming out" is gradual, marked by a sense of hesitation among participants who fear potential judgment, disappointing their families, and facing rejection from society. This is because non-heterosexual individuals encounter minority stress, including stigma, prejudice, and discrimination, leading to a hostile and stressful environment that contributes to mental health issues among gay, lesbian, and bisexual individuals (Meyer, 2003). Indeed, the "coming out" journey poses challenges and complexities involving societal norms, expectations, and potential risks (McNabb, 2020).

It is crucial to understand that "coming out" for non-heterosexual females does not always involve a single, significant disclosure moment. Instead, it is an ongoing journey that unfolds over time. These individuals express their true gender identity not through direct communication but rather through their actions and behaviors, often rejecting extremely feminine attires associated with heterosexual females. Similarly, Morris (1997) discovered that the coming out process for lesbians is multi-faceted, involving the recognition of lesbian identity, disclosure of sexual orientation, sexual expression, behavior, and the cultivation of sexual consciousness. Conversely, for gays, it may entail behaviors traditionally seen as feminine.

Coming out marks a significant milestone for non-heterosexual youths, as they strive for validation and support from both family and peers, internalizing these reactions deeply. Consequently, the responses of their immediate family to their disclosure of sexual orientation significantly shape their self-perception within the non-heterosexual identity (Willoughby, Malik & Lindahl, 2006). Remarkably, the majority of these individuals experienced acceptance from their families, who used the terms like "understanding", "support", "reassuring words", "acceptance", "encouragement", and "life advice" to describe their reactions. This positive familial response is in line with the findings of Aritatpokin's study (2022), which indicated that Thai respondents generally had a more optimistic perspective on coming out to acquaintances compared to disclosing their sexual orientation to strangers.

This family acceptance serves several purposes. First, it contributes to the happiness and self-confidence of their children, enabling them to embrace gender identity more fully and foster a higher level of well-being. Second, it demonstrates that families value their members based on their character and achievements rather than adhering to gender stereotypes. Third, it plays a pivotal role in challenging conventional beliefs about sexuality. Having LGBTQ members within the family encouraged other participants to “come out” at an earlier stage. According to Jerome, Ting, and Yeoh (2021), social acceptance of LGBTQ individuals is attributed to the recognition of their humanity and the acknowledgment of their equal rights as heterosexual individuals, which cannot be infringed upon.

However, this social acceptance comes with certain conditions. Gays are expected to refrain from actions that might tarnish the family’s reputation, a condition imposed to challenge the misconception that homosexuality is inherently harmful. This condition serves to liberate individuals from the stigma associated with being homosexual. Despite the societal acceptance of LGBTQ community members, some individuals within this community may not feel comfortable disclosing their sexual orientation. For instance, in a study by Aritatpokin (2022) involving 100 queer Thai individuals, 59% expressed discomfort in openly identifying as members of the LBGTQ community. Additionally, 52.5% did not anticipate receiving social benefits solely from coming out as gay (Aritatpokin, 2022).

Participants admitted experiencing the reluctance to “come out”. It emanates from their fear of rejection, which can take two distinct forms: rejection of their gender identity and rejection of their same-sex relationship. Individuals from conservative families often grapple with the challenge of their parent’s inability to accept their sexuality, with religion playing a significant role in shaping this conservative perspective. The influence of religion is seen as a substantial hurdle to the process of “coming out” since it can impact both the perception of their family and community of homosexuality. According to a survey conducted among 570 university students in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, the influence of Confucian values contributed to their decreased acceptance of same-sex marriage. The findings indicate that, on average, these students strongly oppose the legalization of same-sex marriage, citing concerns that it would result in societal moral decay (Le, 2023).

