



## Navigating Acceptance: Challenges Faced by LGBTQIA+ Students in a Tertiary Institution in the Southern Philippines

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## ABSTRACT

The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, Asexual and other sexual (LGBTQIA+) community is continuously facing local and international challenges. There is an increasing social integration of LGBTQIA+ individuals, including different forms of discrimination and abuse. Despite worldwide movements and advocacies aiming for gender equality and inclusivity, many are still undergoing social adjustment for acceptance. Various universities and academic institutions are not always pillars of education but can be axes of prejudice and exclusion. By employing a mixed-methods approach, this study aims to investigate the experiences of LGBTQIA+ students in a conservative community of Tawi-Tawi, southern Philippines. This research used survey questionnaires (n=50) and focus group discussions to capture respondents' demographic profiles, challenges, experiences, and gender inclusivity within the academic institution. The findings revealed that most of the respondents were aged 20 to 21, identified as bisexual, and were enrolled as second-year undergraduates. Verbal abuse (44%) appeared as the most common form of discrimination, with the lesbian (39%) and bisexual (39%) respondents reporting having experienced frequent discrimination within the academic institution, compared to queer (37%) and gay (25%) respondents. Despite these commonly experienced challenges, most LGBT individuals feel included, enjoying freedom of self-expression within the institution. Thus, the LGBT students can safely and liberally embrace themselves even in a highly Muslim-dominated province of Tawi-Tawi.

**Keywords:** *challenges, experiences, LGBTQIA+, MSU TCTO, Tawi-Tawi, southern Philippines*

## INTRODUCTION

While some scholars postulate the universality of sexual taxonomies originating in the Global North, others advocate a historicized, evolutionary understanding of sexuality (Gibson et al., 2013). The intellectual ferment of the 1980s, manifested in the ascendance of sexuality studies and gender, catalyzed the LGBT rights discourse and the development of Gay and Lesbian Studies (GLS) as a methodological device to understand the movement's evolution within the broader idea of minority rights (Kuriakose & Iyer, 2020). The term "gay" originally meant "happy," but has shifted to homosexuality and has been stigmatized in mainstream discourse. Queer, despite existing stereotypes and discrimination, has been associated with positive and negative connotations such as motherly and reverent (Shi & Lei, 2020). Homosexuality has been perceived negatively and is associated with the ideas of inconsistency with traditional values and linked to immoral or illegal behaviors. In a heteronormative society, these concepts together with the LGBT identity have been historically regarded as a psychological disorder or abnormality, leading to misrepresentation and prejudice (Shi & Lei, 2020). The 21<sup>st</sup> century was a significant phenomenon that highlighted the consistent marginalization and call for equality among LGBT individuals (Manalastas & Torre, 2013). Globally, marginalized LGBT individuals are confronted with violence based on their race, class, and gender. Some transgender women and lesbians have experienced violence and have been imbued with misogyny. Also, LGBT people of color encountered racial prejudice rooted in sexual orientation (Meyer, 2015). Even though human rights are universal, conservative customs still prevent LGBT people from being accepted by society (Garcia, 2013).

In the Philippines, the LGBT community continuously endures discrimination and prejudicial treatment (Reyes et al., 2019; Tang & Poudel, 2018). Based on reports, 156 homicides within the LGBT community have been linked to sexual identity since 1996 (Philippine LGBT Hate Crimes Watch, 2012). Many institutions in the Philippines offered numerous policy recommendations, but the legislature has yet to enact special laws to safeguard LGBT rights. Political organizations like the Ladlad group are pushing for legislative initiatives and calling for the passage of an anti-discrimination bill that addresses the violence and marginalization experienced by the LGBT community to neutralize discrimination issues (Coloma, 2013). Even though current anti-discrimination laws cover race, religion, and ethnicity, they frequently fail to include LGBT people specifically (United Nations Development Programme [UNDP] & United States Agency for International Development [USAID], 2014).

