Fifty Shades of Gay: Exploring Multiple Experience of Gay Students

Teody Lester V. Panela

Abstract

This study used phenomenological approach in exploring the life and lived experiences of gay high school and college students in the City of Calbayog, Province of Samar. Ten (10) gay college students participated in the study. Participants met the description of a gay high school and college student: 1) bonafide high school and college student from any of the schools in City of Calbayog; 2) a biological male; 3) consider themselves as gay; and 4) willing to participate in the study. From the data analyses, three major themes emerged: (1) Stigma and Labels; (2) Outlook Distortion; and (3) More to Life. The result showed that these students experienced a difficult yet an honest form of self-expression that can inspire and boost the aspiration of gay students. The school must be extensive with the programs that catered around the members of the LGBT community. The school together with the community should conduct gender awareness seminar that tackle not only the concerns of the gay students as well as acknowledge their ability to contribute to the society. To fully fathom gay students' experiences, an intensive interview with their family, their friends, school personnel and community members is recommended

Key Words: Gay Students, Experience, Outlook, Emotion, Disposition

Introduction

In the Philippines, the lesbian, gay, bisexuals and transgender (LGBT) community have always make a stand for respect and equality from the society. During the 2011 Philippine National LGBT Conference, it was found out that despite the growing tolerance towards LGBT people, acceptance is still yet to be achieved. They still face violence and discrimination from their family, from society organizations, from health institutions, in schools, at work and from the government (Ocampo & Alonso-Balmonte, 2016).

Some would consider gayness as a form of a contagious disease, a genetic manifestation from familial heritage or an illness brought about the person's environment. However, the Psychological Association of the Philippines (2013) reaffirm its position, out of their scientific knowledge, that being gay is not a disease or disorder. There is no inherent pathology or illness behind same-sex gender orientations. In fact, it was taken out in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders 40 years ago.

Lesbians, gay, bisexuals and transgendered individuals confront pressures from the society to hide, suppress or even change their form of self-expressions and identities as conditions and requirement for social

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acceptance and enjoyment of rights. Furthermore, this discrimination and prejudice tend to be based from a rhetorical moral condemnation fueled by ignorance or unfounded beliefs surrounding this type of sexual orientations and gender expressions with maladjustment or psychopathology (Psychological Association of the Philippines, 2013).

Along with the concerns arising from being gay, the development of their sexuality often involves coming to terms with their individuality and acceptance of one's attractions, desires and feelings. Self-acceptance of one's sexual orientation is the openness of how one accepts their own sexuality (Franke & Leary, 1991). Accompanying individual acceptance is societal acceptance, which serves as a protective factor for gay. This predicts greater and positive self-esteem, essential social support and general health status preventing the occurrence of substance abuse, suicidal ideation and depression (Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009).

With its main objective of exploring the lived experiences, perceptions, and challenges of gay high school and college students, this study would like to answer the following questions: (1) what are the experiences, discriminating or not, of the participants; (2) what is their perception about oneself; and (3) what are their aspirations. This study is also an avenue to introduce a new form of data collection brought about the emergence and popularity of user-created electronic novels.

Review of Literature

The lesbian, gay, bisexuals and transgender (LGBT) community members are subject to prejudices rooted in beliefs and traditions about gender and sexuality. Considered as members of a social minority group, they suffer from various forms of injustice. Adding more to the fuel to the fire, is the lack of recognition from the society that ultimately affect their capacity to enjoy and fully access their rights as citizens. They are more susceptible to experience intolerance, harassment, threat of violence and discrimination due to their sexual orientation (Subhrajit, 2014).

Marginalization is at the core of exclusion of the members of the LGBT community from fulfilling their social lives in three levels, namely individual, interpersonal and societal levels. This limits their opportunities to make social contribution thus developing a low self-confidence and self-esteem resulting to eventual isolation from the society. Marginalization can be in the form of racism, poverty, sexism, and homophobia that negatively impact their mental well-being (Majd, Marksamer, & Reyes, 2009).

Furthermore, exclusion and discrimination have major impacts on the lives of gay person and resulted in the following: early dropping out of school, leaving family and home, inability to land regular jobs with lesser options, isolation from being ignored in the community, unable to access various services, moving to other areas, lack of social support, religious rejection, suicide attempts and forcibly marrying the opposite sex leading to divorce (McDavitt, et al., 2018).

