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A Critical Analysis of Identity Formation Amongst Closeted Filipino Youth through Judith Butler's Gender Trouble

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ABSTRACT

Filipino society is often regarded as being pervasively conservative and a stickler for heteronormativity, putting young people identifying within the queer umbrella under significant pressure to conform to traditional gender and sexual norms. This environment fosters a dual performative identity, where closeted individuals present a "cisnormative" front in the face of traditionally restrictive spaces while exploring and expressing a more authentic identity within supportive communities. Queer theory, which challenges binary conceptions of gender and sexuality, frames this exploration by validating the fluidity of non-traditional labels as tools for self-expression, even if only within specific contexts. Feminist theory adds further depth by acknowledging the compounded constraints faced by queer individuals at the intersection of gender, sexuality, and cultural expectations in the Philippine context. Butler's concept of gender performativity provides an explanation for the usage of labels to "do" gender in a way that enables the balance between maintaining social security and self-expression. This act of labeling, however, is a complex process. At the same time, labels offer a sense of belonging and visibility; they can also confine individuals, as external expectations often "freeze" identity in a way that hinders the ongoing process of identity formation. This study provides a critical analysis of these dynamics, offering insights into how emergent labels serve as both vehicles for self-individuation and as the framework in which closeted Filipino youth navigate their identities.

Keywords: closeted individuals, Filipino youth, gender and sexual identity, gender performativity, queer theory

INTRODUCTION

In the Philippines, ideas of gender and sexuality continue to be shaped by long-standing traditions of faith, family, and morality. Although more queer voices are now seen and heard, many young Filipinos still grow up in homes and communities that value silence and conformity over openness. For those who do not fit within the familiar categories of male and female, or straight and gay, the act of naming themselves becomes both an act of courage and concealment. The words they choose—whether spoken aloud or kept private—carry the weight of acceptance and rejection. It is within this struggle that the present study situates itself, looking into how closeted Filipino queer youth live out and name their identities amid the quiet demands of belonging and the fear of being seen.

Despite identifying several studies that have examined the process of queer identity formation and manifestations of gender performativity in Western contexts, research focusing specifically on the lived experiences of closeted Filipino youth remains relatively scarce. Pre-existing local studies tend to focus on coming-out narratives or public expressions of queerness, which tend to overlook the private negotiations of identity that occur under the constraints of familial, religious, and cultural conservatism. This lack of attention to the "closeted" experience constitutes a persistent gap in understanding how Filipino youth navigate authenticity and self-expression.

To address this research gap, this study examines how identity labels serve both as a platform for self-actualization and as a limiting mechanism in the identity formation of closeted Filipino youth. As such, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity provides a working conceptual framework that allows for a critical analysis of how closeted Filipino youth perform dual identities and negotiate visibility within oppressive social structures.

On Gender, Sexuality, and Sex. To the uninformed reader, gender, sexuality, and sex are nothing but mere synonyms to be used interchangeably with one another—insofar as the everyday perception allows, they are regarded in a somewhat fluid yet homogeneous manner. To fully deconstruct the socio-cultural divisions inherent in these labels and properly "queer" the binary underlying the process of identity formation, it is imperative that one first identifies the differences between such labels.

Sex is often the starting point or the foundation for identifying a particular individual's gender or sexual orientation. It is a biological identifier which is dependent on the person's genitalia, and to a lesser extent, their overarching physical appearance or attributes; in terms of sex, one can be male, female, or intersex, the latter being a condition in which one individual have genitalia, reproductive organs, or chromosomes that are arranged beyond the conventional male/female binary (Cleveland Clinic, n.d.). While some present as physically

androgynous, intersex individuals usually lean towards having either masculine or feminine physical characteristics.

Sexuality is distinct from gender and sex in that it represents the expression of attraction, or lack thereof, more than any singular form of identity expression. While sexuality is often intrinsically connected with gender orientation, it focuses more on external attraction than reflection of identity and expression; if a person identifies as a straight individual, for instance, it implies that they are attracted to the opposite gender (Better Health, n.d.).

Gender is a complex tapestry of social, psychological, and cultural identity (World Health Organization, n.d.). Though it is often confused with sexuality, gender orientation is decidedly more fluid and serves as the individual's purest form of self-expression. For example, a person can identify as a trans lesbian—the original biological sex of the aforementioned person may be male. However, their gender is female, which makes them a *lesbian* as opposed to *straight*.

The Genealogy of Queer and Feminist Movements in the Philippine Context

The Philippines' pre-colonial perspective on gender, sexuality, and sex is very much divorced from its modern counterpart, which many Filipinos would generally be familiar with. Though there is an established distinction between the three classifications, the culture surrounding gender and sexuality is largely egalitarian and has yet to be defined appropriately; pre-colonial society, with its own class divisions, oddly does not impose any hierarchical effect on the binary and non-binary demographic of the time in a manner that can be considered queer in itself (Cervantes, 2023). This is further exemplified by the prevalent roles held by *Babaylanes or Babaylan* within these communities—though their roles are not typically constrained, they often circulate between being a healer, a spiritual mediator, a warrior, and a priestess. They are generally referred to as a combination of a shaman and an advisor to the datu (Center for Babaylan Studies, n.d.), dabbling in several leadership roles within the community at once.

Even so, according to Smith (2022), Babaylans, despite characterizing a "divine feminine power," are not limited to being purely female vassals with variations thereof, of non-female Babaylans. These spiritual leaders appear generally ambiguous in their gender expression, and may be called *bayog/asog* (Ngu, 2022); these male or transgender shamans do not have a rigid adherence to masculinity nor femininity, rather they manifest both with respect to the mysticism attached to their roles as mediators (spiritual and healing). Animism, being the reigning religious doctrine of the time, places a higher value on spiritualism and, consequently, those who have received the gift of spiritual vision and of healing, as opposed to a strict adherence to a particular gender or sex. By the nature of these animist doctrines,

everyone and everything within the purview of the natural world shares one soul and is all equally sacred—a view that extends to the conduct of business, property, and families during the pre-colonial era, when anyone, regardless of gender and gender-disposition, is treated equally (Brewer, 1999).