While Filipinos are consistent with their conservative social attitudes (Widmer et al., 1998; Tang & Poudel, 2018), García (2013) contended that the Philippines maintains its reputation as an LGBT-friendly country in Southeast Asia. Due to its conservative historical

trajectory, which includes the non-recognition of same-sex marriage, legalized abortion, divorce, and gender identity, the Philippines is frequently seen as a country with limited receptivity towards LGBT people. The country is considered among Asian states with strong tolerance towards homosexual individuals, yet many are still victims of discrimination (Oducado, 2023). As a result, the nation is thought to be unlikely to foster an atmosphere that supports the acceptance and inclusion of sexual minorities (Manalastas & Torre, 2016).

Consequently, LGBTQIA+ students in the Philippines have been significantly impacted by discriminatory environments, with difficulties often ignored, despite regular discussions of many educational issues (Tang & Poudel, 2018). Studies have shown that intimidation of LGBT people occurs even in educational environments (Sutter & Perrin, 2016) and academic institutions (Everitt & Camp, 2014). Some university students faced discrimination and experienced being dragged and physically abused due to their sexual orientation, which greatly affected their mental health (Tang & Poudel, 2018). Similarly, adjective terms such as “girly” or “bakla” are used to connote something negative, and sexist anecdotes are mentioned, offending unmanly men, women, and LGBT individuals. These sexist comments and gender-biased language were uttered by some students, including those old-generation male professors (Rodriguez, 2019). Hence, to mitigate discrimination, non-discrimination policies, gender-neutral facilities, inclusive curricula, staff training, and support for LGBTQ+ student organizations are necessary to create inclusive environments (Hernandez & Torres, 2023).

Tawi-Tawi is one of the provinces in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), located in the southern Philippines. This province has been the earliest home of Islam in the country, and it remained free from Western intervention for most of the Spanish period (Bangsamoro Commission for the Preservation of Cultural Heritage [BCPCH], 2022). Mindanao State University Tawi-Tawi College of Technology and Oceanography (MSU TCTO) is a renowned emerging research institution in the province. This academic institution has a diverse student composition from other nearby island municipalities. The province has diverse ethnic groups, including Sama, Tausug, and other minorities. The province of Tawi-Tawi has a Muslim dominated population. Despite its religious historical affiliation and conservative culture, many of its young residents, including the students, are bending with the trends of individualism and openly expressing themselves. Although there are various studies on the experiences and challenges of LGBT individuals (Rodriguez, 2019; Tang & Poudel, 2018; Endeley & Ngaling, 2007; Jorolan-Quintero et al., 2011; Nadal, 2013; Abesamis & Alibudbud, 2024), there is a literature gap on the study of LGBT students, particularly in a Muslim-dominated university. Therefore, within the academic and conservative setting of Bongao,

Tawi-Tawi, this study aims to examine the experiences of LGBT students, the challenges they encounter, and the inclusivity level in tertiary education. It also aims to assess the acceptability and resilience of the LGBT youth in the southern part of the country.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This study was conducted in the province of Tawi-Tawi, specifically at the Mindanao State University Tawi-Tawi College of Technology and Oceanography (MSU TCTO), Sanga-Sanga, Bongao municipality. Fifty (50) self-identified LGBTQIA+ college students, aged 18 years and above were randomly selected as the respondents of the study. To capture a wide range of experiences, stratified sampling techniques were used to guarantee heterogeneity across gender identity, sexual orientation, age, academic program, college department, and year level.

By employing a mixed-methods research design, this study utilized a survey questionnaire to examine the (i) demographic profile of the respondents, (ii) the challenges and the experiences of LGBT students, and (iii) gender-related discrimination faced by the students. To strengthen the survey result, two Focus Group Discussions (FGD), comprising 5-6 LGBT students each, were conducted to obtain the lived experiences and social life preferences narratives of the respondents. An informed consent form was also crafted to provide information on confidentiality protocols among the respondents.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Profile of the respondents**

