



The experiences lived by lesbian students in an underdeveloped country: a qualitative study

1 Anthony James C. Marciano ^a | 2 Jhon Patrick B. Formentera ^a | 3 Avegail M. Magolinay ^a | 4 Runard Kyle B. Elona ^a |
5 Natanya Deneille S. Arinio ^a

^a Sta. Cruz National High School, Department of Education: Manila, Philippines.

ABSTRACT

In today's generation, LGBTQIA+ people have been mistreated in society, particularly lesbians. Lesbians were considered to have the most minor research conducted on this issue. This study aims to know the struggles, coping mechanisms, and insights of lesbian students. The researchers used a phenomenological research design. Ten lesbian students participated in the interview, and the data were analyzed using Colaizzi's method. The result revealed the following themes: social and emotional wellbeing challenges for struggles; respect for one's identity and acknowledging one's rights for coping strategies; surrounding oneself with positivity and setting goals and encouragement for insights. Although being a lesbian has been a challenge in this society, the participants found a way to boost their confidence and be content by being who they are.

Keywords: Lesbian Students, Qualitative Research, Phenomenology, Philippines.

INTRODUCTION

The LGBTQIA+ community is growing, and the pleasures, challenges, and resiliency in their lived experiences come with it. Many people are struggling with whether to accept or reject their capabilities as a part of the third gender, particularly lesbians. Although there have always been lesbian, homosexual, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals, their identities have usually been linked to stigma. As a result, they have been subjected to bias, leading to societal inequality (Rodillas et al., 2017).

Lesbians face several sorts of discrimination, including physical hostility and verbal abuse (Flores, 2020). Lesbian students' physical, psychological, and academic wellbeing may be negatively impacted by these events, which causes them to suffer and feel anxious and distressed (Mateo & Williams, 2020). Particularly, lesbian students face a range of difficulties that are usually influenced by prejudices, societal expectations, and self-identity. It frequently finds that their educational experience can be destroyed by bullying, prejudice, a lack of information about lesbians, and, in some cases, physical or sexual assault (Edcel, 2019). Lesbians in a culture with gender norms experienced discrimination, felt helpless or irrelevant, and had little representation when navigating the coming-out process and forming relationships.

The lived experiences of LGBT members, particularly lesbians, are facing colossal criminalization and discrimination, such as hate-motivated torture, violence, and killing of LGBT people (Nguyen et al., 2017). Lesbians and LGBT people are finding their way to fight for human rights. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex people gradually face criminalization in 72 different countries, such as China, India, and many others. None of these countries provide legal recognition for same-sex marriage and legal protection against discrimination for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (Nguyen et al., 2017).

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals in Africa, especially in South Africa, have unprecedented access to their rights due to broad legal and regulatory frameworks, in contrast to heterosexual people (Hames, 2018). Even

in countries where LGBTQ rights are protected by law, there is evidence showing that LGBTQ people still face discrimination. South Africa is relatively progressive and has created a non-discriminatory clause to ensure the rights of LGBT people are respected and implemented nationally, but despite this protection, there is evidence that they face discrimination in many aspects of their lives, particularly in the workplaces (Soeker et al., 2015).

Lesbian students in the Philippines also lose their self-esteem, such as speaking for themselves, socializing with people who make boundaries for them, and having freedom for themselves. Some gays and lesbians need more freedom for themselves and their emotional and sexual lives (Convicar & Pios, 2019). Harassment is also a struggle of the lived experience of lesbian students.

Based on sexual orientation gradually happens in many schools, and there are many diverse issues and experiences of lesbians and gays viewed by heterosexual people (Reloj, 2021). At Palawan State University, the majority of gays and lesbians receive equal treatment with their school staff and teachers. However, other gay and lesbian students still encountered implications such as peer rejection, homophobic remarks, and parental rejection expressed by their guardians inside their household (Reloj, 2021). Tang and Poudel (2018) considered the Philippines as a lesbian-friendly country. However, in the study conducted, Filipino lesbian, gay, transgender, and bisexual or the LGBT community, especially the students who are part of LGBT, are struggling with bullying and discrimination from communities, schools, and even in their families.

