

Navigating the Uncharted: A Phenomenological exploration of Male Students Dating Gay Partners in the Municipality of Pinukpuk, Kalinga

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Abstract

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of male students in the Municipality of Pinukpuk, Kalinga who are involved in romantic relationships with gay partners. Anchored in Identity Negotiation Theory, Hegemonic Masculinity, and Social Identity Theory, the study examined how participants negotiate identity, masculinity, emotional vulnerability, and social perceptions within a culturally conservative environment. A qualitative phenomenological research design was employed using purposive sampling to select 10 male students from high school and college levels. Data were gathered through semi-structured written interviews conducted via Google Forms and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes and patterns in the participants' narratives. The findings revealed that participants experienced discrimination, teasing, and social pressure rooted in heteronormative expectations and the indigenous concept of *bain* (shame). To manage these challenges, students commonly adopted the strategy of “*dedma*” or ignoring criticism to maintain identity security and academic focus. The study further found that dating gay partners did not diminish the participants' sense of masculinity; instead, they reconstructed masculinity through self-acceptance, emotional openness, and authenticity. Relationships were also described as sources of emotional intimacy, practical support, and personal growth, contributing to increased maturity, responsibility, improved hygiene, and stronger self-respect. The study concluded that these relationships serve as transformative spaces for resilience, identity reconstruction, and emotional development despite prevailing cultural pressures. Recommendations emphasized strengthening anti-discrimination policies, providing safe counseling spaces, promoting inclusive discussions on masculinity, and encouraging respectful community dialogue regarding non-traditional relationships. The study aligns with SDG 4 – Quality Education, SDG 5 – Gender Equality, and SDG 16 – Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions by promoting inclusive educational environments, respect for diverse identities, and social understanding. Its sustainability contribution lies in fostering socio-cultural inclusion, emotional well-being, educational support systems, and community awareness within culturally sensitive contexts.

Keywords: Bain (Shame), Emotional Vulnerability, Identity Negotiation, Lived Experiences, Masculinity, Phenomenology, Personal Growth, Social Perceptions, Student Life, Thematic Analysis

1. Introduction

The discourse on gender and romantic relationships has significantly evolved as societies gradually move away from rigid heteronormativity. Masculinity is increasingly being redefined, particularly among younger generations who are becoming more open to emotional vulnerability and non-traditional relationships (Connell, 2005; Anderson, 2009). Identity negotiation remains a fundamental process through which individuals reconcile their internal self-concept with external societal expectations (Swann & Bosson, 2008). For men involved in marginalized or non-traditional relationships, identity negotiation often involves managing stigma, maintaining social standing, and balancing personal authenticity with prevailing norms of masculinity (Goffman, 1963; Butler, 1990; Pascoe, 2007). Research further suggests that despite growing social acceptance, gender-nonconforming intimacy continues to affect the mental well-being and social positioning of men (Meyer, 2003; Herek, 2007). Traditional masculinity has historically emphasized heterosexuality, emotional restraint, and physical dominance through the framework of Hegemonic Masculinity (Connell, 2005). However, contemporary perspectives on Inclusive Masculinity indicate greater openness among young men toward diverse emotional and romantic expressions (Anderson, 2009).

Existing literature highlights the persistent tension between traditional masculinity and evolving gender identities. Studies emphasize that men in marginalized relationships often experience social stigma and must carefully perform and negotiate identity within heteronormative spaces (Goffman, 1963; Butler, 1990). Research also reveals that schools frequently reinforce heteronormativity, exposing students in non-traditional relationships to peer discrimination and social exclusion (Garcia, 2008; Manalansan, 2003). Scholars further argue that emotional vulnerability among men challenges dominant masculine ideals and contributes to more inclusive understandings of manhood (Anderson, 2009). Emotional intimacy in same-sex or gender-diverse relationships has likewise been associated with personal growth, resilience, and stronger self-

awareness (Kimmel, 2008; Meyer, 2003). In addition, studies on Filipino psychology emphasize the role of *hiya* (shame) and communal honor in regulating social behavior and identity formation (Enriquez, 1994; Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000). These themes collectively demonstrate how relationships become sites of identity reconstruction, emotional support, and social negotiation.

