Navigating Identity: Unpacking the Lived Experiences of Filipino Homosexual Men in Muslim Communities

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Abstract

Homosexuals around the world continue to face discrimination. This historical stigma is rooted and propagated by the cultural and religious values held by communities. Over the years, however, accepting individuals for who they are become increasingly recognized as essential. This study aims to address the existing gaps and to inform the development of culturally informed support services and promote greater understanding and acceptance among Muslim communities by emphasizing the unique context of Lanao del Sur, southern Philippines. These research questions guided the study: (1) How do Filipino homosexual men in a Muslim community experience the intersectionality of their sexual identity and religious environment? and (2) How do they negotiate and make sense of dual pressure of religious conformity and personal authenticity?   Using qualitative design, the study involved seven Muslim men in the Philippines, aged 21 to 35, who identify as homosexual. This age range was selected to capture individuals likely to have developed a stable sense of identity and to have encountered a range of experiences related to their sexual orientation. Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling. Findings reveal how these individuals navigate the delicate balance between their sexual identity and the religious and cultural expectations that shape their social environment. They emphasize the pervasive impact of stigma and social isolation, while also highlighting the resilience fostered through coping strategies and social support networks.

Keywords: *Filipino Homosexual Men, Homosexuality, LGBTIA+, Lanao del Sur, Philippines*

Introduction

Homosexuals around the world continue to face discrimination, which remains a persistent global issue. This greatly impacts their well-being, relationships, and freedom of expression (Peter Tatchell Foundation, 2025). This historical stigma is rooted and propagated by the cultural and religious values held by communities. While major world religions have varying perspectives on homosexuality (with some advocating inclusivity), many still uphold a negative disposition (Ayoub & Stoeckl, 2024). Homosexuality, defined as the attraction to individuals of the same sex, encompass a person's social identity, behaviors, personal preferences, and affiliations (Rainbow Directory of New Zealand, 2025). The act of affirming one's identity as gay or homosexual is influenced by many factors, including self-acceptance, culture, social expectations, and the rule of law (Tamilchelvan & Rashid, 2017). Over the years, accepting individuals for who they are become increasingly recognized as essential. Individuals who identify as homosexuals face significant struggles related to their identity as they attempt to harmonize sexual orientation with their religious and cultural identities and adopt different coping mechanisms to manage the challenges and consequences within and outside of their religious communities (Cuenca, 2010).

In Islam, where gays are sometimes viewed as sinners (Zulkffli & Rashid, 2016), attitudes against homosexuality are more emphasized. The "coming out" can lead to significant personal, social, and even legal consequences. "Being gay" is considered deviant, corrupt, and rebelling against God, which takes off no plausibility for recognizing gay as Muslim (Jamal 2001; Siraj 2009). Islam perceives homosexuality as a resistance to its teachings (Tamilchelvan & Rashid, 2017). While contemporary researchers have attempted to interpret the Qur'an in ways that may be more inclusive of homosexuality (Jamal, 2001), these interpretations remain largely unaccepted by the broader Islamic community. This lack of acceptance has contributed to a scholarly gap, as discussions often focus on theological debates rather than lived realities. Consequently, investigations into the experience and identities of gay individuals within Islamic contexts remain limited in literature.

The present study aims to address the existing gaps and to inform the development of culturally informed support services and promote greater understanding and acceptance among Muslim communities by emphasizing the unique context of Lanao del Sur. By using qualitative approaches, future research can further examine personal experiences, resilience strategies, and culturally sensitive interventions. To achieve these objectives, the study is guided by the following research questions: (1) How do Filipino homosexual men in a Muslim community experience the intersectionality of their sexual identity and religious environment? and (2) How do they negotiate and make sense of dual pressure of religious conformity and personal authenticity?

As we embark on this sensitive exploration, we must approach the subject with respect for both the individuals involved and the broader cultural context. The stories of these homosexual men, living at the intersection of faith, tradition, and personal truth, offer a unique window into the human experience of identity formation under challenging circumstances. Through their stories, we obtain useful accounts of their experiences which include, but are not limited to, the encountered challenges and coping strategies they have developed. Overall, this study offers in-depth insight into the complex issues surrounding

homosexual identity and the discrimination often associated with it. The findings contribute to the existing literature and may inform future research and the development of interventions that support the LGBTQIA+ community while promoting broader societal awareness and inclusivity. Thus, this study aligns with the UN Sustainable Development Goals: SDG 5 - Gender Equality and SDG 10 - Reduced Inequalities.

Phenomenology, developed by Edmund Husserl and Martin Heidegger, is both a philosophical and methodological approach to studying how individuals experience their importance in the world (Smith, 2018). In this study, an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology was used to unpack a person's subjective experiences and thought processes in making sense of their experiences (Smith & Eatough, 2007; Smith, 2015). This framework supports the present study in uncovering how participants navigate their lives within their communities while reconciling their religious and sexual identities. It allows for a deeper understanding of how they practice their religious and cultural affiliations, confront challenges and societal expectations. It provides a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences of emotional, psychological, and social difficulties, their learned adaptive strategies, and the complex intersection between sexual orientation, religion, and cultural norms that mostly stigmatize non-heterosexual orientations.