Table 1A shows that most of the respondents (48%) were aged 20-22, followed by 36% aged 22-23, while 8% were aged 18-19 and 24 and above. This reveals that most of the LGBT students are young adults and at the middle stage of their academic career. As Gates (2014) mentioned, males and females may identify themselves as LGBT by the age of 18. Females, compared to males, are statistically more inclined to perceive themselves as part of the LGBT community. On the other hand, Table 1B shows that 38% of the students are bisexual, with 24% gay, 22% queer, and 16% lesbian. Hence, transgender individuals are not visible, signifying that these students are not fully aware of the sex assignment of their gender identity. As Nadal and Corpus (2013) argued, lesbian women (tomboy) and gay men (bakla) are sometimes flagged or labelled as transgender. The inclusion of the “Others” category, specifically pansexual (2%), implies accommodating the diverse sexual identities within the community.

In terms of year level, Table 1C revealed that most LGBT respondents were second-year students, representing 38% of the sample, followed by first-year students at 26%, third-year students at 20%, and fourth-year students at 16%. The majority of second-year students who identify as part of the LGBT community represent a pivotal initial step in identity formation and personal growth. Psychosocial development theories state that the college years or young adulthood period is a crucial phase for resolving identity crisis and role confusion (Torres & McGowan, 2016). Also, literature on sexual orientation states that teenage youth's self-identification as LGBT happens increasingly at earlier ages and is more likely that this formation of identity and the coming-out process has already been completed before entering college (Torres & McGowan, 2016; Troiden, 1979).

Table 1

Demographic Profile of the Respondents

| A. AGE               | NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS | PERCENTAGE |
|----------------------|-----------------------|------------|
| 18-19                | 4                     | 8%         |
| 20-21                | 24                    | 48%        |
| 22-23                | 18                    | 36%        |
| 24-above             | 4                     | 8%         |
| B. GENDER            |                       |            |
| Lesbian              | 8                     | 16%        |
| Gay                  | 12                    | 24%        |
| Bisexual             | 18                    | 36%        |
| Transgender          | 0                     | 0%         |
| Queer                | 11                    | 22%        |
| Others/Pansexual     | 1                     | 2%         |
| C. YEAR LEVEL        |                       |            |
| 1 <sup>st</sup> year | 13                    | 26%        |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> year | 19                    | 38%        |
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> year | 10                    | 20%        |
| 4 <sup>th</sup> year | 8                     | 16%        |

Challenges encountered in MSU TCTO

The weighted mean scores in Table 2 which range from “often” to “very often,” show that experiences of discrimination, bullying, harassment, and exclusion are common.

Similarly, it depicts that LGBT students “often” face bullying and discrimination because of their sexual identity. Nanales et al. (2017) posited that bullying is a ubiquitous incident for LGBT students that causes absenteeism and anxiety. This finding is further aligned with Schueler et al. (2010), claiming that LGBT students experienced conflicting social identities and homophobia, which influenced their personal growth and academic engagements. As Hanimoglu (2018) and Remoto (2005) reported, LGBT incidents of discrimination in the academic setting trigger distress and trauma. These discriminations and abuses originated within the contexts of family, media prejudice, and even homophobia among public officials, including religious institutions’ negative perceptions of LGBT (Remoto, 2005). Hence, as social learning theory asserts, people learn different gender-type behaviors from their environment, observation, and modelling.

Additionally, Table 2 demonstrates that the LGBT students are “very often” harassed by staff members or faculty, and the university only occasionally acknowledges their involvement. As similarly cited by Taragua (2020), LGBT individuals are vulnerable to diverse forms of discrimination, including in the workplace and academic settings. Human Rights Watch (2016) reported that students are facing verbal coercion when faculty members impose their personal views on LGBT students. Correspondingly, LGBT students are frequently experiencing physical bullying, verbal abuse, and sexual assaults at school. Despite the adoption of the Anti-Bullying Act of 2013, which prohibits harassment and discrimination in educational institutions, bullying and gender-related mistreatment are still overlooked by school staff. As Santos and De Jesus (2020) claimed, any form of bullying among the LGBT students can be mitigated through the school administrators’ assistance and guidance, and as Mara et al. (2021) argued, mitigating discrimination requires expanding rights and freedoms for the LGBT community.