Moral, religious and political beliefs of a dominant group often reinforce homophobic environment forces. It is manifested in physical attacks, jokes, negative media representation and discrimination in the workplace. The dilemma to come out or not can cause a great deal of distress to the person. Extreme harm and disruption of the lives of people can often result from it. This in turn direct individuals to dissatisfaction of the place they live in or study at, stress, loneliness, exposure to physical disturbance, and ostracism (Mayock, Bryan, Carr, & Kitching, 2009).

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Members of the LGBT community often face harassment in schools every day. Most of them find it hard to speak up and complaint about harassment because it is so prominent in the culture. LGBT harassment is one of the forms of harassment that is allowed and accepted in popular culture (Ryan, Russell, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2010).

They face considerable levels of harassment, stigmatization, and discrimination of which they learn to cope with particularly when they have the support of family and friends, and participate with social networks. However, some younger members had to cope with harassment, stigmatization, and discrimination without support. This had a negative impact on their mental well-being, leading to rejection from loved ones or religious affiliations, harassment and bullying at school, danger of physical violence in public places, casual homophobic comments, prejudice from professionals, childhood sexual abuse, verbal harassment, greater fear of discrimination and physical violence (Ryan, 2009).

Negative school experiences directly affect LGBT community members' academic achievement (Kann, et al., 2016). A negative hostile environment in school impacts their academic success such as lower grades and higher rate of absenteeism or problems with punctuality.

This study attempted to explore the gay high school and college students' experiences, perception and hope. The results of this study will be helpful in understanding the students' lived experiences and concerns prevailing in the society.

Methodology

Research Design

This qualitative study utilized phenomenological approach that aimed to investigate the experience of gay college student - how it is be gay and a student at the same time. A qualitative research study aimed to examine a phenomenon that impact on the lived reality of individuals or groups in a particular cultural or social context (Mills & Birks, 2014). A qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem (Creswell, 1998). The researcher builds a complex and holistic picture, analyze words, report detailed views of informants, and conduct the study in a natural setting. Phenomenology aimed to accurately describe the phenomenon without a pre-existing knowledge to a framework, but remaining truth to the facts (Groenewald, 2004). More so, using a qualitative research, the researcher would able to connect with their participants and to see the world from their viewpoints (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The researcher found this method most suitable to the inquiry in order to provide a comprehensive analysis on the lived experiences of gay college students.

Participants and Sampling

The participants of the study were identified using purposive sampling. Using purposive sampling, the researcher can choose their participants that will be fit for the study (Devers & Frankel, 2000). Simply put, the researcher decides what needs to be known and sets out to find people who can and are willing to provide the information by virtue of knowledge or experience (Tongco, 2007). Ten (10) gay college students participated in the study. Participants met the description of a gay: 1) bonafide high school and college student from any of the schools in City of Calbayog; 2) a biological male; 3) consider themselves as gay; and 4) willing to participate in the study.

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Data Collection

In gathering the appropriate data for the study, two methods were used, namely indexing of electronic novels and a semi structured interview.

Semi-structured interview is a type of interview that has become the most familiar strategy in collecting qualitative data (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). A semi-structured interview is a qualitative method of inquiry that merges a predetermined set of open questions with the privilege for the researchers to explore particular responses further; used to understand how interventions work and how they could be enhanced. It also allows to asked follow-up question for clarification. The content of the interview guide was validated by two professionals who were expert in the field of Psychology. The researcher also provided an agreement that included obtaining informed consent, ensured confidentiality, time and place commitments, permission to record, delineating the ethical principles of research. As to data storing methods, the researcher used note taking and dialogic form interview to each deeper response of the respondents.

Data Analysis

The following steps represent Colaizzi process for phenomenological data analysis (Speziale, Streubert, & Carpenter, 2010). (1) Each transcript should be read and re-read in order to obtain a general sense about the whole content. (2) For each transcript, significant statements that pertain to the phenomenon under study should be extracted. These statements must be recorded on a separate sheet noting their pages and line numbers. (3) Meaning should be formulated from these significant statements. (4) The formulated meanings should be sorted in categories, cluster of themes, and subthemes. (5) The findings of the study should be integrated into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon under study. (6) The fundamental structure of the phenomenon should be described. (7) Finally, validation of the findings should be sought from the research participants to compare the researcher's descriptive results with their experiences.