This study adopts an insightful approach by emphasizing the first-person accounts of gay men in Muslim communities, providing a deeper understanding of their lived experiences. This method of analysis examines how individuals manage the complicated intersection between their sexual identification, religion and cultural norms that mostly stigmatize non-heterosexual orientations. An example of this is how participants reconcile their religious teachings to affirm their sexual identity or navigate the dual pressures of cultural expectations and personal identity. By examining these intersections, the research can unwrap the complex and nuanced ways in which the individual participants construct and express their identities within a complex and challenging social environment.

As the theoretical foundation of this research, the phenomenological approach deepens our understanding of identity development while emphasizing the importance of empathy and inclusion in examining marginalized perspectives. Through this lens, the study contributes to broader discussions on the intersection of religion, culture, and sexuality, and provides a platform to amplify the voices of those who are often unheard.

Review of Related Literature

While there are Muslim-majority countries that adopt a more lenient approach, many still enforce traditional laws. According to Statistica Research Department, as of 2024, homosexuality is criminalized in 64 countries, with most of these nations situated in the Middle East, Africa, and Asia (BBC News, 2023). Among the countries that penalize homosexuality are Saudi Arabia, Iran, Afghanistan, Brunei, Pakistan, and parts of Nigeria, with punishments ranging from small fines to the death penalty. In a qualitative study by Jaspal and Cinnirella (2010), interviews with British Pakistani men who identified as both Muslim and gay revealed that the identity threats often stemmed from the perceived incompatibility between their sexual and religious identities. Their research also suggests that gay men in Muslim communities employ various strategies to navigate their identities. However, it is important to note that this study focused on British Pakistani men, highlighting coping mechanisms such as identity compartmentalization and selective disclosure (Jaspal,

2010). The experiences of homosexual men in other Muslim communities may vary depending on their distinct cultural and religious contexts, as identity negotiation is shaped by localized traditions, norms, and theological interpretations (Siraj, 2012).

The Philippines, while still considered a developing nation, is notable for its progressive stance towards the LGBTQIA+ community. According to a 2013 survey of Pew Research Center comparing seven Asia-Pacific countries, the Philippines emerged as the most "gay-friendly" nation in the region. Moreover, the Philippines has been recognized as one of the leading tourist destinations in Asia and among the most LGBTQIA-friendly countries in the world (Pew Research Center, 2013). Tolerance, however, does not equate to acceptance. A recent survey indicates that acceptance of homosexuality in the Philippines remained largely unchanged between 2013 and 2019 (Abad, 2020). While approximately 73% of Filipinos - most of whom are Catholic - believe that society should accept homosexuality, about 65% also consider homosexuality immoral (Abad, 2019).

While there are still LGBTIA+ Filipinos being rejected by their families as a result of coming out, Muslims in the Philippines face even more complex challenges. Amnesty International (2023) reports on the pervasive discrimination and violence faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). The survey highlights the heightened vulnerability of LGBTQIA+ Muslims to harassment, arbitrary arrest, and violence due to their sexual orientation or gender identity; intersection of faith, culture, and sexuality creates a complex tapestry of human experiences. Cuenca's (2010) qualitative research on Muslim homosexual men in the Philippines highlights the dual pressures of religious conformity and individual authenticity in the coming out process. It also shows that many rely on support networks within the LGBTQIA+ and progressive Muslim communities to combat social isolation. While the Philippines does not criminalize homosexuality, a lack of discriminatory legislation and absence of legal protection add to stigma and discrimination and perpetuate mental health issues and suicide risk among LGBTQIA+ people.

For example, a 2018 article highlights the challenges faced by the LGBTQIA+ community in Marawi, including experiences of violence and threats. The conservative atmosphere of the city, influenced by Islamic traditions, having been shaped by Islamic heritage, has created a chaotic and discouraging environment for LGBTQIA+ people. Numerous LGBTQIA+ individuals have reported feeling unsafe and have chosen to flee the city, citing increased instances of ridicule, domestic abuse, and discrimination in educational settings (GlobalPost, 2018). While this outward migration underscores the severity of hostility faced, it also highlights an urgent need to understand the lives of those who remain, particularly homosexual men who must continuously negotiate their sexuality within their communities.

Methodology

The study involved seven Muslim men in the Philippines, aged 21 to 35, who identify as homosexual. This age range was selected to capture individuals likely to have developed a stable sense of identity and to have encountered a range of experiences related to their sexual orientation. This developmental phase is often called 'emerging adulthood', which is a liminal phase in one's life when identity consolidation occurs amidst existential risks (Arnett, 2004). This age bracket aligns with the phenomenological inquiry into Dasein's

(German term for existence) authenticity as the young adults face peak tensions between internalized heteronormativity and self-disclosure in conservative contexts. Demographically, this age-group comprises 62% of the urban Muslim youth workforce in Mindanao (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2023) while increased underemployment of 32% exacerbates precarity in identity (DOLE, 2025).

Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling, based on their alignment with the research objectives. Initial contact was made via text, phone call, or Facebook Messenger, followed by a confirmation message to verify their willingness to participate. Individuals who did not respond within 24 hours were excluded and not contacted again. Participants were also excluded from final analysis if they declined or withdrew consent or failed to attend scheduled interviews.

Those who participated took part in in-depth, individual interviews focusing on their lived experiences, challenges, and perspectives within their communities. To ensure participant safety and well-being, the researchers provided informed consent procedures, research orientation, emotional debriefing, and, when necessary, post-research support such as counseling referrals and follow-up communication. The study was conducted with strict adherence to ethical standards, including the protection of anonymity, confidentiality, and cultural sensitivity, particularly in the religious context of where the informants live.

Research instrument

To ensure the reliability and validity of the data, participants were provided with a detailed informed consent form outlining the research objectives, ethical considerations, and interview expectations. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured, in-depth interviews using an interview guide developed by the researchers and reviewed by the research adviser. The guide featured open-ended questions designed to explore the lived experiences of homosexual men in Muslim-dominated communities. Additional tools, such as research notes and audio recording equipment, were used to ensure thorough documentation and accessibility of the data for analysis.

The interview questions were framed to elicit rich narratives about participants' experiences navigating their sexual identity within the religious and cultural norms of their context. Sample questions asked during the interview included: (1) What experiences are unique to you as a homosexual Muslim man? (2) What challenges in the past have you faced regarding your sexual identity? (3) What was your family's reaction when they learned about your sexual identity? (4) How do you cope with the challenges you encounter in relation to your sexual identity? (5) How do you feel when you participate in community gatherings such as family events (e.g. reunion, celebrations, funeral) and religious activities (e.g. congregation prayer in a mosque)? (6) How do your insights, realizations, and reflections from your experience shape your aspirations for the future?

Data collection

Identified participants were invited by the researchers for one-on-one interviews depending on the modalities that the participants were comfortable with. Seven participants were interviewed face to face inside a tertiary academic institution in Marawi City. While three participants were interviewed online using google meet due to their personal preference

and for feasibility of the interviewers living outside Marawi City. The interviews lasted for an hour to one hour and thirty minutes maximum. Upon providing consent, participants received a more detailed orientation outlining the study's objectives, expected duration of the interview, the type of questions they will be asked, and the general expectations regarding their participation.   All face-to-face and online interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim. The interviewer documented both verbal and non-verbal responses using audio recordings, interview guides, and field note sheets. Debriefing was conducted immediately after each interview to ensure the wellbeing of the participants. During the debriefing process, participants were given the opportunity to express any concerns or emotional reactions. No adverse effects were reported.

Data analysis

In the qualitative data analysis of this study, the researchers utilized Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) to explore the lived experiences of Filipino homosexual men within a Muslim community in Lanao del Sur, Philippines. In line with IPA methodology (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014), the researchers immersed themselves into the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts to establish a rich, deep understanding of each participant's story. In a process of initial noting, the transcripts were read line-by-line to search for salient statements and phrases, with descriptive and conceptual comments noted to try to capture the participants' experiences and meaning-making. The codes were generated inductively, closely reflecting the participants' own words and views. These codes were then grouped into emergent themes for each single case, respecting the idiographic approach of IPA.

Following individual analysis, cross-case analysis was carried out by the researchers, comparing and contrasting themes across all participants to determine both common patterns and individual experiences. Overarching themes were built to capture the group's collective essence while still acknowledging individual differences. The research team participated in iterative discussion to sharpen and validate themes, using reflexive journaling and peer debriefing to reduce bias and ensure cultural sensitivity. Where relevant, member checking was undertaken by providing initial findings to a limited set of participants for comment. All final themes were synthesized into a coherent story, supported by direct quotes to show main points, and interpretations based on both the participants' everyday realities and the wider phenomenological context. Throughout analysis, rigorous ethical principles were upheld, guaranteeing the anonymity and confidentiality of participants, and treating sensitive information with utmost care in respect to the unique cultural and religious environment of Lanao del Sur. The subsequent results were presented to the participants to allow them to review and reflect with the findings. These participants affirmed that the analysis is genuine in capturing their lived experience.

Findings

The findings of the study highlight the lived experiences of Filipino homosexual men in a Muslim community in Lanao del Sur, Philippines, and the ways in which they make sense of these experiences. In answering the research questions: What are the lived experiences of homosexual men living in a Muslim community and how do they make sense of these experiences. Particularly, what are the experiences of Filipino homosexual men in terms of experiences in navigating their sexual identity within the religious beliefs and

cultural norms of their context and how they make sense of these experiences?