Coming from this wildly fluid approach to gender and sexuality, the Spanish colonial era heralded several significant changes to the cultural and political landscape of the Philippines. However, many traditions have been preserved through the persistence of indigenous tribes and the isolation of untouched ethnic groups, secluded safely within previously unreachable mountains. There are just as many, if not more, practices and pre-colonial traditions that have been destroyed or trampled upon by the Spaniards (Prieto, 2014). With the suppression of the broader Philippine culture, the more diminutive framework governing gender and sexuality has been completely restructured under the Christian Catholic regime introduced by the Spanish government, with the dawn of Catholicism in the country marking the dawn of rigid gender-specific roles as well. As stated by Tonk's History (2012), religion, in both the pre-colonial era and Spanish colonial era, served as the primary decision point which provided the standard by which gender and sexuality are judged; for instance, spiritual leaders under animism were usually women with a leeway towards the inclusion of non-female shamans, while priests or *Sacerdotes* are always men. With the reduced structural power of women in society, "Maria Clara" became the symbol of the ideal Filipina: meek, submissive, and beautiful yet delicate as a flower. Beyond the manifestation of gender-based responsibilities and hierarchy, queer history has also been notably absent from historical narratives and documentation, with scant mention (Torres, 2022).

Unlike its earlier stages, however, the contemporary Philippine socio-political arena is a battleground—cultivated by centuries of intercultural dialogue between Western and Eastern influences via colonization and, gradually, globalization. Since the Spanish settlers left in 1898, the conversation regarding the existing gender social configuration has been increasingly solidified and developed by the subsequent arrival of Americans, as a result of the Treaty of Paris (National Park Service, n.d.). These western traditions, having overtaken pre-colonial thought, have been fighting a continuous war with the remnants of indigenous teachings, slowly dying out. However, in recent decades, the country has seen a resurgence in the appreciation of these long-forgotten values and heritage, such as the renewed interest in the use of *baybayin,* the Filipino script that predates Spanish colonization (Winters, 2023). In the rediscovery of pre-colonial perceptions on gender and sexuality, many queer Filipino youth consider this framework to be infinitely preferable in terms of inclusivity and equality.

Today, though the approach to the queer community cannot necessarily be considered as an encompassing acceptance, the growing appreciation for "gay" culture, the normalization

of queer monikers, such as *baks or bakla,* in the usage of slang, and the growing media representation of queer identities, encourages more tolerance within the more traditionalist spheres such as the religious sector and the older age demographic (Manalastas & Torre, 2016). Gender-based violence has also seen its fair share of pushback in the legislative arena, with the passing of the Safe Spaces Act of 2019 and the introduction of the SOGIE Equality Bill (Garcia, 2004), allowing the protection of queer folks from discrimination. This development has nonetheless been a small one about the true emancipation of the queer community from direct hostility and physical aggression, with the SOGIE Bill still facing significant backlash and resistance from traditionalists, proving that there is still a long way to go in the fight for queer freedom and safety (Idelfonso, 2024).

Queer and the Closet

In the wake of innovations in global travel and the 21st century's technological singularity, globalization and intercultural dialogue are at an all-time high. Adjacent to these developments are also the increasing visibility and openness of members of the queer community through social media, backed by the growing acceptance of the aforementioned community in the wake of fourth-wave feminism and the rise of queer feminism (Lange & Pérez-Moreno, 2020).

Despite the progressive environment fostered within online and digital spaces, the Philippines' socio-political and cultural climate restricts individuals from freely expressing themselves in specific contexts. This has led to the emergence of closeted individuals who are not fully capable of "coming out" as queer or participating in queer culture (Cámara-Liebana et al., 2023). This phenomenon is caused by several factors, including, but not limited to, fear of social exclusion, familial ostracism, or religious persecution.

Judith Butler (1990) identifies *gender* as something that flows through a process or a set of actions, rather than being static. As outlined in her theory of gender performativity, Butler regards gender as something to be expressed, more so as what one does than what one is. As the aptly-named theory of performativity suggests, the closeted individual is set to perform a sort of dual identity acclimated to the "audience" they are presently courting. This suggests that one cannot be queer and closeted at the same time, with the closeted individuals acting in adherence to the binary and conforming to the traditional gender values, alienated from the actual queer experience.

On existential implications. Beyond the socio-cultural constraints that mold these identities lies a deeper existential struggle: the tension between becoming and belonging. The self, when closeted, is not simply concealed—it is suspended in a liminal state of deferral, wherein identity becomes not a given but a project. In this light, existentialist thought offers

a critical dimension to this inquiry, where the pursuit of authenticity is not merely an act of resistance but a demand of being itself. To queer the self within the Filipino context, then, is to contend with the burden of freedom: the freedom to define, to act, and to exist meaningfully despite conditions that threaten erasure.

Research Objectives

This study aims to examine how closeted Filipino queer youth navigate identity formation within restrictive socio-cultural environments. Particularly, it seeks to:

1. Analyze how closeted Filipino queer youth utilize identity labels as a form of self-expression within restrictive socio-cultural environments.

2. Examine how digital, familial, religious, and community spaces influence the negotiation between public conformity and private authenticity.

3. Investigate how identity labels enable and constrain the processes of identity formation and self-actualization among closeted Filipino queer youth.

Through these objectives, the research aims to contribute to the growing discourse on queer identity formation in the Philippines by offering a nuanced understanding of how individuals navigate authenticity within systems that restrict self-expression.