Globally, changing perspectives on masculinity and gender relationships have encouraged broader acceptance of emotional openness and diverse identities (Connell, 2005; Anderson, 2009). Nevertheless, societal expectations surrounding masculinity continue to shape the experiences of men engaged in non-traditional relationships (Butler, 1990; Pascoe, 2007). In the Philippine setting, traditional Catholic values coexist with a visible yet often marginalized LGBTQ+ community. The concepts of “*Bakla*,” “*Paminta*,” and “*Lalaki*” illustrate the complexity of gender identities and the continuing influence of machismo culture (Tan, 2001; Garcia, 2008). Filipino students involved in non-traditional relationships frequently experience secrecy, fear of discrimination, and concerns about *hiya* or shame (Enriquez, 1994; Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000). Within Kalinga, these pressures are intensified by indigenous cultural traditions rooted in warrior identity, tribal honor, and communal expectations (Sugguiyao, 1990). The concept of *bain* (shame) functions as a strong regulator of social behavior, making identity negotiation particularly difficult for male students dating gay partners. Consequently, these relationships represent not only personal choices but also significant cultural negotiations involving masculinity, dignity, and social acceptance (Pascoe, 2007; Herek, 2007).

This study is anchored on Identity Negotiation Theory, Hegemonic Masculinity, and Social Identity Theory. Identity Negotiation Theory explains how individuals attempt to reconcile personal identity with societal expectations, particularly in environments where communal identity strongly influences social interaction (Swann & Bosson, 2008). This framework helps explain how male students maintain identity security while navigating non-traditional relationships. Connell’s Theory of Hegemonic Masculinity provides a lens for understanding how dominant cultural expectations of masculinity influence students’ experiences (Connell, 2005). The theory explains how participants challenge rigid masculine archetypes by embracing emotional vulnerability and redefining masculinity through authenticity and self-acceptance. Social Identity Theory further explains how belonging to marginalized or non-traditional groups shapes self-esteem, emotional resilience, and personal growth (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Through emotional intimacy and social negotiation, participants develop stronger self-awareness and resilience despite external stigma.

Although studies on masculinity, LGBTQ+ identities, and Filipino gender culture are increasing, limited research specifically examines the lived experiences of male students dating gay partners in indigenous and culturally conservative communities such as Kalinga. Existing studies largely focus on urban settings or broader LGBTQ+ experiences without exploring how local concepts like *bain* influence identity negotiation and relational experiences. Furthermore, little attention has been given to how these relationships contribute to personal growth, emotional maturity, and self-redefinition among male students. The study addresses these gaps by documenting the voices and lived realities of students who navigate cultural expectations, emotional vulnerability, and social perceptions while maintaining authentic relationships.

This study aligns with several Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It supports SDG 3 – Good Health and Well-Being by addressing emotional well-being, mental resilience, and the psychosocial experiences of students facing discrimination and social stigma. The research also aligns with SDG 4 – Quality Education by emphasizing the importance of inclusive and discrimination-free educational environments that support student welfare and identity development. The study further contributes to SDG 5 – Gender Equality through its exploration of gender inclusivity, emotional expression, and the dismantling of restrictive gender norms. In addition, it reflects SDG 10 – Reduced Inequalities by promoting understanding and acceptance of marginalized identities within schools and communities. Finally, the research supports SDG 16 – Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions by advocating for safer, more inclusive educational institutions and community dialogue that reduce discrimination and social exclusion.

The study contributes to multidisciplinary sustainability by promoting social inclusion, emotional well-being, educational equity, and cultural understanding. From a socio-cultural perspective, the research encourages broader acceptance of diverse identities while preserving respectful community dialogue within indigenous cultural settings. In terms of educational sustainability, the findings highlight the need for safe and supportive school environments that foster student well-being and reduce discrimination. The research also contributes to public health sustainability by emphasizing the psychological importance of emotional support, resilience, and self-acceptance among students. In the area of policy and institutional sustainability, the findings may guide schools, counselors, and community leaders in developing inclusive programs and anti-discrimination initiatives. Additionally, the study promotes community sustainability by encouraging empathy, mutual respect, and social understanding among culturally diverse populations.

2. Material and methods

2.1 Research Design

The study utilized a phenomenological research design to explore and describe the lived experiences of male students involved in romantic relationships with gay partners. The design was selected because the research aimed to understand how participants make sense of their relationships and interpret the meanings attached to their experiences. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), phenomenology seeks to describe the universal essence of a phenomenon through individuals' subjective experiences. This approach enabled the researcher to deeply examine identity negotiation, masculinity, emotional vulnerability, and social perceptions as experienced by the participants in their daily student life.

2.2 Locale of the Study

The study was conducted in the Municipality of Pinukpuk, Kalinga, a locality characterized by strong indigenous cultural traditions and heteronormative social expectations. Within this context, concepts such as *bain* (shame), tribal honor, and traditional masculine archetypes significantly influence social behavior and interpersonal relationships. The locale provided an appropriate setting for examining how male students navigate non-traditional romantic relationships within a culturally conservative environment.

2.3 Respondents of the Study

The respondents of the study consisted of 10 male students from both high school and college levels who were engaged in romantic relationships with gay partners. These participants were selected because they possessed direct experiences relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. Their narratives provided insights into identity negotiation, masculinity, emotional intimacy, social perceptions, and personal growth within the context of their relationships.