Table 1. Superordinate and subthemes of Filipino Homosexual Men living in a Muslim Community

Superordinate Theme	Subthemes
1. Experiences of marginalization and moral mothering in religious context	- Discrimination in sacred spaces - Social ostracization within kinship and community - Moral rejection and threats to divine punishment
2. Balancing faith, identity, and beliefs	- Integration of religious upbringing and identity - Shared humor as a collective resilience
3. Reflections and aspirations	- Advancing acceptance, respect, and affirmation of LGBTQIA+ Identities - Fostering inclusive education to reduce LGBTQIA+ - Discrimination and Extremism

Experience of marginalization and moral mothering in a religious context

This theme captures how participants navigate the pain of being morally judged, socially excluded, and spiritually condemned within a religiously grounded cultural setting. Their identities as LGBTQIA+ individuals are not only questioned but also framed as deviant and sinful leading to emotional harm, fractured belonging, and self-regulation of expression. These experiences are shaped by religious discourse, social expectations, and family dynamics.

Based on this result, community members - such as family members, religious figures, and other community members - assume the role of moral guardians, pressuring the participants to conform to the accepted gender roles that are based on their culture and religion. Oftentimes, this pressure results in internalized conflict between self-authenticity and community acceptance. Participants feel that expression of their identities is being framed as corrupt, deviant or sinful, and in extreme cases, moral policing escalates to humiliation, dehumanization, and degradation, where participants were labeled as "others," "animals," *pimorkaan* (societal curses), and rebelling against God, which causes feelings of disownment, condemnation, and isolation. This situation affirms Cuenca's (2010) findings, which emphasized the tension (pressure) between religious conformity and individual authenticity experienced by Muslim male homosexual in the Philippines. This struggle had been reported among British Pakistani men, where the community actively forced individuals to conceal their existence. Thus, *moral mothering* became a tool for maintaining social order, often at the cost of an individual's psychological well-being and sense of belonging, and not as a nurturing force.

Discrimination in sacred spaces

Participants shared deeply painful experiences of being marginalized within religious spaces, particularly during acts of worship that are central to the life of Muslims particularly

during congregation prayers. The mosque, a space for refuge, becomes a place where their identity is not only questioned but morally rejected. For instance, Voltage shared a distressing memory during the *taraweeh* (night) prayer at the masjid where he was told by another worshiper that he must "have a separate mosque" simply for being gay. Similarly, Jaff avoids Friday congregation prayers due to repeated sermons condemning homosexuality whenever he is around, describing the embarrassment of being silently judged by those who are aware of his identity. These accounts highlight how spaces meant for spiritual reflection and unity become a source of shame, alienation, and fear, forcing participants to withdraw from religious practices or navigate it with caution and emotional restraint.

> *Aydoo. Ito yung pinaka worst na experience ko… after ng prayer sabi nya sa akin "hoy kayo, dapat ma separate kayo ng sarili nyong masjid". Ayy, na offend ako. … Lumabas ako kasi nahurt ako… Sa mga time na yon, sobra yung hagulgol ko, grabe akong nasaktan.* (aydoo. This is the worst experience that I had… after the prayer he told me that "hey, you must have your own separate mosque". Ayy, I was offended. … I went out because I was hurt. … During those times, I cried a lot, I was deeply hurt.)

> *Umiiwas ako to attend the Friday prayer kasi nabanggit ano yung… Nabanggit yung gays at bakit sila bawal sa society. Kaya yun ang ginawa ko, I really tried not to attend Friday prayers kasi alam mo na ang sesermon. Gays are not accepted in the religion and should be thrown away by family members.* (I avoid attending Friday prayer because they've mentioned there. They mentioned about gays and why they are prohibited in the society. So that's what I did, I really tried not to attend Friday prayers because I already know the sermon. Gays are not accepted in the religion and should be thrown away by family members)

Social ostracization within kinship and community

Aside from the marginalization that the participants experienced within religious spaces, they also encountered condemnation and dehumanization within their social circles and family. Participants are not merely labeled as sinful - rather as being not male or a female but "other" and sometimes likened to an "animal". This moral condemnation is exacerbated by threats of divine punishment and familial disownment. As the participants shared, there is a pervasive belief in the community about gay individuals, that they should be isolated, disowned, and treated as societal curses *pkamorkaan*, which translates into real psychological harm and internalized doubt about one's worth of place in the society. These labels often result in social distancing, restricted engagement, and a lingering fear of conditional acceptance.

> *Parang they set boundaries towards me. Kasi nga, parang they.. what's this.. parang I am others. They considered me as an others. Hindi lalaki, hindi babae, kundi others. Parang they… animal daw ako. Uh uhmm.. so with that nagkaroon ng limitation ang engagement towards them.* (It's like they set boundaries towards me. Because, it's like they… what's this… it's like I am others. They considered me as others. Not a man, not a woman, but others. It's like they… I'm an animal. Uh uhmm.. so with

that there was a limitation in my engagement towards them.)

Yung family mo itatakwil ka nila. Ganoon yung hatred nila sa mga bakla, kasi yun nanga their mindset is "pkamorkaan" and you know parang sinasabi nil ana basta bakla na iseparate ng bahay. Kumbaga ia-isolate. (Your family will reject you. That's how much hatred they have for gay people, because their mindset is "pkamorkaan" and you know, they seem to be saying that as long as you're gay, you'll be separated from your home. So, you'll be isolated.)