Furthermore, because of their sexual orientation, they are “very often” forbidden from participating in certain activities. Participants stated that they “often” experienced disruptions to their mental health and “often” felt a lack of belonging in their social circles and surroundings (Table 2). LGBT college students also affirmed that their mental health is negatively affected due to their sexuality, as evidenced by a weighted mean score of 3.76. Minority stress theory likewise revealed that the societal stigma and discrimination pose excessive stress to the mental health of the LGBTQA+ individuals. They have higher common mental disorders than heterosexuals (Moorhead et al., 2024). As Santos and De Jesus (2020) and Nomani (2022) mentioned, bullying or sexual prejudice negatively impacts mental health. Gender revelation or disclosure of sexual orientation among LGBT youth has both positive and negative consequences, especially to their mental health (Varjas et.al., 2016).

The mental and physical health of LGBT individuals is influenced by external factors such as discrimination, prejudice, stigma, and other social determinants of health, leading to health disparities. Lesbian and bisexual individuals are reported to have an elevated risk for diabetes, hypertension, and other cardiovascular illnesses. They are at risk of violence from peers and family members. LGBT individuals are facing mental health disparities such as anxiety and depressive suicidal symptoms (Patterson & Potter, 2022), and are vulnerable to verbal abuse, physical harassment, and sexually transmitted infections (Martin & Hetrick, 1988). The limited participation at school triggered social isolation, which is prejudicial to their self-esteem, aligning with the claims of minority stress theory emphasizing how discrimination negatively impacts their well-being and health.

On the other hand, the weighted mean score of 2.58 shows that the recognition of the LGBT students' participation in academic and extracurricular activities is limited, and that they "often" faced barriers in participating in institutional activities due to their sexual orientation, as evident in the weighted mean score of 4.40 (Table 2). Messinger (2013) has documented that lesbian students are having difficulty in integrating their sexual orientation into their identity due to prejudicial comments. Despite the increasing social acceptance of the LGBT community, stereotypes continue to persist (Smith & Gray, 2009). Survey results likewise affirmed that 87% of LGBT students in America were subjects of bullying at school during 2016 and 2019 (Hinduja & Patchin, 2020). Thus, the overall weighted mean score of 3.83 signifies that the LGBT students are experiencing gender related discrimination, bullying, and social exclusion.

When participants were asked about the impact of these challenges on their well-being, the FGD confirmed that LGBT students see these challenges as motivations to strive harder and surmount hurdles. They added that their experiences at school had an impact and brought changes to their mental, social, and personal lives. Challenges made them eager to strive and become stronger every day. Participants also claimed that they overcome challenges as LGBT people by staying focused on their objectives, instilling in their minds that no matter what they do, they cannot challenge the perspectives of any people. Hence, LGBT individuals have demonstrated increased self-resilience (Smith & Gray, 2009). The challenges and the feeling of social exclusion among LGBT students are somehow common in many institutions. Mustanski et al. (2010) argued that LGBT individuals are typically confronted with sexism, homophobia, racism, and marginalization in educational settings, which obviously affect their psychological and social being. They are targets of threats, derogatory jokes, verbal harassment, physical assaults and overt mistreatment (Dessel et al., 2017), such as Lesbian students who faced mockery and teasing, and other verbal discrimination within the campus (Taragua, 2020). Similarly, there are empirical studies on the surge intimidation and

provocation against the third sex or the LGBT individuals in many universities (Sutter & Perrin, 2016).