Research Reflexivity

In the study, the researcher's approach is different in terms of other researchers' perspectives. As a member of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) community, the researcher understands his stand that might lead to a different development and an equally valid understanding of the particular situation under study.

The study has a preconception with a tone of positivity of eventually creating meaning during the entire process. The position, sexuality and the background of the researcher will affect the choices made in the investigation, from an angle, with the methods that best judged the sole purpose of the study, framing, coming up with themes and the overall conclusion of it. With the intent of sharing the results to the participants of the study. Furthermore, preconception is not equated in any form of bias unless the researcher fails to mention them (Malterud, 2001).

Ethical Consideration

The study focused on the lived experiences of gay college students, their self-regard and aspirations. Therefore, the ethical considerations centered around the situations depicted solely from participants' experiences, interactions and actions observed. The issues of theoretical, theological, situational, critical

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and covenantal situational approach to research ethics were irrelevant to the overall study (Tisdale, 2004). If literal transcriptions and summary were used in the narratives.

Results and Discussion

From the data analyses, three themes emerged: (1) Stigma and Labels; (2) Outlook Distortion; and (3) More to Life. The three themes and subthemes that emerged suggested that gay students are not yet genuinely accepted by people yet they still have positive self-regard or personal outlook as evident in the second theme. While they hold an unquenchable hope for equality. This study showed that these students experienced a difficult yet an honest and fulfilling form of self-expression that can inspire and boost the aspiration of gay students.

Episodes of discrimination and nondiscrimination were reflected in the first theme. Though, others may associate, right away, that experiences surrounding gay people are negative, the result of the study revealed otherwise. The first theme focused on the unknown and known treatment of the gay community.

Theme 1. Stigma and Labels

From the analysis, it can be understood that being a gay college student is not an easy task. They are experiencing difficulty in terms of the type of environment they experience, social stigma and unjust actions and slurs directed towards them. Likewise, despite the cruel reality, they are still viewed as a valuable member of the society and some were even considered a blessing by their family and friends.

(1) "People see me as a menace to society, a non-contributing member for that matter."

(2) "My family disowned me because of me being gay, they say that I am a disgrace to them."

(3) "People would call me names while I pass by them, and would make me of unsure of myself and worth."

(4) "My parents told me that I am not a priority for them, since I can be more than a beautician."

(5) "People would make funny noises when I passed by, as if it was not enough, they would yell 150 on my face."

(6) "Boys would not let me use the bathroom, they feel that I am peeping on them or up to no good."

(7) "I am always considered the weakest not only in my family but at school as well."

In the first major theme, which is the unknown and known treatment of the gay community, the participants of the study talk about their negative and horrific experiences. Students in a homophobic environment would lead them to fear victimization, experience social stigmatization and cruel treatment that impedes their natural ability to develop their sexual identity and gradual disrupt their social and learning experiences (Knowles, 2005). Gay college students bear the force of acts of intolerance, discrimination, and hate. Stressing that the problem does not lie in the youth, but in the community, family and the school where the student belongs (D'augelli, 2002).

A school should be a safe place for everyone, but in the Philippines, gay students often find that their experience at school is smudged by bullying, lack of access to LGBT-related information, discrimination, and in some

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cases, emotional, sexual, and physical assault. Such abuses, if not prevent or stopped, can cause deep and lasting harm and restrict students' right to education, protected under the law (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

Not solely focusing on the undesirable events but also it was revealed that some have episodes of nondiscrimination. In the Philippines, positive policies, that promote the respect of diversity and promoting LGBT wellbeing, include ordinances against discrimination and gender-based violence and code of ethics. The practice of Pride Month that started last 1994 and the election of gay students in students council also showed a different take to gay experiences (United Nation Development Programme and United States Agency for International Development, 2014).

Gay men have difficulty finding a loving family and true friends who'll accept and support you what they have chosen to be, however, some of them gain their family support, more friends and even new people same as their sexuality (Ocampo & Alonso-Balmonte, 2016).