Moral rejection and threats to divine punishment

Being gay is not only socially deviant but spiritually condemned. Participants shared being labeled as *"salot sa lipunan"* (plague of society) or *"tao ka sa hell"* (a person destined for hell) - phrases that deeply entrenched stigmas, often perpetuated by religious groups or individuals claiming moral authority.

Ahmm, discrimination. Ginabully, catcalling. Ginabully ko tawagon kog bayot bayot. Mga kuan lang kanang usual na madungog nimonga mambully. Pinakasakit ang tawagon kag tao ka sa hell. (Ahmm, discrimination, bullying, catcalling. I am being bullied, called gay, gay. It's the usual form of bullying. The most painful thing is being called a person from hell.)

Sa community naman ang pinaka worst, kasi anjan na yung mga uncivilized na mai encounter mo. Especially sa mga religious groups na "hoy kayong mga kwan… mga salot kayo sa lipunan. Kayong mga homosexual" (In the community, it's the worst, that's where you'll encounter uncivilized people. Especially in religious groups that say, "Hey, you, you're a plague to society. You, homosexuals")

Balancing faith, identity, and beliefs

This theme reflects how participants navigate the intersection of their Islamic faith and sexual identity. While acknowledging that traditional teachings reject homosexuality, they draw on their religious upbringing as a moral foundation - valuing discipline, kindness, and religious duties. At the same time, shared humor within peer groups serves as a collective coping strategy, allowing them to manage stigma, affirm their identity, and build resilience in the face of marginalization.

Integration of religious upbringing and identity

While Islamic teachings traditionally reject homosexuality, participants do not view their identity as entirely incompatible with their religion. Their religious upbringing - attending *halaqah* and *madrasah* (arabic schools) in their early education sets as a moral compass in navigating their gender identity. These teachings value kindness, discipline, modesty, and performing religious duties (e.g., the five pillars of Islam). As they become adults, these religious experiences serve as formative, offering both structure and spiritual grounding, using it to uphold religious integrity, even if their gender expression is limited by it. They continue to live with the guidance of what they learned in *madrasah*, they still strive

to be good Muslims by still following Islamic duties such as performing the five pillars while they navigate their sexual identity. This negotiation proposes that for Muslim gay men in Lanao del Sur, "coming out" is not a rejection of their past but a harmonizing of the complexity of it. They maintain the respect for their learnings in *madrasah* on kindness and belief that "only God knows who you truly are" to confront the heteronormative pressure they face today.

> *Nakapag aral kasi ako sa madrasah ng from kinder to grade 4, naka graduate ako. So yun ang nagiging guide ko yung mga natutunan ko… Sa akin kahit papaano yun ang guide ko na may limitation at boundaries ako.* (I studied in Madrasah from kinder to grade 4, I graduated. So, my learnings from there became my guide. For me, at least that serves as my guide that I have limitations and boundaries.)

> *With religious obligations naman, kasi ako nag aaral ako sa madrasah, since bata ako until nag senior high ako… Di ko masyado nafeel na jina judge ako. Kasi yun nanga, yung ustadh ko, alam nyang mahinhin ako. Sabi nya "God only knows who you truly are. Siya lang makaka husga sayo kasi ang unang titignan ng God is what's in your heart.* (With religious obligations, I have studied in madrasah since I was a child until I went to senior high… I didn't feel like I was being judged. Because my teacher knows that I was timid. He said "God only knows who you truly are. He is the only one who can judge you because the first thing God look at is what's in your heart")

Shared humor as a collective resilience

Despite the negative experiences the participants have experienced in their communities, they find support within their peer groups who also identify as homosexual through the use of humor as a coping strategy to navigate emotionally uncomfortable and stigmatizing experiences - such as hearing condemning sermons in the mosques or within the local communities Instead of internalizing the pain, participants like Ryan and Ganda describe how they and their peers gather together and transform these difficult moments into shared jokes. While the use of humor is stereotypically associated with gay men, for the participants of this study, it serves as a deeper, protective factor against ostracization. Humor becomes a way to reclaim agency, dilute emotional harm and foster solidarity through shared understanding. This collective laughter, though often casual in tone, reflects a deeper form of emotional resilience and group-based resistance. It helps them manage psychological distress, maintain dignity, and cultivate a sense of belonging within a stigmatizing environment.

Shared humor serves as a coping mechanism for navigating the dual pressures of faith and identity. Within a Muslim context, it functions to normalize tensions by drawing on incongruity and performativity. For homosexual Filipino men in predominantly Muslim areas, humor becomes a collective strategy. Friends gather to laugh off awkward religious topics, allowing them to resist the full internalization of rejection (Aidi, 2021).

Humor serves as a means of self-enhancing and affiliative coping that enables marginalized LGBTQ+ individuals to reframe trauma and stigma into manageable challenges. Camp humor, gallows humor, and other forms of humor have been used throughout history within gay communities to subvert homophobia and health crises in

support of psychological endurance (Kyomugisha, 2025). Humor is a powerful coping mechanism that helps people deal with adversity, reduce stress levels, and enhance resilience. By looking at humor as a cognitive appraisal, emotional expression and adaptive strategy, in highlighting its ability to alleviate stress, emotional catharsis, and creating social cohesion.