2.4 Sample and Sampling Procedure

The study employed purposive sampling, also referred to as judgmental or subjective sampling, to identify information-rich participants appropriate for phenomenological inquiry. Patton (2015) explained that purposive sampling is valuable for selecting participants capable of providing meaningful and detailed accounts of a specific phenomenon. The researcher deliberately selected students who had actual experiences of dating gay partners to ensure authentic and in-depth data. This approach allowed the study to focus on individuals who could clearly articulate their experiences related to identity negotiation, masculinity, emotional vulnerability, and social perceptions.

2.5 Research Instrument

Data were collected using written semi-structured interviews administered through Google Forms. The instrument contained open-ended questions designed to encourage participants to describe their daily experiences, the meanings they attached to their relationships, and their strategies for managing social perceptions. The use of a written digital platform was intended to ensure confidentiality and anonymity, particularly within the cultural context of Kalinga where *bain* (shame) strongly influences social behavior. This method provided participants with a safe and non-threatening environment for expressing emotional vulnerability and authentic experiences.

2.6 Data Gathering Procedure

The researcher conducted data gathering through online semi-structured interviews using Google Forms. Participants were first informed about the purpose of the study and provided digital informed consent prior to participation. The written format allowed respondents to freely express their thoughts and experiences without fear of exposure or judgment. Responses focused on participants' lived experiences, relationship meanings, emotional intimacy, and strategies for handling discrimination and social pressures. Confidentiality was strictly observed throughout the data collection process.

2.7 Data Analysis Techniques

The collected data were analyzed using Thematic Analysis. The researcher systematically reviewed the written responses, generated codes, and identified recurring themes associated with the study's objectives. The analysis focused on patterns related to identity negotiation, masculinity, emotional vulnerability, social perceptions, and personal growth. This process enabled the researcher to capture the meaning and essence of the participants' lived experiences while maintaining accuracy and ethical rigor.

2.8 Ethical Considerations

The study strictly observed ethical standards to protect the identity and well-being of the participants. Given the sensitivity of the topic and the possibility of social stigma, no personally identifiable information was connected to the responses. Pseudonyms were assigned to participants, and informed consent was obtained digitally. The researcher also practiced "bracketing" throughout the thematic analysis to minimize personal bias and preserve the authenticity of the participants' narratives. These measures ensured a credible, respectful, and humanized representation of the participants' lived experiences.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Identity Negotiation and Social Perceptions

3.1.1 Navigating Discrimination through “Dedma”

The findings revealed that participants regularly encountered teasing, discrimination, and negative social perceptions within their school environment. Several respondents shared experiences of being mocked and socially judged because of their relationships, with some describing reactions such as “inaasar” and “nandiri sila.” To cope with these experiences, many participants adopted the strategy of “dedma” or ignoring criticism. They emphasized maintaining focus on their academic responsibilities and staying “totoo sa sarili” despite external judgment. These experiences reflect the process of identity negotiation described in Identity Negotiation Theory (Swann & Bosson, 2008). Participants continuously balanced their personal identities with societal expectations in a community strongly influenced by heteronormativity and the indigenous concept of *bain* (shame). The use of “dedma” demonstrates emotional resilience and self-preservation rather than open confrontation. The findings also support discussions on stigma and social performance in marginalized relationships (Goffman, 1963; Butler, 1990), particularly within environments where communal honor and masculinity remain highly valued (Enriquez, 1994; Suguiyao, 1990).

3.2 Reconstruction of Masculinity

3.2.1 Redefining Masculine Identity

The participants reported that dating gay partners did not lessen their sense of masculinity. Several respondents stated that their relationships were comparable to heterosexual relationships and emphasized that their manhood remained intact. One participant expressed, “Hindi kabawasan sa pagkatao ko ang pakikipagrelasyon sa kanila,” while another described the relationship as “Parang katulad lang sa relasyon sa babae.” The students emphasized self-acceptance, authenticity, and emotional openness as important aspects of their identity. The findings challenge the traditional framework of Hegemonic Masculinity, which associates masculinity with heterosexuality, emotional restraint, and dominance (Connell, 2005). Instead, the participants demonstrated characteristics aligned with Inclusive Masculinity, where emotional vulnerability and diverse relational expressions are increasingly accepted among younger men (Anderson, 2009). The results suggest that masculinity within the Kalinga context is gradually being reconstructed from rigid cultural archetypes toward more inclusive forms grounded in courage, authenticity, and emotional sincerity.