The LGBTQ community in Davao City was suffering through discrimination due to their sexual orientation and gender identity and expression (SOGIE). Homosexuals face discrimination, harassment, and bullying at work, which hinders their process of coming out and has a negative effect on their mental health. This makes it harder for some LGBTQ members to embrace themselves (Cabaluna, 2019).

The researchers became interested in studying this phenomenon since researchers have some peer relationships with people who are members of LGBT or lesbians. We found this phenomenon interesting because we are intrigued to know about the lived experiences of lesbians and gain insights, as well as the intervention to help them cope with their struggles. The researchers believe that this phenomenon is an area of interest for lesbians. Moreover, the phenomenon of lesbians in the Philippines is one of the least studied, more so for the struggles of lesbians. This study is our contribution to the body of knowledge of lesbian students by enlightening this phenomenon. The primary purpose of this study is to describe the struggles, coping strategies, and insights of lesbian students.

This research study aims to determine the reasons why lesbian students encounter many difficulties. It also seeks to identify the struggles, coping strategies, and insights of being a lesbian student. The researchers also highlight the experiences of lesbian students. There are numerous studies about the struggles of lesbians in the Philippines, but this research study fills the gap about the experiences of lesbians. In addition, this study emphasized the lived experiences of the lesbian students.

Therefore, this study will help lesbian students promote a positive environment, increase awareness, and improve public policy regarding lesbian sexuality and discrimination. In addition, this research study would also help the parents to formulate urgent solutions on how to resolve the conflict that their children, who are lesbians, are facing. This research study would also raise awareness about LGBTQ+ issues, promote empathy and understanding, inform policies to create inclusive environments, and ultimately foster a more supportive and equitable society for all individuals, regardless of sexual orientation. Lastly, it would help future researchers to contribute more information to help address and understand more about the struggles and challenges lesbian students face every day.

METHODS

This portion presented an overview of the procedures and methodology used in conducting this study. This covers the research design methods, participants, instruments, and analyses utilized in this study.

Research Design

This research study used a qualitative approach. Specifically, the researchers used phenomenology to examine the experiences of lesbian students at Sta. Cruz National High School-Senior High School. A phenomenological approach is a form of qualitative research that focuses on studying an individual's lived experiences within the world (Neubauer et al., 2019). This method was beneficial in examining the participants' experiences after the interview and in determining the coping strategies that participants used to address their challenges.

Research Participants

The researchers purposefully selected ten lesbian participants in this study. The participants were currently enrolled in Sta. Cruz National High School-Senior High School in SY 2023-2024, they must be 18–20 years old. This study used an interview guide questionnaire and the purposive sampling method.

Instrument and Analysis

This research study used an interview guide questionnaire and a purposive sampling method. The instrument of this study consisted of interviews, surveys, and recordings to gather the data needed for analysis. Responses would be analyzed and interpreted using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a method that describes a group of texts, like interviews or transcripts. It would help to find the data with common themes, repeated ideas, and topics (Crosley, 2019). The researchers review the information that they gather from the informants. With the help of the researchers, they can come up with a theme and ideas to help support the research paper. Moreover, the researchers ensured the confidentiality and rights of the participants. After gathering and interpreting the data, the researchers discussed the study findings.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Struggles of Lesbian Students

Lesbian students frequently have particular difficulties at school, such as bullying, discrimination, and lack of support and representation. Peers and relatives may treat them with misunderstanding, making them feel invisible and alone. In addition, lesbian students encountered peer pressure because of discrimination and societal stigma against their sexual orientation. According to Mason, Lewis, and Heron (2017), lesbian women are experiencing daily discrimination among people, and it can harm their mental health. In the Philippines, many lesbian students encountered particular difficulties such as peer bullying, discrimination, and low self-esteem towards LGBTQ+ members. In this study, after the researchers analyzed the data using the thematic method of data analysis, only two themes emerged: social well-being challenges and emotional well-being challenges as the reason for the struggles of lesbian students.