> *Since yung school naming is very conservative, pag may sermon sa school, nagkukumpol kaming magkakaibigan who identify as the same. We used to joke around kapag ganun yung topic so it didn't seem difficult or heavy for me, kasi yun nga we makes jokes na lang to make it lighter. Siguro para hindi naming masyadong mafeel yung dapat naming mafeel. Yun lang.* (Since our school is very conservative, whenever there is a sermon at school, my friends and I who identify the same way would gather together. We used to joke around when the topic was like that so it didn't feel too difficult or heavy for me, because, as I said, we would just joke around about it to make it lighter. Maybe it was our way of not fully feeling what were supposed to feel)

> *Kanang magsimba ma topic me, sempre ma awkward ka, or ma sa kita npod ka. Usahay maulaw ka, sempre naa kay mga katapad. Peru maokay raman ko, mawala rapod. Murag ako ginahimo kay pag kame friends, magtapok, kataw an nalang namo. Makatawa nalang ka, murag giatay mani oi, awkward sya.* (When we go to church and the topic is about us, of course it gets awkward, or sometimes it hurts. …what I usually do is, when I am with my friends, we gather together and just laugh about it. You just end up laughing, like "this is messed up", it's awkward).

Personal reflections and future directions on navigating sexual identity within a Muslim context

This theme highlights participants' reflections on living authentically while envisioning a future that balances personal growth with social acceptance. Rather than seeking radical societal change, most expressed a desire to quiet affirmation and tolerance of their identity. Participants emphasized the importance of inclusive education in reducing stigma and fostering understanding, advocating for awareness, critical reflection, and respectful dialogue. Through personal resilience and role modeling, they aim to challenge stereotypes and create space for greater visibility and acceptance within Muslim communities.

Advancing Acceptance, Respect, and Affirmation of LGBTQIA+ Identities

Full recognition, respect, and inclusion of individuals or groups regardless of differences in identity, background, or characteristics. Across the participants, these are the recurring themes that are consistent. The desire to have quiet acceptance over full societal equality depicts the resigned acknowledgement of these individuals on the challenges posed by the current cultural and religious norms. Majority expressed hope for a sense of affirmation and tolerance of their existence rather than radical change, focusing instead on personal goals such as being able to graduate, gaining financial independence from their family and most importantly., being able to live authentically.

> *We become more tolerant about them lalo na sa mga bata because the more*

we put the children into these struggles that more that their confusions will persist. The more na magkakaron sila ng inclination to be… socially deviant. (We become more tolerant of them, especially with children, because the more we put children into these struggles, the more their confusion will persist. The more they develop an inclination to be… socially deviant.)

Unlike sa ibang community where LGBTQ, they hope and they hope for equal treatment and equality and all, dito sa amin like what I have said to you earlier na in our religion in our culture, really is not acceptable and prohibited, so I won't hope for that. Ahh, I ho-hope ko lang is acceptance, maybe because I can tell naman na yong sa amin hindi hindi kame magiging ganito forever because we also have, ahhh, plans in the future. (Unlike in other communities where LGBTQ people hope and hope for equal treatment and equality and all, here in our place, like I said to you earlier, in our religion and culture, it is really not acceptable and is prohibited. So, I won't hope for that. Ahh, what I hope for is acceptance, maybe because I can tell that in our community, it won't be like this forever because we also have, ahhh, plans for the future.)

Fostering inclusive education to reduce LGBTQIA+ discrimination and extremism

Education fosters tolerance—those who are educated tend to respond with more diplomacy and open-mindedness even when they hold differing views. Several respondents put a huge emphasis on the vital role of inclusive education in reducing LGBTQIA+ discrimination and extremism. They highlight that confusion during the process of self-discovery is normal and should be recognized and accepted rather than judged. Some of the participants shared how their preferences and behaviors are often shaped by their parents and the environmental influences they had, noting the importance of critical self-reflection and awareness of these situations. Through education and community, individuals gain the tools to challenge internal biases and learn from the experiences of others. Majority of the respondents also had noted on conscious efforts of breaking the stereotypes by being role models themselves that challenges the negative perceptions of the LGBTQIA+ communist, adapting in various social settings while staying true to who they are as an individual.

If you are gay, you have to be versatile. You can multi-task, you can do make up, you can do yung Gawain ng lalaki" (If you are gay, you have to be versatile. You can multi-task, you can do makeup, you can do the things that men usually do)

Slowly, not really, kasi may takot parin. Especially when Isis came. They were so conservative, they became close-minded. Yun sha. Education really plays a pivotal role. Sometimes din, educated people acts differently. Compared to uneducated even if they are really conservative. Even if they are against you, since they are educated. They try to be diplomatic. As much as possible. So. Education really. (Perhaps, because for us, my family members are educated. I have friends whose family members are somewhat uneducated. Acceptance and tolerance come with education.)