3.3 Meaning and Nature of Relationships

3.3.1 Emotional Intimacy and Safe Spaces

The participants described their relationships as sources of emotional intimacy and understanding. Many respondents emphasized that they felt emotionally safe and comfortable sharing their feelings, dreams, and personal struggles with their partners. Statements such as “bukas kaming nagbabahagi ng nararamdaman, problema, at pangarap” reflected the depth of emotional connection experienced within the relationships. These findings indicate that the relationships function as important emotional support systems for the participants. The results support literature suggesting that non-traditional relationships can foster emotional vulnerability, self-expression, and resilience among men (Anderson, 2009; Kimmel, 2008). Within a social environment characterized by stigma and heteronormative expectations, emotional intimacy becomes a significant avenue for identity affirmation and psychological well-being (Meyer, 2003; Herek, 2007).

3.3.2 Practical and Financial Support

Aside from emotional support, participants also identified practical assistance as a major aspect of their relationships. Several college students reported receiving financial support and school-related assistance from their partners. Responses included experiences of being “alagang alaga,” receiving money for school needs, and obtaining personal items. Some participants acknowledged that the relationship sometimes involved utilitarian elements or “gamitan lang.” The findings demonstrate that these relationships serve both emotional and practical purposes within the realities of student life. The practical support provided by partners contributed to participants’ academic motivation and personal stability. This dual nature of relationships reflects how intimacy and material assistance intersect within marginalized relational experiences, particularly among students facing social and economic challenges.

3.4 Manifestations of Personal Growth

3.4.1 Emotional Maturity and Responsibility

Participants consistently reported experiencing personal growth as a result of their relationships. Many described becoming more mature, responsible, understanding, and emotionally resilient. The respondents emphasized improvements in their attitudes, emotional control, and interpersonal behavior after entering their relationships. The findings support Social Identity Theory, which explains how individuals belonging to marginalized groups develop stronger self-awareness and resilience through social experiences (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Despite experiencing discrimination and social pressure, the participants transformed these challenges into opportunities for emotional growth and self-development. Their experiences illustrate how emotional intimacy and relational support can positively influence identity formation and maturity.

3.4.2 Improvement in Personal Hygiene and Self-Presentation

Another significant finding involved the improvement of participants' physical grooming and personal hygiene. Respondents reported becoming more conscious of their cleanliness, clothing, and overall appearance. They stated that they became "malinis sa katawan" and more attentive to their "pananamit." These changes suggest that the relationships encouraged greater self-respect, discipline, and confidence among the participants. The findings indicate that emotional care and relational support extended beyond emotional well-being and contributed to positive behavioral and lifestyle changes. This transformation aligns with the broader process of personal development described in Social Identity Theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), where social relationships influence self-concept and behavioral growth.

4. Conclusion & Recommendations

The phenomenological inquiry into the lived experiences of male students dating gay partners in Kalinga revealed a journey marked by resilience, identity negotiation, and personal transformation. The findings showed that participants regularly encountered discrimination and social pressure within a heteronormative environment, yet they managed these challenges through emotional resilience and the strategic use of "dedma" to protect their identity and academic focus. The study further concluded that dating a gay partner did not diminish the participants' sense of masculinity; instead, they reconstructed masculinity through self-acceptance, authenticity, and emotional openness. Their relationships served as sources of both emotional intimacy and practical support, particularly in navigating student life. Moreover, the relationships fostered significant personal growth, reflected in increased maturity, responsibility, empathy, improved hygiene, and greater self-respect. These experiences demonstrate how emotional connection and social negotiation contribute to the redefinition of identity and masculinity within the cultural context of Kalinga.

Educational institutions in Kalinga should strengthen anti-bullying and anti-discrimination policies to protect students involved in non-traditional relationships from teasing and social stigma. Guidance offices should provide safe and non-judgmental spaces where students can openly discuss emotional vulnerabilities while recognizing the cultural influence of *bain* (shame). Schools are also encouraged to integrate discussions on diverse forms of masculinity to reduce rigid gender stereotypes and promote inclusivity within the academic environment. Community leaders should foster dialogues that encourage respect, understanding, and acceptance regardless of relationship choices in order to minimize discrimination and social exclusion. Furthermore, future researchers are encouraged to conduct longitudinal or quantitative studies to further examine the themes of personal hygiene, emotional growth, and financial support among larger populations of male students in the Philippines.

Compliance with ethical standards

The author declare no conflict of interest. This study complied with recognized ethical standards for human-participant research by ensuring voluntary participation with informed consent, the right to withdraw without penalty, and strict confidentiality through anonymous, secure, and aggregated data handling. Given the focus on psychological well-being, procedures were non-invasive, and safeguards were observed to minimize discomfort, with guidance to appropriate support services when needed, and required institutional permissions were secured for instrument use and access to academic records.

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