Significance of this Study

This study explores the complexities of identity labels as they form within Filipino youth. While gender identity has traditionally been aligned with anatomical sex, contemporary views suggest it is shaped by interaction, social structures, and cultural expectations (Martin & Dinella, 2001). Descriptors like “genderfluid” and “pansexual” challenge binary norms, increasing the complexity of identity (Richards et al., 2017). Despite growing queer visibility, many Filipinos remain closeted (Poltras, 2019), often clinging to labels even in affirming spaces.

This research examines how individuals who are expressive in safe spaces remain closeted in others, particularly due to familial pressures (Brammer, 2017; Ereno, 2014), a pattern rooted in colonial values. Conforming to binary expectations can limit identity development and reinforce static gender roles (Perry et al., 2019). This study argues that dependence on identity labels may regressively constrain queer self-expression and hinder the broader goals of feminist and queer liberation.

Scope and Delimitations

As such, this study examines how Filipino youth, particularly those belonging to the queer community, make sense of their gender and sexual orientation within a Philippine cultural context shaped by class, religion, and globalization. It focuses on the "closets and labels" perspective and draws on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity.

The population is limited to closeted Filipino youth aged 15 to 21. This study examines how these individuals perceive and enact gender in a context where traditional culture intersects with modernity, and how social media and global discourses shape their identity. It also examines how socio-economic status influences gender identities in both urban and rural environments.

Limitations include a focus on urban and rural cities, which excludes deeper insights into rural areas due to practical constraints. Additionally, while acknowledging colonialism's influence on gender roles, this study does not provide a historical analysis. Instead, it focuses on the contemporary experiences of Filipino queer youth as they navigate identity in a shifting cultural landscape.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Gender Trouble: Judith Butler's Intervention

Judith Butler's Gender Trouble (1990) challenges binary understandings of gender and identity. Butler argues that gender is not an innate or stable identity but a set of repeated actions and performances shaped by social expectations. Her intervention draws on post-structuralist thinkers, such as Michel Foucault, who argued that subjects are constituted through social practices and discourses of power (Foucault, 1977, as cited in Butler, 1990).

Gender Trouble. "Gender trouble" refers to the disruption of binary distinctions between male/female and masculine/feminine. Rather than accepting these identities as fixed, Butler questions their foundations, arguing that there is no natural link between anatomy and identity. Local categories, such as bakla and tomboy, further illustrate this disruption, challenging and reinforcing traditional gender norms in the Philippine setting (Fajardo, 2008).

By exposing the instability of gender categories, Butler's theory undermines the notion of a singular, authentic way to be a woman or a man. This opens space for new forms of gender expression and solidarity across liberation movements.

Gender Performativity. Central to Butler's argument is gender performativity—the idea that gender is not something one is, but something one does. It is a series of socially

regulated acts repeated over time. Drawing on Simone de Beauvoir's claim that "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman," Butler asserts that gender is shaped by interaction with structures of power.

Sarah Salih (2002) explains that all bodies are gendered from the beginning of their social existence. Thus, gender is performed and reinforced through daily acts. These performances can sometimes fail or become exaggerated, as in drag, revealing their constructedness (Butler, 1990). In this way, performativity opens the possibility for subversion and transformation.

Gender as a Set of Actions

Butler's theory asserts that gender is constituted through a set of repeated actions — what she calls "stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, 1990). These acts encompass a person's attire, speech, behavior, and interactions with others. Over time, these repeated performances create the illusion of a stable gender identity, but in reality, they are contingent, historical, and open to change.

For example, in the Philippine context, closeted youth often perform a "cisnormative" identity in public—adopting behaviors, mannerisms, and language that align with traditional gender roles to avoid social exclusion or persecution (Beato & Ibon, 2022). In private or within supportive communities, they may express a more authentic, non-conforming gender identity. This dual performance highlights the performative nature of gender: it is not a fixed essence but a set of actions tailored to different social contexts (Butler, 1990).

Local identities such as bakla and tomboy further demonstrate how gender performances are contextually specific. In Filipino society, the bakla identity often merges aspects of femininity and male-bodiedness in ways that disrupt Western categories of "gay man" or "trans woman." (Fajardo, 2008). This fluidity resonates with Butler's argument that there is no original or pure gender identity behind the performance—only culturally situated acts that can be repeated, modified, or subverted.

Butler also emphasizes that these performances are not freely chosen but are compelled by social norms and expectations (Butler, 1990). The pressure to conform is especially acute in societies with strong patriarchal and religious influences, such as the Philippines, where deviation from gender norms can lead to ostracism, discrimination, or violence (Gender Health Data, 2024; Philippine Commission on Women, n.d.)." Thus, gender is not merely a personal choice but a socially regulated performance under constant surveillance.

Why Closeted People are not Queer

The experience of being "closeted"—concealing one's sexual or gender identity due to fear of social repercussions—is a consequence of the performative nature of gender and the constraints imposed by heteronormative societies. In the Philippines, where conservative Catholic values dominate, many LGBTQIA+ youth hide their identities as a coping and protective mechanism (Beato & Ibon, 2022).

According to Butler, to be "queer" is not merely to possess a non-normative identity but to disrupt binary norms (Butler, 1990). Being closeted involves conforming to norms rather than subverting them. As such, closeted individuals are not fully participating in the "queer" project, which aims to expose the constructedness of gender and sexuality.

This does not invalidate their experiences. Instead, it highlights how the closet enforces normative performance. Still, the potential for subversion remains—small, private acts of resistance can build into a transformative force.

The Tension between Normativity and Subversion in the Closet

The experience of being "closeted"— the concealment of one's sexual or gender identity due to fear of social repercussions—is a consequence of the performative nature of gender and the constraints imposed by heteronormative societies. In the Philippines, where conservative Catholic values dominate, many LGBTQIA+ youth hide their identities as a coping and protective mechanism (Beato & Ibon, 2022).

