



GENDER AND EQUALITY TOWARDS POLICY ENHANCEMENT: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY ON THE STORIES OF LGBTQIA+ COHABITING COUPLES

REYTER ICOM V. RAMOS¹, JAMES CEDRIC G. ABAÑO², RYAN MARK G. MANLAPAZ³,
ERVIC M. ROLLORATA⁴, JIESEL S. ULZAME⁵, LINAGYN A. GEMENTIZA, LPT⁶,
LETTY Q. POLIQUIT, DPA⁷

<http://orcid.org/0009-0007-5098-0755>¹, <http://orcid.org/0009-0008-8636-285X>²,
<http://orcid.org/0009-0007-2102-4625>³, <http://orcid.org/0009-0007-6127-0628>⁴,
<http://orcid.org/0009-0009-7735-2163>⁵, <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6817-1971>⁶,
<http://orcid.org/0009-0004-6722-441X>⁷

icomramos09@gmail.com¹, jamesabano18@gmail.com², rhayhassetgenteronezapalnam@gmail.com³,
ervicrollorata@gmail.com⁴, jieselulzame17@gmail.com⁵, linagyn24.kcast@gmail.com⁶,
lettypoliquit@gmail.com⁷

Kapalong College of Agriculture, Sciences and Technology Maniki, Kapalong, Philippines¹⁻⁷

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative research, utilizing a phenomenological approach, delved into the experiences of 14 LGBTQIA+ cohabiting couples in Asuncion and Kapalong. The study aimed to uncover challenges, coping mechanisms, and insights regarding social acceptance, inspiring policymakers to create more LGBTQIA+-friendly policies. The findings highlighted difficulties in societal and familial acceptance, with couples facing issues like religious and moral conflicts, discrimination, exclusion, and social stigmatization. Coping strategies included accepting others' perceptions, making adjustments, fostering communication, and holding onto love. The study showcased the resilience of these couples, providing a foundation for enhanced policies.

Keywords: LGBTQIA+, cohabiting couples, social acceptance, lived experiences

INTRODUCTION

In today's dynamic global landscape, societal norms and practices are evolving rapidly. A notable shift is the increasing prevalence of same-sex relationships in contemporary society, particularly identifying as lesbian or gay. This evolving acceptance is pivotal in addressing the challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals, such as violence, discrimination, and negative consequences arising from exclusion.

Worldwide, sexual and gender minorities grapple with the impact of societal attitudes, with low acceptance contributing to issues like bullying, violence, health problems, employment discrimination, and underrepresentation in civic leadership (Flores, 2021).

Over the years, LGBTQIA+ individuals, especially cohabiting couples, have faced discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. The global push for LGBTQIA+

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rights, although progressing, encounters challenges in some Middle Eastern and African countries. Iran, in particular, has been studied, revealing the severe physical and mental health consequences, high rates of rejection, prejudice, and violence experienced by sexual and gender minorities. Public acceptance remains a significant issue even in culturally conservative countries, posing challenges to gender equality, social acceptance, and recognition of same-sex unions (Abboud et al., 2022). In the Philippines, specifically in Intramuros Manila, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) has been increasingly vocal to its opposition to legal recognition of same-sex relationships in the Philippines, coinciding with a legal challenge to the ban on same-sex marriage in the Family Code being raised in the Philippines Supreme Court. There are issues of same-sex relationship especially in rural cities in the Philippines that often faced with disadvantages and difficulties in acquiring equal rights within the country. They also have a higher rate of suicide ideation compared to their heterosexual counterpart (Villegas, 2017).

In light of these, a study emphasizing the social acceptance of LGBTQIA+ cohabiting couples should be conducted. This makes the study necessary and urgent, as the country's political and religious regulations are currently being challenged by the growing societal issue. Thus, it is in this premise that the researchers are interested to know and carry out this research, wherein it is still a major problem about gender equality. This study served as an eye-opener to the public about the existing societal issue in our locality that needs to be address and it is also beneficial to the LGBTQIA+ couples that let other people hear their different life sentiments.