The next theme featured a positive regard or new found respect to themselves. Their experiences taught them how it is to look on the brighter side of life and focused on things that matter most and positively influence their self-perception.

Theme 2. Outlook Distortion

Aside from the difficulty in socializing and dealing in a homophobic environment, they also shared their utmost motivation to keep going, aspiring more in their studies that they hope to give them a brighter future. They develop a good way of coping and counteracting, a trusty support system and a positive sense of self.

(1) "It came new to me at first (talking about the series of bullying but eventually my body and mind got used to it. As they say, it is all in the mind, I don't mind them and just continue striving."

(2) "The pain could be described as scraping an old wound to introduce a new one, it is very traumatic but I eventually got used to it and considered challenges as inspirations."

(3) "Every day became a routine to me, the constant bullying and hitting, it came to a point that my body was numb already."

(4) "Luckily, I've developed an immunity to it, even giving a joke as a rebuttal."

(5) "I just don't let it get me, I often take it as it is but that doesn't mean that I let them pull me down or step on my being."

(6) "Even if others hate me for being who I am, I don't mind at all as long as I have the support of my family and friends."

The second major theme concentrated on the unbelievable positive outlook of the gay college students. Despite experiencing a homophobic environment which further contributed to the students' difficulty in socializing with other people, they have this motivation and optimism to keep going and push further in their studies, whey they view it as a ticket to brighter future and acceptance from the society. Despite the fear and adversity that gay college students experienced, each developed their ways of coping with and counteracting their unsafe, unaccepting community cultures and marginalized treatment. These allowed them to develop a

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positive self-regard, sense of belonging at school and their individual affirmation (Badgett, Durso, Kastanis, & Mallory, 2013). One particular area that helped students were the understanding, acceptance and support they received from peers and adults. In like manner, if the society can offer a compelling and pointed advice for development of an accepting environment, then the school would be more inclusive and understanding regardless of the gender or sexual expression one has.

The last theme focused on the unwavering aspiration of the members of the gay community. The new found meaning gained from their experiences, gave them something to look forward to. Challenges were treated as inspiration for them to do good and aim higher.

Theme 3. More to Life

Gay students have aspirations to achieve and unwavering hope to get over life struggles. Their confidence and optimism in what they have to offer and their ability to see the goodness in everyone, in every situation and in every opportunity, and their desire for personal and professional growth.

(1) "I always hope for the best, that such challenges exist to mold me to become a better person."

(2) "I see myself as complete when I get to express my true self, no pretention, and I look forward to what the future holds."

(3) "People can judge me but I will never compromise my identity, life is about being you and doing what makes you happy."

(4) "I may look weak to them because of my sexuality but life is never complete without problems, it depends on proper perspective and standing firm to what you believe in."

Lastly, the third major theme discusses the undying hope of the gay students. like any other human being, they also have aspirations and hopes to achieve a just and fair society. Higher educational institutions are mandated to inculcate democratic principles in the pursuit of education, expected that they would treat all students fairly regardless of their gender, not obstructing their right to education. Gender rights should have become the points of contention to provide and increase the visibility of gay people, moving beyond the stereotypes and societal ignorance, showing that gay can occupy a wide array of positions in the society and life like everyone else, eventually such mindset will help the society change quicker (Thiel, 2014). A gay-friendly environment will lead to health improvement, increase performance satisfaction, build better relationships and greater commitment at work among gay workforce (Byne, 2015).

Conclusion

This study provides a description of the lived experiences of gay high school and college students. The students shared experiences of being criticized for what they believe, being bullied for what they are, stereotyped for what they become, and being discriminated for what they stand for. Despite these experiences, some were considered valuable members of a family or a group. Those acts were deliberately done by schoolmates, school personnel, family members and the society as a whole. Despite these, they remain encouraged, confident, and hopeful to themselves to pursue more and push through with their education, their aspiration, their identity and their life in general.

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Recommendations

1. The school must be extensive with the programs that catered around the members of the LGBT community.
2. The school together with the community should conduct gender awareness seminar that tackle not only the concerns of the gay students as well as acknowledge their ability to contribute to the society.
3. To fully fathom gay students' experiences, an intensive interview with their family, their friends, school personnel and community members is recommended.
4. Further studies and a more in-depth investigation of the lived experiences of gay students is recommended.

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