According to Butler, to be "queer" is not merely to possess a non-normative identity but to disrupt binary norms (Butler, 1990). This, however, does not negate closeted individuals' queerness. Closeted individuals navigate within the tension between normativity and subversion, identifying as queer in identity by orientation but unable to visibly embody the queerness of being queer.

This tension, where individuals are in constant negotiation with their identity, highlights how the closet enforces queer individuals to conform to the normative standards of society. This reveals how societal structures compel individuals to conform to heteronormativity while silencing others' freedom of expression. Concealment, therefore, does not negate an individual's queerness; it constrains the individual's ability to express, thus leading to the tension between normativity and subversion. The closeted remain in negotiation with their authentic identity and their survival in a conservative system. Still, there is potential for subversion within the closet; small, private acts of resistance can again build toward transformation.

Transition from Closeted to Queer: From One Limitation to Another

The process of coming out—moving from the closet to openly identifying as queer—is often seen as a liberation from societal constraints. However, Butler's theory complicates this narrative. While adopting a queer label can provide a sense of belonging and visibility, it can also introduce new forms of limitation and regulation.

Research on Filipino youth shows that identity labels serve as both vehicles for self-expression and as frameworks that can "freeze" identity, constraining the ongoing process of self-actualization (Archer, 2021). Once an individual publicly claims a specific label, they may feel compelled to perform that identity consistently, even if it no longer feels authentic to them. This phenomenon is not unique to the Philippines; studies of LGBTQIA+ youth globally indicate that the search for and adoption of labels can be both empowering and restrictive (Archer, 2021).

Katherine Archer's research on LGBTQIA+ youth's use of social media for identity exploration found that online spaces provide opportunities for experimentation and support but also reinforce the importance of labels as markers of community and belonging. The anonymity of online platforms allows for exploration without immediate social risk. However, the pressure to adopt a fixed label can lead to a sense of stagnation or limitation, as individuals feel bound by the expectations associated with their chosen identity (Archer, 2021).

In the Philippine context, the transition from being closeted (constrained by cultural and normative pressures) to being openly queer (constrained by label expectations) can be seen as moving from one set of limitations to another.

Filipino LGBTQIA+ individuals not only face external pressure from conservative society but also internal pressures from their own communities regarding what it means to be "properly" queer—in the context of internal pressures within the LGBTQIA+ community, being "properly" queer indicates adhering to the expectations of how a queer person should present themselves and sticking with a label that best suit their gender-sexual identity (Cámara-Liebana et al., 2023). This dynamic underscores the importance of understanding identity as fluid, incomplete, and ongoing. As Butler later argues in Undoing Gender, true liberation does not lie in stabilizing new identities, but in embracing the constant process of becoming and resisting the finalization of selfhood (Butler, 2004).

If Butler's theory of performativity reveals the constructed nature of identity, existentialism unveils the emotional and ontological weight of such construction. For the closeted Filipino youth, identity formation becomes not simply a response to social pressures, but an existential confrontation with one's own becoming. These performances—shaped by

fear, survival, or fragmented desires—do not merely reflect social compliance, but a deeper negotiation with authenticity. To exist as queer within systems that suppress queerness is to perform under a shadow, wherein one is compelled to disown parts of the self for the sake of coherence and acceptance. And yet, in the very act of naming and performing, there emerges a kind of self-authorship—a quiet, deliberate assertion of one's right to be.

This study examines the challenges faced by Filipino youth in developing an authentic identity and their attachment to binary identity labels, drawing on Queer Theory, Judith Butler's theory of Gender Performativity, and Critical Feminist Theory. These frameworks are used to explore the relationship between societal expectations, gender identity, and labels in the identity development of Filipino youth.

Queer Theory focuses on the fluidity of identities shaped by societal experiences. Feminist theory focuses on gender oppression that forces individuals to conform to norms. Both challenge dominant systems of power and marginalization (de Lauretis, 1991; Crossman, 2024). Each theoretical framework offers a distinct yet vital perspective on the analysis of the topic at hand. For instance, queer theory provides a foundational understanding of the fluidity and multiplicity of identities, which allows this study to interpret how Filipino youth navigate beyond the binary gender-sexual identity categories. Butler's concept of gender performativity, on the other hand, deepens the analysis of queer identity formation by identifying identity as a repeated performance shaped by social norms, highlighting how closeted individuals negotiate authenticity through acts of concealment and expression. Lastly, critical feminist theory situates these aforementioned "performances" within systems of power and oppression—further emphasizing how the paternalistic patriarchal systems, prevalent religious/belief systems, and cultural familial expectations reinforce heteronormative norms that constrain identity formation. Together, these frameworks define how external social forces and internalized norms shape the complex process of becoming queer in the Philippine context.

Queer Theory

The emergence of identity labels within the queer community has made the notion of identity complex. Despite the number of descriptors, tracing queer history is difficult because these labels did not always exist. Early queer individuals were often unspoken of and unidentified.

The term 'queer' refers to individuals whose gender identity or sexuality does not fit traditional ideas. Its meaning has evolved across history. Originally used to mean strange or peculiar, it was later used derogatorily to refer to homosexuals (Etymonline. (n.d.). In the early

1990s, the word began to be reclaimed by the LGBTQ community (Perlman, 2022). Today, it encompasses fluid and diverse gender identities.

Gender Performativity

Judith Butler's concept of gender performativity provides the central analytical lens for this study. Butler (1990) posits that gender is not an innate quality but a repeated performance shaped and sustained by social norms and discourse. Through these performances, individuals reproduce or subvert the expectations imposed by heteronormative structures. This framework is particularly useful in examining the lived experiences of closeted Filipino youth, whose daily negotiations of visibility and self-expression reflect the tension between performing safety and desiring authenticity. Butler's theory thus allows this study to interpret identity not as a static category but as an ongoing act of becoming within social constraint.