Table 2

Challenges Encountered by LGBTQIA+ Students of MSU TCTO

| Statements                                                                                                                                          | WM   | Interpretation |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|----------------|
| 1. Have you experienced discrimination or harassment at school due to your sexual orientation or gender identity?                                   | 3.60 | Often          |
| 2. Have you experienced being bullied by your classmate/s due to your gender identity?                                                              | 3.74 | Often          |
| 3. Have you experienced being harassed by the teacher or staff due to your gender identity?                                                         | 4.60 | Very Often     |
| 4. Does MSU TCTO recognize participation from LGBT students both in academic and extracurricular activities?                                        | 2.58 | Occasionally   |
| 5. Have you experienced being prohibited from joining or participating in activities conducted by MSU TCTO due to your gender identity?             | 4.40 | Very Often     |
| 6. Have you felt you do not belong in your circle of friends, classmates, or environment due to your gender identity?                               | 4.14 | Often          |
| 7. Have you experienced any negative impacts on your mental health or well-being due to your sexual orientation or gender identity while at school? | 3.76 | Often          |
| OVERALL:                                                                                                                                            | 3.83 | Often          |

\*Note: 4.2-5.00 - Very Often, 3.4-4.19 - Often (A), 2.60-3.39 - Sometimes (U), 1.80-2.59 - Occasionally (D), 1.00-1.79 - Not at All.

LGBT experiences in the university

A. Safety in MSU TCTO

Figure 1 demonstrates the safety of expressing identity in the MSU TCTO campus. Despite the challenges, a significant majority (86%) of respondents felt secure in expressing their identity within the educational institution. Specifically, gay and pansexual individuals reported a uniform sense of security (100%), while queer (91%), lesbian (87%), and bisexual

(73%) individuals reported progressively lower percentages. In contrast, Goodboy and Martin (2018) argued that the feelings of insecurity in relation to sexual identity led to self-censorship and absenteeism. He mentioned that some LGBT students are consistently bullied within educational settings to the extent that school administrators and teachers perpetrate discrimination. Consequently, discrimination within the academic institution can lead to serious mental problems of low academic performance and even suicides (Munoz-Plaza et al., 2002).

In the focus group discussion, the students were asked when they revealed their identity in public, and most of the LGBT student respondents said they first revealed themselves to their friends and, of course, to their mothers. They also added that they uncovered themselves in their early junior high school years. When asked also about how their family and friends responded, one of the participants mentioned that *“My family was not surprised at all. They already knew and even acknowledged my bravery for coming out of my closet.”* As Munoz-Plaza et al. (2002) contended, the majority of the LGBTQ+ student respondents concealed their sexual orientation from their parents during high school, citing perceived limitations of family support and experiences of negative messaging on their homosexuality in the family and at school. In addition, Austria (2013) revealed that in the Philippines, although parents are potentially aware of non-heterosexual identities, coming out remains rare and does not often occur. Nonetheless, Durust (2018) cited that similar studies found that most LGBTQ individuals considered their parents’ guidance in their educational journey and reflected on what makes their family happy. Comments from their loved ones made them sensitive. Caglar and Durust (2016) argued that LGBTQ individuals feel uneasy or even embarrassed about expressing their gender.

On the other hand, freely expressing themselves is also part of their sense of safety on campus. When the respondents were asked about their clothing preferences and which style they preferred to wear, most bisexual participants preferred “male or female clothing.” The gay group preferred wearing a “crossed dresser,” whereas the pansexual and queer group mentioned that their clothing style depends on the “mood and occasion”. Concerning wearing makeup, the queer said they wear it, but not most of the time, depending on the occasion, if needed. Nonetheless, bisexual and pansexual people said that they occasionally wear makeup. Lesbians preferred not to wear any make-up. Conversely, gays unsurprisingly affirmed they want to wear make-up.