Several studies which have been notable and conducted in various quantitative studies but apart from the statistical data or the quantitative aspect of the issue, it is of best interest to explore the qualitative side of the story to study in-depth the existence of the phenomenon. In relation to the study, relevant international studies have been discovered

mainly on the experiences of and cohabiting couples of Horowitz et al., (2020); Washington, (2022); Reitman, (2019). However, it only focuses on the experiences of couples of opposite sexes who live together. Lastly, this paper will take a different look at the issue by studying it in-depth and capturing the different challenges, struggles and triumphs of the LGBTQIA+ cohabiting couples engaged in this phenomenon and gave important concepts that perhaps produce in this inconsiderable world. Its purpose is to address the need to understand their experience, to ask how fundamental their lived experiences are and to focus on what is happening in our locality.

This study was also anchored to the following authors: Brown's (2020) theory of Multiple and Intersecting Forms of challenges faced by LGBT cohabiting couples such as social discrimination and being denied, issues with their healthcare, and lasting effects on their physical and mental well-being; Fight for Equality Theory of Ellis (2013); and Gender Development Theory of Miller (2016). According to these theoretical supports, LGBTQIA+ cohabiting couples face a variety of challenges that impact their physical and mental well-being, discrimination based on gender identity is still an issue in many places, and gender plays a significant role in facilitating human experiences.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study looked into the aspect of gender and equality towards policy enhancement on the stories of cohabiting couples in the Municipality of Asuncion and Kapalong. Specifically, it sought to answer the following objectives: (1) To understand the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ cohabiting couples about social acceptance; (2) To describe the coping mechanisms of LGBTQIA+ cohabiting couples on the challenges they have encountered; and (3) To uncover the insights of LGBTQIA+ cohabiting couples related to social acceptance.



METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach to gain a nuanced understanding of participants' experiences and coping strategies. Data were gathered through interviews, observations, discussions, and representations, and were interpreted and validated for generating case descriptions and themes (Creswell et al., 2013).

Phenomenology was central to this research, emphasizing the study of human experience. It explores how participants reveal themselves, delving into the first-person structures of consciousness and emphasizing subjective components of human existence (Gallagher, 2012). The study focused on comprehending and conveying the lived experiences of individuals, aiming to discover the essence and significance of phenomena as perceived by participants.

Criteria for participant selection followed Creswell's phenomenological study principles (2013). Fourteen participants were chosen for In-Depth Interviews (IDI), representing 14 couples and ensuring sufficient data for identifying and generating themes. Participants met specific pre-inclusion criteria, including at least 5 years together, age 18 and above, residency in Kapalong, Davao del Norte, Asuncion, Davao del Norte, government employment, and LGBTQIA+ identification.

To ensure ethical considerations, the researchers developed an interview guide questionnaire and validation sheets, obtained necessary permissions, and underwent ethical evaluation by the research office. Upon approval, participants were contacted, provided informed consent and member checking certificates, and interviews were conducted with due consideration for confidentiality and ethical standards. After this, the researchers transcribed the data into written form and then translated into Standard English language. Afterwards, the researchers formulated the emerging themes based on the core ideas from the participants'

responses. Next, the formulated themes were submitted to the data analyst whose expertise is aligned with the concept of language for verification and approval.

All the gathered data was analyzed using thematic analysis, a method that provides a systematic approach to data analysis. It allowed the researchers to associate the frequency of a theme with the entire content. The integration of thematic analysis in this study was very helpful because it helped detect and identify the factors and variables that influenced the phenomenal issue as generated by the participants. The interpretations of the participants were significant in providing appropriate explanations for their behaviors, actions, and thoughts. Thematic analysis involved three linked stages: data reduction, data display, and data conclusion, all of which were useful for drawing and verifying the collected data (Creswell, 2009).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Lived Experiences of LGBTQIA+ Cohabiting Couples with Regards to Social Acceptance

The major themes and core ideas for Research Question No. 1 are presented in Table 1. All the participants had their responses towards their own experiences. From the answers of the participants, five major themes emerged: incompatibility with certain religious beliefs or moral principles, being discriminated against and criticized, being excluded from the family, and being socially stigmatized.

The first theme that emerges is incompatibility with certain religious beliefs or moral principles. Our religious beliefs and the general public view these behaviors as unethical. The second theme that was expressed in this study was couples are being discriminated against and criticized. Couples have historically been marginalized and discriminated against, which has significant consequences for society



as a whole. The third theme that emerged in the findings is that cohabiting couples are being excluded from the family. LGBT couples who are rejected by their families encounter a variety of negative psychological effects.