Critical Feminist Theory

Critical theory is a theory inspired by various schools of thought that represents a complex set of strategies and approaches. It is a social theory that aims to understand human experience as a means to change the world (Depoy & Gitlin, 2016). Feminist theory and critical theory focus on social and economic inequalities, and both critique and change society as a whole through promoting systemic change (Martin, 2002). Feminist critical theory focuses on the ways society overlooks the oppression of women in response to the patriarchal system. The social system dominated by patriarchy reinforces power inequality, with women at the opposite end of the spectrum. The standardized norms, based on male experience, limit women's control over their existence. The social system in society dictates the identity an individual should possess, thereby suppressing the development of an authentic identity.

Feminist theory is generally associated with being exclusively focused on girls and women, and it is intended to promote the idea that females are superior to men. In reality, feminist theory offers a perspective that highlights the forces that create and perpetuate inequality, oppression, and injustice (Crossman, 2024). Through this framework, the struggles Filipino youth face in Society are analyzed on how the oppressive structures like religion, family, and community lead to the Filipino youths developing inauthentic identities to conform to expectations.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the identity formation and negotiation of closeted Filipino youth. According to Creswell (2013), qualitative research prioritizes understanding the meanings individuals ascribe to their experiences, focusing on depth and complexity over statistical generalizations. This approach is suited to examining the emotional, cultural, and social dimensions of identity within the restrictive socio-cultural context of the Philippines. The design facilitates an analysis of dual performative identities: one performed publicly to conform to societal expectations and another cultivated privately in supportive spaces to express authenticity.

The research is philosophically grounded in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* and queer theory, which challenge dominant discourses on gender and sexuality by emphasizing performativity, subversion, and power dynamics. These frameworks provide the foundation for understanding the ontological (nature of being) and epistemological (nature of knowledge) dimensions of identity formation. By integrating this theoretical lens, this study critically examines how closeted Filipino youth navigate societal norms and construct their identities through repetitive performative acts.

Data Analysis Approach

Critical discourse analysis (CDA), informed by critical and feminist theory, provides an analytical framework for examining how language and societal norms influence the construction of identity. CDA, as articulated by Fairclough (1992), explores the relationship between discourse, power, and social realities, emphasizing how language reflects and perpetuates societal structures of inequality and oppression. This study uses CDA to analyze how closeted Filipino youth navigate societal expectations through identity labels and language, interrogating how these labels, rooted in heteronormative and cisnormative discourses, both enable self-expression and restrict identity fluidity. Drawing from feminist theory, the analysis examines how gendered power dynamics and societal pressures constrain authentic identity, revealing how youth challenge or conform to these norms in their negotiation of autonomy within oppressive social structures.

Data Gathering Tools

This study is framed within a queer methodological approach, which deconstructs binary and heteronormative structures that traditionally define gender and sexuality. Queer theory emphasizes the process of "queering" by exploring how closeted youth engage in performative acts to embrace the fluidity of identity formation. In this framework, identity is not seen as fixed or limited but as dynamic and self-defined, shaped by personal experiences and social contexts. This methodology highlights how these closeted Filipino youth resist rigid

societal expectations, subverting normative frameworks to construct and express identities that are adaptable, individual, and reflective of their authentic selves—an approach that also fosters inclusive, reflective, and critical practices in research and education (Apolo et al., 2025; Garo et al., 2025).

Archival research supports this study through examination of narratives, academic studies, and literature. Rooted in historical inquiry, it provides a socio-political context to situate the experiences of closeted Filipino youth within broader structural frameworks (Cox, 1994). This study does not involve direct data collection from participants. The study relies on archival and publicly available sources, as well as previously published studies, in which ethical approval and informed consent, including parental consent for minors, have already been secured. Therefore, no additional parental consent was required for this secondary analysis. To provide readers with a clear sense of the study's corpus, the archival materials analyzed include publicly available narratives and peer-reviewed works such as Ereno's (2014) *Playing It Straight: A Phenomenological Study of Filipino Homosexual Adolescents who are "Closeted" at Home but are "Out" at School*, Docena's (2013) *Developing and Managing One's Sexual Identity: Coming Out Stories of Waray Gay Adolescents*, Geonanga's (2018) *Formation of Identity and Sexual Orientation of Young Filipino Bisexuals: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis*, Alikpala's (2020) *God Loves Bakla*, and Espedillon's (2024) article *Us to Ours: Digital Queer Communities Are Creating Safe Spaces Online and Beyond*. These texts form the primary corpus from which the study derives its qualitative data for analysis through Butler's framework of gender performativity and critical discourse analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

NARRATIVES

Closeted Filipino queer youth utilize identity labels as a form of self-expression within restrictive socio-cultural environments.

Internalized religious pressure towards conformity. Internalized religious pressure toward conformity reveals how religiosity functions as both a moral guide and a social constraint within Filipino culture. Deeply embedded Catholic values—shaped by colonial history and patriarchal moral codes—produce rigid expectations of what constitutes "goodness," "purity," and "manhood." These norms compel Filipino youth to perform identities that align with religious ideals of heteronormativity and moral virtue, often at the cost of their authentic self-understanding.

In Judith Butler's terms, such conformity operates through performativity: individuals repeatedly enact gestures and behaviors that mirror the moral expectations of the Church,

thereby reinforcing its authority over gender and sexuality. Within this framework, religious norms do not simply dictate belief; they materialize through disciplined acts that make cisnormativity appear natural and divinely sanctioned.