Social Wellbeing Challenges. Lesbian students can face various social wellbeing challenges, including discrimination, bullying, and lack of support from peers and family relatives. Anxiety, despair, and isolated sensations can all be influenced by these elements. One of the participants is Adas, an 18-year-old grade 11 lesbian student who expresses her experience with peers.

"I experienced being bullied by my classmates; like before, when they were making fun of me, they laughed at the clothes I was wearing, and they always bullied me." (Transcript 1, Page 1, Line 22).

On the other hand, the mockery and jokes from other people made them feel depressed. One of the participants is Espanto, an 18-year-old, grade 12 lesbian student who shared her experiences.

"I experienced being bullied and made a joke of by my relatives." (Transcript 4, Page 1, Line 22).

Based on the shared experiences of the participants, people, especially their friends and peers, can make it uncomfortable for them when topics about bullying and discrimination. According to a study by Human Rights Watch (2011), nearly every young lesbian student described the impact of incidents of verbal and other non-physical harassment because of perceptions toward their sexual orientation. In the Philippine setting, the words "bakla" and "tomboy" have strong negative connotations in casual conversation, and it is even used as a form of mocking fashion UNESCO (2015).

Emotional Wellbeing Challenges. Emotional wellbeing challenges for lesbian students may include feelings of isolation, identity confusion, and fear of rejection. These may result in elevated tension, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. It is crucial to provide support, understanding, and resources to help them navigate these challenges and foster positive mental health outcomes. One of the participants is Nelmidia, a 19-year-old grade 12 lesbian student who expresses her experience with family relatives.

"I have experienced that I am the only one who can solve my problems at school, like bullying, because I am afraid to tell my family members because they might tell me I am overreacting." (Transcript 1, Page 1, Line 22).

The participant's response suggests that she experienced a lack of emotional support from her family and relatives. Emotional support is important for overall well-being. It provides comfort, validation, and a sense of belonging, which are crucial for navigating life's challenges and building resilience.

Coping Strategies of Lesbian Students

The participants found another way to avoid discrimination, peer bullying, and low self-esteem. Lesbian students had other forms of self-assurance, such as praying to God, not minding negative thoughts from others, and not minding other people's feedback to escape discrimination. They also stated that they focused on their life goals because they believed they would succeed one day. In other words, lesbian students focused more on accepting themselves by boosting their self-assurance and eliminating negative thoughts from others and the discrimination itself. Aside from self-assurance, lesbians also had self-acceptance and the freedom to choose as their coping strategies to deal with the challenges that they experienced. Lesbian students develop and maintain individual assurance, focusing on self-confidence and identity development (Hall et al., 2021). Two themes were identified, and the researchers analyzed all their responses using thematic analysis. Moreover, it is respecting one's identity and acknowledging one's rights.

Respect One's Identity. Respecting the identities of lesbian students is essential. It involves acknowledging and accepting their sexual orientation without judgment and creating a safe and inclusive environment where they feel valued and supported. It is about recognizing their unique experiences and ensuring equal opportunities and rights. The researchers asked the participants how they coped with all the challenges they experienced; the respondents learned different strategies for coping mechanisms in dealing with their feelings and goals. One of the participants is Nelmda, a 19-year-old lesbian student who stated that,

"I have experienced so many struggles in my life as a lesbian because I get discriminated against by my peers and family, but with all my courage, I conquered those struggles because I decided to be confident as I accepted and respect myself so that I could grow as individuals." (Transcript 3, Page 2, Line 36).

The participants deal with self-acceptance in all their positive and negative attributes. They started to disregard what people might say and continue to be themselves because they believed it was their life and right to choose who they wanted to be. Our identity originates not from inside the person but from the social realm embracing who we are and not minding other people (Burr, 2015).