Table 1
Major Themes and Supporting Statement on the Lived Experiences of LGBTQIA+ Cohabiting Couples with Regard s to Social Acceptance

Emerging Themes	Supporting Statements
Incompatibility with Certain Religious Beliefs or Moral Principles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "The fact that you are not accepted by your family and your partner's side and those around you, and the views of others about you is that you are a sinner". (IDI-08) "The judgment of people in society is that once you are in a same-sex relationship, you are automatically called as a sinner". (IDI-09)
Being Discriminated and Criticized	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "We have faced discrimination and criticism from the people around us in the community. Especially me, which I belong to IP community and this relationship is not acceptable". (IDI-01) "My unforgettable and negative experiences as a member of LGBT living with my partner is being discriminated and loathed by people". (IDI-06)
Being Excluded from the Family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "It is excruciating to remember these experiences as I faced discrimination not only from the people who I never knew but from my family. Worst, they rejected me as member of the family and ended my monthly allowance when I was in college". (IDI-02) "Because of my homosexuality, my mother kicked me out and I was separated from my children". (IDI-09)
Socially Stigmatized	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "First of all, having a same sex relationship and when it comes to social acceptance there's a lot of people that judges us and in short people does not accept the relationship that we have". (IDI-11) "My significant experience with my partner as LGBT is that other people's judgment of us is severe, there are many people who do not accept the two of us because it is a shame on what we are. It affected us as a couple to the point that we were ashamed to show it to others". (IDI-13)

The fourth theme that emerged in the findings is that cohabiting couples experienced socially stigmatized. The community hold conservative values that are opposed to same-sex relationships. Our religious beliefs and the general public both view these behaviors as unethical. Depending on how others perceive the relationship, one's impression of how reasonable one's perspective is and the behavioral consequences can vary. Additionally, it is believed that opposing actions have consequences (Verkuyten, 2020).

2. Coping Mechanisms of LGBTQIA+ Cohabiting Couples

The major themes and core of ideas for Research Question No. 2 was presented in Table 2. Participants had their responses on how they cope with their challenges. From the answers of the participants, five major Themes emerged: passive acceptance of others' perception, making adjustments, fostering trust and communication, holding on to love and taking a breather.

Table 2
Major Themes and Supporting Statements on the Coping Mechanisms of LGBTQIA+ Cohabiting Couples on the Challenges They Have Encountered

Emerging Themes	Supporting Statements
Passive Acceptance of Others' Perception	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Accept the views of other people and live on our own ways strive and fight for our rights". (IDI-11) "Maybe the only technique as an LGBTQIA+ couple is that we don't think about other people's stories. Also, working together to make a peaceful life together". (IDI-12)
Making Adjustments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "As a LGBTQIA+ couple all the adjustments are what we tried to acquire in order to cope with all the struggles we have encountered. From accepting, realizing and embracing such negativities to coping and successfully overcome it". (IDI-02) "The adjustment I did is difficult, I can't socialize with others. Then our relationship is a secret, so that we are not judged and our peace of mind is touched by other people". (IDI-08)
Fostering Trust and Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "As a person who experienced depression, I can say that it's not easy to deal those numerous emotional feelings. Thankfully, I have a partner who motivates me and has given me prior love and care for me to overcome such". (IDI-02) "Just keep faithing and trusting one another also keep communicating every milestone we encounter no matter the situation". (IDI-03)
Holding on to Love	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "I know that it sounds cringe but love is what keeps me going. I believe that when you love, all the challenges that may come in your relationship is nothing compare to the love you have with each other. It's what matters the most, and love is what it is". (IDI-02) "I don't mind that it's illegal and I'm doing something wrong because we're only human, it's normal to make mistakes. The important thing is that I am happy with what I did, to be in love". (IDI-09)
Taking a Breather	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Take a time-out, listen to music, meditate, get a massage, stepping back from the problem helps clear you head. Talk to someone I can trust". (IDI-05) "By keeping myself physically active, by using stress management and relaxation techniques, and approach people who can help or comfort me and my partner with our situation". (IDI-07)

It was revealed during the interviews that couples cope with the challenges they experience by doing passive acceptance of others' perception. Acceptance is a broad notion that includes social perceptions of LGBT persons as well as popular opinion and prejudice while also advancing their equality and well-being. The second theme emerge is making adjustments.