This study provides a nuanced exploration of the lived experiences of Filipino homosexual men in a Muslim community in Lanao del Sur, Philippines. Through interpretative phenomenological analysis, the research uncovers how these individuals navigate the complex intersections of sexual identity, religious beliefs, and cultural expectations. The chosen age group reflects phenomenological principles by focusing on participants on their early to mid-adulthood. At this stage, Husserlian bracketing enables more mature expression of identity struggles, while Heideggerian notions of 'thrownness' into stigmatized contexts remain salient, unlike adolescence with fluid identities or later decades with diminished struggles.

Building on this methodological grounding, the theme on Experiences of Marginalization and Moral Mothering underscores participants' reports on significant marginalization, including discrimination, social exclusion, and moral policing within their communities. The concept of "moral mothering" emerged, wherein community members-often family or religious figures-assumed the role of moral guardians, reinforcing heteronormative expectations and pressuring individuals to conform. This resulted in internalized stigma, secrecy, and a persistent need to negotiate between personal authenticity and communal acceptance.

Balancing Faith, Identity, and Beliefs, one of the overarching themes was trying to make sense of religious belief and sexual identity. Most participants identified strongly with their Muslim faith but felt excluded by mainstream interpretations that rejected homosexuality. This conflict produced feelings of guilt, spiritual turmoil, and, in a few instances, efforts to reinterpret religious text or find comfort in personal spirituality. Faith and identity negotiation was a continuous, often agonizing process, marked by both resilience and vulnerability.

With their reflections and dreams, in spite of adversity, participants revealed incredible resiliency. They expressed desires for greater acceptance, understanding, and the formation of support groups. Several derived significances from their experiences through the promotion of inclusivity and efforts to enlighten others regarding the reality of LGBTQIA+ individuals in Muslim contexts.

The results underscore the synergistic action of cultural and religious stigma, the value placed on social support, and homosexual men's adaptive strategies to sustain their identities under restrictive circumstances. These finding highlights the necessity of culturally sensitive interventions and the validation of marginalized voices in both academe and the community.

Building on these insights, the study carries significant implications for practitioners, scholars, and community leaders working in Muslim contexts or among LGBTQIA+ individuals who are similarly facing cultural and religious constraints. To translate these finding into practice, the following context-sensitive recommendations are proposed:

Integrate Islamic values into mental health counseling. Mental health practitioners in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Mindanao (BARMM) should consider integrating faith-based approaches in counseling rather than solely relying on Western methods. As participants emphasized, Islamic teachings learned in the madrasah serves as a moral guide in navigating identity. Counseling becomes more effective when incorporating Islamic values such as *rahma* (compassion) and the belief that "God looks

in to the heart of everyone," helping clients reconcile faith and sexuality without feeling force to abandon either. Mental health practitioners should honor the client's commitment to becoming a "good Muslim".

Promote *Adab* (Etiquette) over theological debate. Participants shared that deepest pain come from doctrinal arguments, but from being called degrading and demeaning names such as *pkamorkaan* (societal curse) and *salot* (plague). Religious leaders and local leaders can foster change by focusing their khutbah (sermons) on *adab* (etiquette) and *akhlaq* (good character). Emphasizing that *ghibah* (backbiting) and publicly shaming others are prohibited in Islam directly addresses the "moral mothering" and surveillance that these participants endure, creating safer environment without requiring a controversial theological endorsement.

Support "quiet affirmation" spaces. Participants expressed a preference for subtle, private form of acceptance rather than radical activism. In the context of Lanao del Sur, public pride events may invite controversy, so interventions should align with these preferences. Universities and NGOs can provide peer support groups that are safe and private, where individuals can connect, share humor, and draw strength from collective resilience. Such spaces allow authentic expression without fear of public scrutiny.

Promote anti-bullying campaign. Participants of this study frequently observed that educated individuals tend to show greater diplomacy and tolerance. Schools and universities in BARMM can build on this by formally adopting anti-bullying policies that explicitly prohibit gender-based insults. Gender and Development agencies can also promote awareness sessions on this matter, while curriculum modules must dismantle the stigma and myth that homosexuality is "contagious". These misconceptions should be replaced with scientific perspectives framed around the Islamic and universal value of respect to human dignity.

By adopting such strategies from public visibility to private security, organizations and practitioners can assist in fostering spaces where Filipino heterosexual men in Muslim communities are recognized, valued, and empowered to be themselves directly contributing to SDGs (Gender Equality and Reduced Inequalities). The study also enriches the discourse on highlighting intersectionality of religion, culture and sexuality. Such initiatives are not only for the benefit of individuals but also for the general social cohesion and respect of diversity.

This paper offers new insights into the lived experiences of homosexual men within Lanao del Sur, Philippines - a Muslim area in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). Unlike global studies conducted on Muslim homosexuals, such as British Pakistani men (Jaspal & Cinnirella, 2010) or general Philippine Muslims (Cuenca, 2010), this research narrows its focus to those who remain in conservative areas like Marawi City and surrounding municipalities despite violence and displacement pressures. Rather than emphasizing identity incompatibility or legal risks common in Middle Eastern contexts, the study highlights local resilience amid non-criminal yet culturally intense stigma. Using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) on seven participants' first-person accounts, it discloses context-specific nuances.