Raymond Alikpala's (2020) narrative exemplifies this dynamic. His decision to enter the Jesuit novitiate—motivated by a desire for moral redemption rather than genuine vocation—can be read as a performative act of compliance with religious and familial ideals. It represents how Filipino queer individuals internalize the Church's demand for moral purity, interpreting religious devotion as a possible path to erase or redeem their queerness. However, through the writing of *God Loves Bakla*, Alikpala reclaims the narrative, exposing how faith and sexuality are not inherently opposed but instead entangled in the struggle for self-acceptance.

This case illustrates that religiosity, when internalized through rigid moral standards, becomes an impediment to understanding one's queer identity. However, it also opens the possibility of transformation—when faith is reinterpreted not as a mechanism of repression, but as a resource for self-reclamation. In this way, religious identity and queer identity coexist in tension, creating a space where the subject resists the very norms that once silenced them.

Gendered familial expectations. In a phenomenological study conducted on the 'coming out' experiences of LGBTQIA+ Filipino youth from ages 17-21 (Tiglao, 2014), one particular case study reveals how gendered familial expectations shape the identity formation of closeted Filipino youth. As the only male child in a traditionally structured family, the anonymous participant who took on the pseudonym "Anne" was born into a role heavily burdened by patriarchal expectations. His early behavioral patterns - playing with Barbie dolls, wearing clothes typically associated with girls, and playfully emulating the iconic animated character Princess Sarah- marked him as different in a household that assigns strict, binary roles to gender. These expressions of femininity signify his unintentionally subversive nature—going against the grain of traditional gender norms and biologically imposed sex stereotypes. Though he may have previously verbally identified as straight, by virtue of Judith Butler's theory of performativity, his actions and behaviors only further affirm his queerness. His closeness to his mother and sisters (especially considering the frequent absence of his father during weekdays) reinforced a relational orientation toward femininity, in both manifestations of emotion and behavior. Nonetheless, such deviation made his position as the "only boy" even more precarious within the family dynamics. Unlike his sisters, Anne was expected to embody the family's vision of masculinity—a vision that his father enforced through emotional and financial withdrawal upon Anne's coming out.

In this particular case study, the Filipino patriarchal structure is more evident than ever in the way society often disproportionately "disciplines" or punishes male children who

deviate from heteronormative gender roles. Anne's mother, serving as the quintessential nurturing *nanay* as she was raised to be, embodies nothing but support for her child; Anne's father, on the other side of the coin, also serves as the perfect idealization of masculine power dynamics in a patriarchal society, which he exemplifies through aggressive and withholding manipulation tactics. Extended family members, particularly uncles and an aunt, further reinforced this by instructing him to "act like a man," suggesting that his non-conformity was not only a personal flaw but a stain on familial honor. Even his lesbian sister's presence (an unspoken challenge to gender norms within the same household) was not sufficient to dismantle the family's attachment to a binary, role-specific understanding of gender.

Anne's case demonstrates how gendered familial expectations are not just implicit cultural pressures but active forces that shape how closeted youth approach their identities before, during, and after development. His expression of queerness had become inseparable from his position as the family's only son, tasked with upholding a masculinity that never truly felt natural to him. These expectations do not simply police behavior—they carve out life trajectories, delaying self-expression, complicating disclosure, and affecting emotional and material security. Thus, Anne's experience illustrates how the family operates as both a site of emotional support and gendered control, framing the queer self not just as different but as a disappointment when it diverges from assigned roles.

Digital and physical "safe spaces" influence the negotiation between public conformity and private authenticity.

Social media safe spaces as pathways to queer visibility and embodiment. In an ABS-CBN article, *"Us to Ours: Digital Queer Communities Are Creating Safe Spaces Online and Beyond"* (Espedillon, 2024), the emergence and subsequent growth of two queer-led Filipino digital communities, Queer Safe Spaces PH and The Sunny Side Club PH, are thoroughly explored. These communities were established by two particular groups of queer individuals who were once closeted and sought refuge in digital platforms that allowed them to express their identities without fear of face-value judgment or even aggression and violence. The story of content creators Roanne Carreon and Tina Boado, who founded Queer Safe Spaces PH in 2019, is emblematic of the move from private secrecy to public community-making. In the absence of queer representation and support in their offline environments, they turned to online spaces to foster a sense of community, engage in safe visibility, and eventually organize in-person gatherings. Similarly, the formation of The Sunny Side Club PH by Jewel Enrile, Yana Romero, and Cal Tolentino was initially inspired by the scarcity of lesbian/sapphic-centered spaces, prompting them to initiate a Discord-based digital community in 2023. Both initiatives exemplify how digital spaces can serve as zones of safety and affirmation for queer individuals navigating the pressures of public conformity with their desire for private authenticity.

These similarly motivated narratives demonstrate that digital safe spaces can serve not only as sanctuaries from public surveillance but also as tentative sites for identity rehearsal and eventual embodiment. These communities, although not perfect in concept and practice, provide a space for experimentation and vulnerability where members can explore queer identity without fear of familial and societal judgment. As one of the founders of The Sunny Side Club PH notes, the "comment section is a scary place," implying that public online spaces often replicate the same marginalizing forces found in broader society. In contrast, Discord servers, Instagram collectives, and digital forums offer a layer of insulation—allowing queer youth to validate themselves and others within affirming, curated digital communities. Over time, these private acts of self-assertion begin to translate into embodied, public performances of queerness, as seen in Queer Safe Spaces PH's Queer Prom and Sunny Side Club PH's drag events and sapphic meetups. These in-person events mark the shift from private affirmation to public truth-telling, signifying the courage to exist visibly in a society where full legal and cultural inclusion remains elusive.