The couples make many adjustments to fit in with the surrounding community. The third theme that emerges on how cohabiting couples deal with the challenges of social acceptance is through fostering trust and communication. The couples must strengthen their trust towards each other and communicate constantly to foster a good relationship. The fourth theme that emerges on how the couples deal with the different challenges they encounter is holding on to love. Despite the challenges they encounter, they remain committed to each other in their love. The fifth theme that emerges in the study is taking a breather. LGBT couples can acquire relaxation techniques, get outside in nature, listen to soothing music, and incorporate physical activity into their daily routines. LGBT people's acceptance and rejection are critical to understanding their life decisions. It involves recognizing that societal attitudes and experiences of acceptance or rejection significantly impact the decision-making and choices of the couples. It highlights the importance of considering the broader social, cultural, and personal factors that shape their lives and decisions (Flores, 2021).

3. Insights of LGBTQIA+ Cohabiting Couples Towards Social Acceptance

The major themes and core ideas for Research Question No. 3 are presented in Table 3. From the answers of the participants, five major themes emerged: choosing to be resilient and happy; being steadfast and strong; keeping moving forward; an influence and an inspiration to others and being responsible and owning up to one's actions.

The first theme that emerged in the study is they choose to be resilient and happy. People who build resilient relationships can have a good impact, and resilient relationships can take various forms. The second theme that emerged is being steadfast and strong. A strong couple indicates that they aren't impacted by the circumstances

and continue to be steadfast. The third theme that emerged in the study is to keep moving forward. They continue living their lives and remaining happy despite the negativity they face.

Table 3
Major Themes and Supporting Statements on the Insights of LGBTQIA+ Cohabiting Couples on Social Acceptance

Emerging Themes	Supporting Statements
Choose to be Resilient and Happy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "The main lesson I acquire is to stand firm whatever storm may come in your way, because at the end of the day you only have yourself and the person who treasures you". (IDI-02) "I realize that freedom is attainable if you strive to attain it and the lessons that I have learned through my past relationship up until now is that give the love and happiness to the person that deserves it and trust each other". (IDI-11)
Being Steadfast and Strong	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "You must accept each other no matter what trials that will come and to be strong and that is a proof that you truly love each other". (IDI-10) "In all the trials, stories or judgments we've gone through, just let it all pass and let all the problems be a lesson for you to strengthen your relationship". (IDI-12)
Keep Moving Forward	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "We should stay strong and keep going whatever circumstances may come". (IDI-07) "Keep going and be with yourself, be true and life must go on". (IDI-14)
An Influence and an Inspiration to Others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "My experiences will help me to become a good influence to other people and the community by making myself voice out the thoughts in my mind regarding discrimination and become a better person". (IDI-07) "My experiences can help to inspire other people who can't go out because they are afraid of judgments. I am the living proof that the judgment of others is worth it because you can feel the real happiness". (IDI-13)
Being Responsible and Owning up to One's Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "You know what are the consequences of your decisions and you should be strong with each other. That you will not be affected of others or be blind to the person close to your heart so that you can find peace of mind ". (IDI-08) "It is a challenge in life where it makes us strong and learn from it and I accept the consequences of my choices in life". (IDI-11)

The fourth theme that emerged in the study's findings on the couples' insights is to be an influence and an inspiration to others. By promoting and supporting laws that deal with LGBT issues and concerns, they also advance real representation. The fifth theme that emerged is being responsible and owning up to one's actions. Because of exclusion and unequal treatment, their choice has a variety of adverse consequences. Everyday challenges impact cohabiting couples both mentally and physically. These challenges can take many different forms.



But no matter what difficulties they encounter, overcoming them is important (Ketcham, 2019).

CONCLUSIONS

Protection, awareness, and acceptance are necessary, especially in this generation in the community. In order to develop diversity within the community and school, policymakers would enhance some policies that would promote equality and awareness among cohabiting couples. The policies that may promote diversity would be beneficial to the offices and to the community to make the people aware and respect other people's decisions and know that issues evolve and it also need government actions for it also affects the citizens.

The results of the conducted interviews from the in-depth interview and the analyses of their findings have revealed concrete evidence that LGBTQIA+ cohabiting couples experienced difficulties in society, in the workplace, and in their family. This implies that looking for an alternative way to address this difficulty and to adjust the current situation is needed. The cohabiting couples express and fight their different stands in life that make them stronger and able to move forward in the situation. The researchers suggest strengthening public policies such as gender equality in schools and in the community. Also, promote awareness to make the citizens more knowledgeable about the current issues in the society. The government setting may implement an Information Education Campaign to raise awareness of societal issues and spread information to the people in the community.