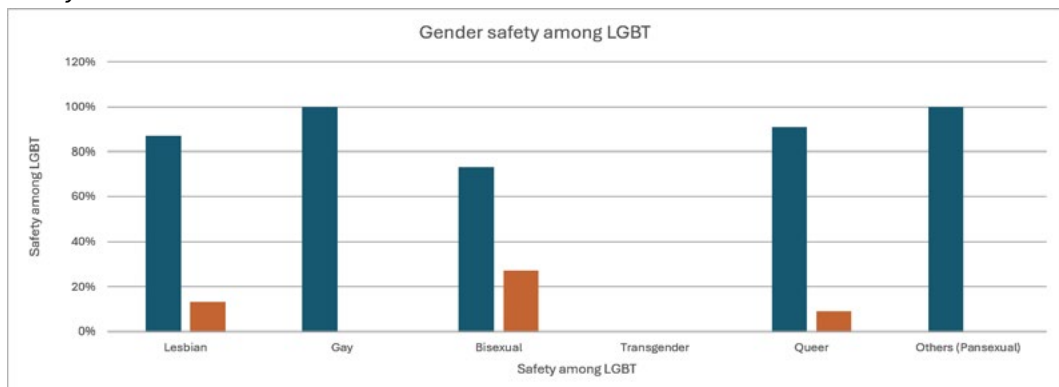
The researchers also asked how they cut their hairstyles short or long. Bisexuals, Queer, and Pansexual agreed and said that short or long hair does not matter. It depends on the mood and style. Gays responded that they love long, long hair, but they need to have short hair in some of their participating courses at school. On the other hand, Lesbian students mentioned that they preferred having short hair. As Koene (2016) mentioned, gender

expression manifests through different modalities, mannerisms, and dress. Clothing serves as a vehicle to express gender identity (Adomaitis et al., 2024). Here, LGBT students are free to choose their clothing preferences to express their identity. Since MSU TCTO is a state university that grants students autonomy to decide what they are comfortable with, LGBT students likewise have their own liberation in choosing any clothing preferences they desire. Hence, the conservative nature of the community in Tawi-Tawi does not actually restrict the physical gender self-expression of the LGBT students. Despite the freedom of clothing lifestyle, there are also reported verbal discrimination and disapproval coming from faculty and administrators, especially when wearing cross-dresser, as similarly documented by Trinidad and Tarague (2022). Most gay students expressed their desire to wear their preferred clothing, believing such attire would have nothing to do with their competence as students (Trinidad & Tarague, 2022). Thus, Durust (2018) likewise argued that LGBT people perceived themselves to be emotionally and physically unique.

Furthermore, when the respondents were asked about their social groups and relationships, the LGBT students confirmed that they preferred mixed-gender groups, demonstrating their openness to social interactions. In terms of relationship status with same-sex or opposite sex, pansexual, bisexual, and queer student respondents revealed that they are not engaged in any relationship but are expressly open to having one with any gender. Gay respondent, on the other hand, not surprisingly said that he is exclusively attracted to men but currently unpartnered. Similar to other lesbian individuals, lesbian respondents were in relationships with women, which is consistent with their sexual orientation. Interestingly, most of the LGBT student respondents reported no changes or alterations of characters in their faith or religious beliefs even after disclosing their gender orientation. Hence, the interview narratives revealed that there is reconciliation between the student's gender identity and spiritual beliefs, even as a Muslim. As Caglar and Durust (2016) argued, LGBTQ individuals feel unique in their social lives, as these experiences are influenced by their feelings, particularly when they are not restricted in their social relationships.