Ultimately, the article illustrates that digital and physical safe spaces are not dichotomous but are rather interwoven in the process of identity negotiation. These communities enable a shift in which private authenticity—once limited to online usernames and pseudonymous avatars—finds real-world expression and collective validation. Safe spaces function as intermediary zones where queer individuals can practice being seen, known, and accepted on their own terms, in preparation for more public-facing acts of embodiment. They do not merely shield participants from harm but actively cultivate the conditions under which authenticity becomes thinkable and livable. Thus, in the context of this study, the archival narrative affirms that safe spaces are critical sites of negotiation, where queer Filipino youth balance the constraints of public conformity with the liberatory promise of private, and eventually public, authenticity.

Performative Private Persona. The archival data from Joselito R. Ereño's (2014) study, published in the *International Journal of Gender and Women's Studies*, offers a necessary entry point into understanding how Filipino homosexual adolescents construct and perform fragmented identities across divergent social settings. Situated within the broader thematic lens of the *Performative Private Persona*, such narratives underscore how digital and physical safe spaces (especially those found in school or among peers) had become areas where authenticity can surface, even if only partially or tentatively The adolescents in this study embody a delicate negotiation between public openness and private suppression in smaller groups of more intimate relation, finding themselves "out" in relatively safer public domains while remaining "in-the-closet" within the confines of the familial home.

One of the most salient motivations for concealment within the home is the deeply rooted cultural expectation tied to family honor and the social value of heteronormativity. Participants repeatedly mentioned their parents' high expectations and the perceived shame that homosexuality could bring to the family name as a deterrent for earlier disclosure of their identity. As one respondent articulates, "iniingatan ko yung image namin lalo na nung nag-iisang anak lang ako sa family ko," emphasizing how queerness becomes not just a personal truth but has manifested as an extant reflection of the family's identity as well. Another asserts, "ang taas ng expectation nila… tapos ang mangyayari sa'yo, ganyan lang," revealing how parental investment—often framed in terms of education and sacrifice—is weaponized against the possibility of any unconventional identity expression, in these cases, homosexuality. This pressure is not only cultural but also moralistic, hiding behind seemingly 'solid' ethical justifications, embedded in the assumption that deviation from heterosexual norms reflects a failure of familial upbringing. Thus, the private self is heavily policed by kinship obligations and religious conservatism, forming a psychological landscape where conformity feels compulsory.

These closeted adolescents featured within the aforementioned study also withhold disclosure due to a pervasive fear of rejection, emotional and material. The threat of being disowned, as one participant noted ("pwede nila akong itakwil bilang anak"), reinforces the household as a potentially volatile space where survival depends on adherence to normative scripts. This fear is further compounded by internal confusion, a theme emerging in statements like "nalilito ka pa," where identity remains uncertain, in flux, or perceived as temporary; in *queering* as a practice, such ambiguity provides an avenue for further exploration and open-minded self-expression as opposed to serving as just another way to invalidate one's identity. Thus, concealment is not only imposed externally but sometimes driven by internalized doubts, shaped by an absence of affirming narratives or future imaginaries that allow for queerness within Filipino familial life.

On the other hand, this same demographic of adolescents' reports being "out" amongst even casual peers in settings where the physical and social environment offers relative safety—these settings often take the shape of schools and even small online communities, where the chance of being recognized by non-tech-savvy family members is slim to none. In these purported sites of temporary vulnerability, friendship groups serve as provisional safe spaces, defined by open-mindedness and an emotional bond forged by loyalty. Participants describe feeling accepted and emotionally held by friends who offer validation absent at home: "tanggap nila ko, hindi ko kailangang mag-effort." Disclosure in these spaces is framed as an act of emotional relief and personal truth-telling—"kaya kong maging totoo… mae-express ko kung sino ba talaga ako"—suggesting that performativity here is less about suppression and more about self-articulation. This public performance, however, is no longer

performative in the Judith Butlerian sense of reiterating norms for survival, but rather a form of resisting familial erasure and accessing micro-affirmations.

Still, the psychological cost of this duality is deeply felt. Adolescents speak of sadness, grief, and exhaustion stemming from their inability to reconcile public openness with private denial. As one confides, "napapaiyak nalang bigla kasi nga ayun sa pagpapanggap," pointing to how emotional labor is demanded not in the act of "coming-out-of-the-closet" but in the prolonged act of hiding from others and oneself; the home then, in these narratives, projects an image of their site of psychic fragmentation as opposed to a sanctuary.

What this archival data reinforces, in line with previous analyses, is that for closeted Filipino youth, identity is not merely about internal knowing but about external navigation. Disclosure of one's identity is filtered through risks and rewards (whether emotional, social, or financial), and safety is not a guaranteed outcome but one that must be negotiated across various spaces. The digital and physical environments of school and peer groups become spaces of partial authenticity, while the home remains structured by expectation, duty, and silence. In this context, being "out" is not a linear progression toward freedom but a strategic partitioning of the self—a survival mechanism embedded within a culture of conditional belonging.

Identity labels enable and constrain identity formation and self-actualization.

Gender and sexuality labels as limiting structures for progressive self-expression. This archival analysis draws from a phenomenological study of Filipino bisexual youth aged 14 to 21 (Geonanga, 2018), whose narratives reveal the complex, often conflicting role of gender and sexuality labels in shaping their identities. Participants often report difficulty expressing themselves due to their "unconventional ideas," which they frequently attribute to their equally unconventional identity labels. For some, labels like "bisexual" lack resonance with their personal aspirations, or as one participant put it: "I have dreams as a human, but not as a bisexual." Others grapple with conditional self-acceptance, hinging their worth on the ability to express their sexuality without shame. These accounts reveal a profound ambivalence—seeking clarity while resisting confinement—capturing the messy, ongoing process of queer selfhood.