Most of all, the opportunity to know the real story of these LGBTQIA+ cohabiting couples will be able to help the researchers and future researchers to understand why a certain behavior is being experienced at some point and

for other people not to be prejudiced regarding of their certain behavior. The fewer prejudices these couples encounter, the more motivation they should possess. The result of our study, could inspire government settings as a basis to help the citizens in the community that faces different difficulties and the LGBTQIA+ couples to hear their lived experiences.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The outcome of the qualitative interview provided an outline of the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ cohabiting couples regarding social acceptance, the coping mechanisms of LGBTQIA+ cohabiting couples on the challenges they have encountered, and the insights of LGBTQIA+ cohabiting couples related to social acceptance. Thus, LGBTQIA+ cohabiting couples' experiences as well as their notable involvement in the social stigma and different challenges, are much deeper and should be given credit by conducting further studies.

Another study could be attributed to these cohabiting couples' involvement and experiences in different areas. Researchers should take the opportunity to keep up with social change and the experiences of the citizens. It is likely that paying attention to same-sex cohabiting couples would strengthen our understanding and increase awareness in society. It would be useful to do further studies in a bigger community to understand how these practices have developed in society. Also, figuring out how the community responded to the cohabiting couples might also be helpful.

This study can also be turned into a quantitative one. To determine the number of cohabiting couples in the locale and to find out their difficulties. Future studies are required to learn more about the variables that influence a person's decision toward having a same-sex relationship and how they may be supported to their decisions in life.

Finally, this research has made a significant contribution to LGBTQIA+ couples where they will be heard and would add knowledge to the people about their experiences. As well as it provides insights into this issue and the situations they had encountered, particularly in terms of social acceptance.

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AUTHORS' PROFILE



Reyter Icom V. Ramos finished her Bachelor of Public Administration in Kapalong College of Agriculture Sciences and Technology (KCAST) last June 2023 and graduated as Cum Laude. She also participated at International Cross-Cultural Exchange and Professional Development - Thailand and awarded as Best in Oral Research Presenter.



James Cedric G. Abaño finished his Bachelor of Public Administration in Kapalong College of Agriculture Sciences and Technology (KCAST) last June 2023. He is currently improving his skills and potentials by engaging in any learning opportunities.



Ryan Mark G. Manlapaz finished his Bachelor of Public Administration in Kapalong College of Agriculture Sciences and Technology (KCAST) last June 2023. He is an International Certificate Holder on Production of High Quality Inbred Rice, Seeds Certification and Farm Mechanization. He has been a local government employee since 2020 in LGU Talaingod Municipal Assessors Office. He is currently pursuing his Bachelor of Science in Real Estate Management at Southway College of Technology in San Francisco, Agusan del Sur.

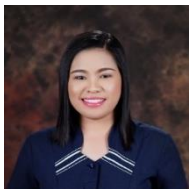


Ervic M. Rollorata finished his Bachelor of Public Administration in Kapalong College of Agriculture Sciences and Technology (KCAST) last June 2023. He is currently

employed as an administrative staff at Kapalong College of Agriculture Sciences and Technology (KCAST).

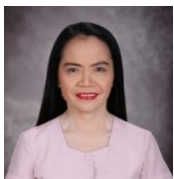


Jiesel S. Ulzame finished her Bachelor of Public Administration in Kapalong College of Agriculture Sciences and Technology (KCAST) last June 2023.



Linagyn A. Gementiza. She has been a college instructor for more than six (6) years and is handling courses related to English language learning and research. She took up Bachelor

of Secondary Education major in English at Kapalong College of Agriculture, Sciences, and Technology (KCAST) as Cum Laude. Currently, she is pursuing her advance studies in Master of English in Applied Linguistics at University of Southeastern Philippines – Davao City. She has been involved in various research-related undertakings and is the Regional Public Information Officer of the Philippine Association of Research Managers, Inc. (PHILARM) Region XI Chapter.



Letty Q. Poliquit is the Program Head of the Bachelor of Public Administration of the Kapalong College of Agriculture, Sciences and Technology. She has been an

educator of the said local college for couple of years already. She took up her graduate and post-graduate studies - Master of Public Administration at University of Mindanao – Tagum and Doctor of Public Administration at the University of Mindanao – Davao. Prior to being in the academe, she has the interest in public administration, governance, and welfare of the general public as she served as one of the distinguished personnel in the Local Government Unit of Kapalong.

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