Rejections about homosexuality take various forms, with gays being more likely to experience them compared to lesbians, bisexuals, pansexuals, and genderqueer individuals. This difference is associated with how gays navigate gender performativity, openly embracing practices traditionally associated with heterosexual females. In a context where homophobia is prevalent, gays often encounter rejection, discrimination, and bullying. The aversion to homosexuality is perpetuated by the unfounded belief that being gay is akin to a contagious disease. This perception is not confined to the Philippines. Similar views are prevalent in Southeast Asian countries as well. For instance, a majority of newspapers in Malaysia depict homosexual individuals as suffering from psychological issues, particularly emotional and mental disorders (Subir, 2019). This homophobic sentiment also manifests in local politics, where homosexuality is unfairly equated with a perceived lack of leadership ability. On the other hand, lesbians and bisexual females primarily face rejection from their partner’s family, yet they persistently seek ways to gain approval for their relationship.

Their narratives underscore the dual nature of coping with the challenges and difficulties associated with their sexuality, with individual and social aspects playing crucial roles. Establishing supportive networks emerges as a critical factor in addressing the challenges tied to their identities. When viewed as a collective endeavor, coping is exemplified by key elements such as offering advice, seeking approval, extending support, and providing motivation. Furthermore, self-empowerment is intrinsically linked to various social platforms that advocate for the rights and well-being of LGBTQ individuals.

5. Conclusions & recommendations

In line with the objectives of queer theory, which seeks to challenge conventional notions of identity politics, participants in this context perceive their gender identity as fluid and flexible. This stance stands in opposition to the essentialist view inherent in the binary model, which tends to oversimplify the intricacies of gender and sexuality. Their “coming out” experiences align with Green’s (2007) concept of radical deconstructionism, as they actively question and disrupt traditional perspectives on sexual orientation.

A noteworthy observation is that non-heterosexual females exhibit a greater degree of fluidity in their gender identity, representing a broader spectrum of gender expressions compared to non-heterosexual males, who primarily identify as gays. The divergence suggests that women, in particular, possess a heightened capacity for reimagining and reinventing their identities.

In the context of Green’s (2007) concept of radical subversion, which emphasizes non-conventional behaviors as a means of resisting established gender norms, we find that gay individuals often engage in practices like cross-dressing and embracing femininity to challenge the binary model associating identity with an individual’s assigned sex at birth. However, it is essential to note that despite these efforts, the gender performance of gay individuals can sometimes still perpetuate aspects of the binary model, as they may draw inspiration from practices associated with heterosexual females. On the other hand, non-heterosexual females avoid extensive reinvention of their practices and gender performance. Instead, they tend to adopt a more neutral lifestyle, downplaying the overt transformation of their identities. This approach can be seen as a strategy for avoiding the socially constructed stereotype of lesbians as individuals attempting to emulate heterosexual males.

The process of “coming out” is deeply intertwined with various factors such as age, religion, disability, ethnicity, and LGBTQ identity (Leung, 2021). This study, however, links explicitly this process to individual’s perception of their family’s reactions. As articulated by Gorman-Murray (2008), the concept of “queering the family” arises when heterosexual parents and other family members embrace and nurture the complexities of sexuality, extending their acceptance to family members existing within the diverse spectrum of gender identities.

The presence and acceptance of non-heterosexual individuals, both male and female, within the family may have played a pivotal role in reshaping family dynamics, leading to a more open and embracing response when the participants decided to come out. This experience suggests that families can evolve to encompass a broader range of gender identities, fostering a more inclusive environment. Consequently, it is more reasonable to anticipate that a more comprehensive array of gender identities will emerge within heterosexual families that wholeheartedly embrace the diverse expressions of human sexuality.

Given the limitations of this study, the following are recommended. First, it would also be worthwhile to investigate heterosexual parents’ acceptance when their family members “come out”. Additionally, examining whether parents of individuals who “come out” experience any stigma may be valuable. Furthermore, it would be helpful to explore the relationship between “coming out” and the well-being and life satisfaction of LGBTQ members. Since the current study is qualitative, a future study could employ quantitative methods. This study could involve comparing the “coming out” experiences of LGBTQ members from different social classes, religious backgrounds, age groups, and family types.

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