As interpreted through Judith Butler's theory of performativity, these struggles tend to expose the regulatory power of gender norms. Rather than fixed identities, participants' gender and sexual orientations are "performances" that deviate from cultural scripts, rendering them unintelligible within traditional frameworks. In this light, identity labels function less as tools for liberation and more as disciplinary mechanisms—identifying with a name or

category and staying within the scope of how it should be expressed. From the standpoint of applying *queering* as a methodology in this particular circumstance, individuals would have been discouraged from pursuing such labels as a means of identifying themselves, as it also hinders further progression of their self-actualization. Rather than asking "what" these youth are, we are invited to consider "how" they are becoming—through negotiation, contradiction, and connection. Their lived experiences underscore that queerness, especially in contexts marked by cultural and familial expectations, is less about arriving at a label and more about surviving the space between legibility and freedom.

Shared struggles of closeted and LGBTQIA+ experiences in identity formation. The following coming-out narratives of Waray gay adolescents collected and interpreted by Docena (2013) can be productively analyzed through the lens of Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* and through the *queering* methodology, particularly in relation to how both being closeted and being out of the closet can act as forms of constraint rather than the pure liberation often idealized in concept. In this archival narrative, the Waray adolescents' *experiences* of "feeling different" from other boys even before adopting the label "gay" illustrate Butler's theory that identity is not a pre-existing essence waiting to be discovered but rather is afflicted mainly by socio-cultural norms and enculturation. The participants "perform" gender and sexuality in subtle ways (through friendships, gestures, clothing choices, etc.) before ever articulating a gay identity. One anonymous participant, who was aliased "Erik's" adoption of a more feminine choice of clothing only *after* encountering other gay peers, once again exemplifies this performative aspect of identity; it was not a spontaneous realization but a construction that is primarily socially mediated by a scaffolding sexuality label. Similarly, "Luke's" internalization of the term *bayot* reflects Butler's concept of interpellation—the process by which individuals become subjects through being "hailed" by discourse. His sense of identity emerges not through an autonomous realization but through the labels imposed on him by others and the alignment of those labels with observable performances, which he eventually claims as his 'own.'

Applying the concepts inherent in the concept of *queering* as a methodology, this text disrupts the coming-out narrative, which often presents a straightforward progression from "ignorance to clarity" or from "repression to freedom." The text itself provides different moments of breakthrough before the participants identified they were gay—each experience not necessarily adhering to any linear development. For some participants, their identification as gay was described as something that "just happened" or something they had always known, despite the late formal application of the label. *Queering* the process means resisting the conception of identity as a clear-cut journey with a definitive endpoint and no further avenue for development or change.

Crucially, the text also highlights the restrictive potential of both being closeted and being out. The closet is typically framed as a space of repression and fear, which is echoed in the participants' efforts to act "straight" during their identity crises, which were driven by fear of parental or peer rejection. With such familial culture well-established, the state of being "out" is not unimpededly liberating either. "Trevor", for instance, finds empowerment in the visibility of his gay peers, but that visibility is still governed by expectations of how one should "act gay." The transmission and prevalence of specific, similar, or even uniform behaviors, such as effeminacy, camaraderie, and public happiness, suggest that even among "out" gay youth, there are performative norms to which one must adhere in order to be legibly and acceptably gay. Thus, being out can involve a new kind of conformity, one that is less about suppressing desire and more about aligning with community scripts in order to keep the aforementioned society's validation and support.

By applying Butler's notion of performativity and the queering lens, we come to understand that the binary between being in and out of the closet is itself a false dichotomy. Each state entails particular regulatory frameworks: the closet imposes silence and surveillance, while being "out" can demand consistency in self-presentation and legibility to others. Identity, as shown through these Waray adolescents' stories, is not an essence to be revealed but a terrain of negotiation, vulnerability, and reconstitution—always in flux, now relational. This archival narrative, then, not only reflects the lived complexities of queer Filipino youth but also challenges essentialist understandings of identity and liberation, offering instead a more nuanced, situated, and critical view shaped by cultural, familial, and linguistic discourses.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Queer communities in the contemporary Filipino setting remain shaped by colonial impositions, religious orthodoxy, and familial expectations that have narrowed the once fluid understanding of gender and sexuality into a rigid binary. Filipino LGBTQIA+ youth, especially those who remain closeted, are subject to a performative expectation that constrains how they appear and how they exist. As Judith Butler (1990) emphasizes, gender is less a static identity and more a repetition of acts performed under the gaze of the normative regime. In the Philippine context, this authority is present in everyday spaces, including the church, the classroom, and the household. The closeted individual becomes a reluctant actor in a play not of their own writing—reciting lines that sustain acceptance at the cost of authenticity.

This process is not just sociological—it is existential. Constructing, concealing, or expressing identity under duress becomes a philosophical inquiry into the concept of living authentically. Within the Filipino queer youth's negotiation of labels, closets, and cultural

weight lies the burden of existence itself: the need to assert a self that remains in a state of flux. Identity is neither static nor purely liberatory; it is a site of perpetual becoming, where the individual wrestles with meaning, integrity, and the risk of truth. To be queer and closeted in the Philippines is not only a political condition but an existential one—where self-actualization is carried out in the quiet refusal to disappear.

True inclusivity cannot be achieved without dismantling the conditions that make the closet necessary. Cultural, institutional, and theological structures must be interrogated and reformed. This includes implementing progressive curricula that trace the history of queer existence in the archipelago. Mental health services and religious ministries must provide affirming care that does not pathologize queerness. Legislative efforts must protect the liberties of queer individuals and provide legal recognition of these identities.

Local research must be supported and made accessible beyond the confines of academia. There is power in reclaiming narratives and returning to pre-colonial epistemologies that embraced gender variance. Through this reclamation, and with institutional support, a more humane and expansive understanding of queer individuals can take root in Filipino consciousness. Filipino LGBTQIA+ youth deserve to inhabit a world where they no longer need to perform for survival.

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