## Figure 1

*Safety in MSU TCTO in Terms of Sexual Orientation*



### ***B. Bullying or Harassment inside the Campus***

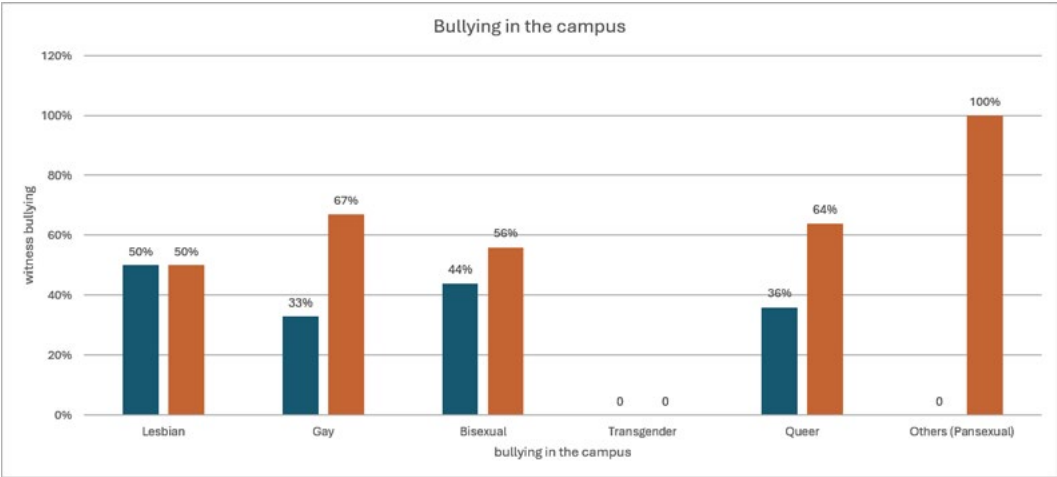
Figure 2 illustrates the prevalence of witnessing bullying or harassment directed towards LGBTQIA+ students. Lesbian and bisexual individuals reported a higher incidence of observing such incidents. Notably, lesbian respondents exhibited a uniform experience in witnessing harassment or bullying of fellow LGBT students on campus. Conversely, most gay respondents reported not witnessing such occurrences. Queer and pansexual respondents concurred that they did not observe harassment of either homosexual or heterosexual individuals on the campus. Thus, the data indicate that most (60%) of the LGBT students have not witnessed harassment or any form of bullying at school. This finding is in contrast with Burczycka (2020), who documented that most LGBT students witness forms of discrimination based on gender orientation, which, was likewise agreed by Munoz-Plaza (2002), confirming its presence within educational settings. On the other hand, Musu-Gillette et al. (2017) mentioned that bisexual, gay, and lesbian students experience higher rates of bullying compared to heterosexual students.

When participants were asked about some of their experiences that challenged their identity as LGBT students, one of the participants argued that it is challenging as an LGBT person to blend in with others, especially when they are around straight people. There is an assumption that they belong to them. Nonetheless, despite the challenges, they confirmed that they have not experienced extreme bullying at school. On the other hand, other university students also encountered some unique experiences. Trinidad and Tarague (2022) affirmed in their study that one of their respondents claimed, *“Some of my classmates are not open to the idea of LGBTQ, and sometimes they will tell me I am too masculine, so they are trying to make sense of my bisexuality.”* Hence, many LGBT students faced the social challenges of discrimination (Nomani, 2022). Durust (2018) also exposed that LGBTQ people have a hard time making friends but enjoy being different from other genders.

The findings in the figure also align with the FGD when the participants were asked about the presence of any LGBTQIA+-related violence on campus. Most of the participants mentioned that there is no record regarding violence related to LGBTQIA+ inside the MSU TCTO campus. They also stated that there are many LGBTQIA+ members at the institution. Caglar and Durust (2016) mentioned that LGBTQ+ individuals commonly exhibit behaviors allied with social values and norms. Their conduct is typically not seen as detrimental in the community. Rather than subjecting them to complete disadvantages through discrimination and marginalization, research should focus on confirming their destigmatization and the normalcy of their sexual orientations.

Figure 2

*Bullying or Harassment on the Campus*



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Despite the conservative nature of the province of Tawi-Tawi, the findings of this study show that there is growing visibility and acceptability of LGBT individuals in the community. Students who self-identify as members of the LGBT community report feeling secure enough to reveal their genuine selves without fear of judgment within the academic institution. Although there were some cases of gender disparity and discrimination by faculty and staff, the idea that there was no witnessed perceived violence within the campus signifies that MSU TCTO has been adapting and embracing diverse sexual orientations. Hence, this university in the southernmost part of the country is moving toward a gender inclusive campus in a conservative and Muslim-dominated setting of Tawi-Tawi. Correspondingly, this study recommends inclusive policies to ensure the equal representation and active participation of LGBT students in school activities. The university must invest in LGBT-competent counselling services to mitigate mental stress. A mandatory sensitivity training for all faculty, staff, and students, and spreading awareness on the LGBT students’ welfare, in a Muslim-dominated school, must be given attention, challenging discrimination, and establishing an LGBT-friendly campus.

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**Ethical Approval.** This research has been approved by the ethical committee board of Mindanao State University Tawi-Tawi College of Technology and Oceanography.

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