The findings emphasize Filipino Muslim cultural cues in BARMM, such as discrimination within religious areas or spaces (e.g., threat of "separate mosques" and provocative sermons leading to prayer avoidance). Many participants prefer 'quiet affirmation' and education rather than activism, reflecting pragmatic adaptation to conservative Islam and diverging from global or urban Philippine studies. Patriarchal dynamics also emerge, with socio-cultural mechanisms like "moral mothering" enforcing narrow gender roles and positioning gay men outside heteronormative masculinity. Respondents defend their space by demonstrating "versatility" (e.g., multitasking "men's work" with feminine attributes), yet continue to confront rigid labels that deny binary manhood. Compared to other contexts (e.g. British Pakistani or Davao coming-out experience), communal surveillance and religious integration without open faith magnify patriarchal control in non-legal Philippine Muslim settings.

The novelty of this research lies in its specific geographic and cultural embedding in Lanao del Sur. It fills a gap in literature by examining homosexual men who did not flee high-stigma Muslim enclaves but remained, including during and after the 2017 Marawi conflicts (Amnesty International, 2023). Reports document discrimination and violence against LGBTQIA+ in BARMM. GlobalPost (2018) noted that Marawi residents felt unsafe due to ridicule, domestic abuse, and school-based discrimination, prompting some to evacuate. The rise of ISIS further reinforced conservatism, intensifying stigma after fighters seized Marawi in 2017.

Focusing on those who stayed post-Marawi conflict is crucial, as the siege exacerbated pre-existing stigma. While direct reports of homosexual-targeted violence during the siege were limited, the conflict heightened gender-based violence, with 45% of sites reporting girls most affected. This signals broader vulnerabilities for non-conforming groups. Amnesty International (2021) later documented continue to face harassment, arbitrary arrest, and violence against LGBTQIA+ in BARMM, including hate crimes. Moro leaders have been criticized for "abusive policy" and indifference towards gay men (Notre Dame University, 2015). Ongoing local violence (e.g., rido and family feud) and extremism further entrap queer Muslim in cycle of fears (Affiat, Rahmadhani & Nakayama, 2024). These realities underscore the importance of studying the importance of studying "stayers," who negotiation faith and identity under persistent threats (amnesty Internation, 2021).

This study highlights negotiation pressure at two-ends – maintaining faith while resisting stigma – without outright rejection of religion. Key nuances include:

Moral mothering: Community members, including family and religious figures, serve as "moral guardians," enforcing heteronormativity through surveillance, dehumanizing labels (e.g., "other," "animals," *pkarmorkaan* or societal curse), and threats of disownment.

Sacred space discrimination: Mosques, intended to be centers of unity, become sites of exclusion through direct confrontations (e.g., demands for "separate mosques") and sermons that discourage prayer attendance.

Faith-identity integration: Values learned through madrasah, such as kindness and the Five Pillars, serve moral compass. Beliefs like "God knows the heart" allow participants

to reconcile faith and sexuality, contrasting with outright rejection found in other studies.

Humor as resilience: Shared jokes about sermons dilute stigma, foster camaraderie, and act as protective factor for agency and belonging. Participants favor subtle tolerance, economic independence, and inclusive education over activism, reflecting pragmatic realism in conservative Islam.

While this study offers valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample size was relatively small (n=7). Although appropriate for qualitative phenomenological research, this limits the generalizability of findings to other Muslim communities, both within the Philippines and globally. Future research could expand the sample size and include more diverse Muslim populations to enhance representativeness.

Second, the study focused exclusively on homosexual men aged 21-35, excluding other age groups and sexual minorities such as lesbian, bisexual, and transgender individuals. Future studies should explore the experiences of these groups to provide a more comprehensive understanding of LGBTQIA+ identities within Muslim communities.

Third, data collection relied on self-reported interviews, which may be influenced by social desirability bias given the sensitivity of the topic. Incorporating triangulation methods, such as participant observation or community-based participatory research, could strengthen data validity. Additionally, the study was geographically limited to Lanao del Sur. Cultural nuances in other Muslim-majority regions may yield different experiences. Cross-cultural comparative studies could illuminate how varying interpretations of Islam and local customs influence the lived realities of homosexual individuals.

Future research should also investigate the effectiveness of culturally tailored interventions and support services identified as critical by participants. Longitudinal studies could track identity development and mental health outcomes over time, providing deeper insights into resilience and coping mechanisms.

Conclusion

This study sheds light on the intricate and often challenging experiences of homosexual men living within a Muslim community in Lanao del Sur, Philippines. It reveals how these individuals navigate the delicate balance between their sexual identity and the religious and cultural expectations that shape their social environment. The findings emphasize the pervasive impact of stigma and social isolation, while also highlighting the resilience fostered through coping strategies and social support networks.

By centering the voices of marginalized individuals, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the intersection between faith, culture, and sexuality. It underscores the critical need for culturally sensitive support systems and inclusive dialogue within Muslim communities to promote acceptance and well-being. Ultimately, this study advocates for empathy, awareness, and structural change that respects both religious traditions and sexual diversity, paving the way for more inclusive and supportive environments for LGBTQIA+ individuals in Muslim contexts.

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