Acknowledging One's Rights. Acknowledging the rights of lesbian students is crucial. This includes their right to express their identity without fear of discrimination or prejudice, access education and resources without barriers, and be treated with dignity and respect like any other student. One of the participants is Reso-or, a 19-year-old grade 12 lesbian student who shared that,

"As a lesbian, I faced difficulties growing up because many people judged and discriminated against me for being who I am, but I acknowledged and accepted my flaws. I have the right to choose my wants in life, which comes from who I am. I told myself I had the right to do this because it was my own , and no one could hinder me. I embrace all my flaws and transform into who I am today because I have the right to do it, and I do not care about others' opinions as long as I know there is nothing wrong with myself." (Transcript 4, Page 2, Line 36).

The participants coped with acknowledging their rights by doing things that aligned with their self-confidence. They started to deal with people with confidence because they believed in their capabilities and that they could achieve all they wanted to by accepting themselves.

Insights of Lesbian Students

Lesbian students deal with issues of mental health, social dynamics, and identity exploration. Despite possible discrimination and intersectional problems, they seek encouraging networks and inclusive learning environments. Moreover, the researchers asked the participants questions about their insights. Since they frequently confront comparable obstacles because of their gender and sexual orientation, they provide insightful perspectives into the experiences of prejudice that others have had to endure. Additionally, they gave guidance to their fellow lesbian students. The study delves into the

experience of feeling different among lesbians, examining how they perceive and navigate this sense of difference within various social contexts Nguyen & Smith, (2023). As the researchers analyzed all their responses, two themes were identified.

Surrounding oneself with Positivity. When lesbians surround themselves with Positivity, it can make them feel happier, more confident, and more supported. Positive surroundings can boost their self-esteem and help them cope better with challenges they might face because of their sexual orientation. Additionally, it may result in more solidified bonds between people and a better feeling of community. Salomaa and Matsick (2019) state that lesbian student may experience positive perceptions towards their sexuality, contributing to higher life satisfaction and better surroundings. One of the participants, Panuncillon, was asked about her insights as a lesbian student.

"As a part of LGBTQA+, they helped boost my confidence, and I will also know who I truly am." (Page 2, Line 36).

The participants surround themselves with Positivity. Being a lesbian means being around people who support and uplift them for who they are. They look for spaces where they will feel accepted and valued. To avoid negative influences, they embrace self-love and acceptance. Marino (2023) has a potential role in shaping positive attitudes and confidence towards the LGB community amidst conflicting societal perceptions and experiences.

Setting Goals and Encouragement. Lesbians tend to focus more on a positive mindset to improve their skills and abilities and help them cope with challenges. By encouraging and affirming them, lesbians can build high self-esteem and confidence to have a positive image as individuals. They believe that every individual is equal no matter what gender it is. One of the participants, Alconaba, was asked about her insights about being a lesbian.

"Being a lesbian is not a cause; I once remember my father saying to me, follow who you are, no matter what others say, and do not be affected by it; you know yourself better. So, in that word, my father says I was encouraged, and it helped me boost my confidence as a lesbian." (Page 2, Line 36).

The participants are setting their goals for a brighter future ahead of them, and with encouragement, they can surely reach that goal. They tend to focus more on their growth to become better and bolder. The judgment of society won't hurt them, as they know themselves better than anyone else and are always positive. With that, they can build high self-esteem and confidence in themselves, and through affirmation, they can overcome everything.

CONCLUSIONS

This study emphasizes the information on the struggles, coping strategies, and insights of lesbian students. The results have shown their experiences with discrimination, bullying by peers, and low self-esteem among family and friends. However, their most effective coping mechanisms are self-acceptance and self-assurance. Despite the pressures of society, they continue their studies. Therefore, being a lesbian does not have to limit one's ability to perform such beautiful things. The findings of this study may inspire other lesbian students. Living a life devoid of circumstances is a hardship for them, but lesbians can overcome those problems because of their assurance and self-confidence. Lastly, the researchers are hoping that the results would help not just the participants but other lesbian individuals in the LGBTQIA+ community both within and outside of schools. They may think of their thoughts and strategies as a way to carry on having a pleasant life and remaining self-assured and committed to their goal of equality.

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