

Research Article

Faith, Identity, and Resilience: A Descriptive Phenomenological Study of Coming-Out Experiences among Muslim LGBT Individuals in North Cotabato, Philippines

Miguelita A. Abarre^{1*}  | Mary Glenda A. Lugtu² 

¹ Program Head, Southern Christian College, Cotabato, Philippines

² Professor, University of Mindanao, Davao City, Philippines

*Correspondence: miguelita.abarre@southernchristiancollege.edu.ph

<https://doi.org/10.70847/670053>

Article history:

Received: 6 January 2026

Revised: 8 February 2026

Accepted: 1 March 2026



© The Author(s) 2026. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)

Abstract

This qualitative research endeavor explored the coming out experiences of Muslim LGBT individuals in North Cotabato, Philippines, focusing on their psychological (mind) and spiritual (spirit) struggles. Using a descriptive phenomenological design, data were gathered from 20 purposively selected participants through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, and were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) descriptive phenomenological method. Results revealed interconnected themes describing internal struggles, relational challenges, and identity negotiation within religious and cultural contexts. Participants navigated these experiences through relational support, spiritual meaning-making, and personal resilience, which shaped the life lessons they shared about self-acceptance, perseverance, and demonstrating personal worth. This research offers additional insight into participants' coming-out experiences within their lived cultural and religious contexts. Findings aim to inform mental health professionals, educators, policymakers, and communities to promote inclusivity, mental well-being, and understanding across cultural and religious lines.

Keywords: Descriptive phenomenology, coming out, coping strategies, life lessons, mental health, Muslim LGBT, Philippines

1. Introduction

Coming out is frequently one of the most impactful experiences in the life of a lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender person because reality remains that the coming-out process often carries painful experiences of homophobia, heterosexism, rejection, invisibility, and stigma (Denison et al., 2021; Moagi et al., 2021). LGBT individuals also experience dilemmas both internally and externally because coming out does not end with the family—it often extends to the wider community, including ethnic and religious communities where social expectations are strongly enforced (Libiran et al., 2024; Rahmawati & Poerwandari, 2024; Rosati et al., 2020).

In many conservative settings, homosexuality is still framed as against the “law of nature,” and LGBT individuals are often labeled as sinners who are treated as unworthy of living openly in public (Ravat & Wendland, 2020; Thawer, 2022). In several Muslim-majority countries, homosexuality has been criminalized, exposing sexual minorities to abuse, imprisonment, and even execution (House of Commons Library, 2022; Human Dignity Trust, 2026; ILGA World, 2020). While the Philippine context differs legally, human rights reports show that LGBTQI+ persons in the Bangsamoro region have experienced threats, harassment, and hate crimes, with some cases reportedly left unaddressed because violence is viewed as “justified” against the life they chose (Amnesty International, 2021). In such conservative Islamic contexts, coming out is discouraged and treated as forbidden, and queer Muslims often feel compelled to hide their identities to avoid religious and social sanctions (Minty, 2025). Yet in contemporary society, Muslim LGBTs exist and continue to negotiate their identities and activism without abandoning their faith (Brooks, 2014; Mohd Sidik, 2015).

This tension between sexual identity and Islamic faith is not only a matter of public debate but also a public health concern. Recent work emphasizes that discrimination and criminalization are linked with serious mental health harms (International Commission of Jurists, 2023; Wallace et al., 2024). The World Health Organization (2025) similarly notes that people who experience discrimination, including LGBTI persons, are more vulnerable to mental illness and suicide. Studies further show that remaining closeted is associated with higher risks of depression, anxiety, distress, and suicidal tendencies among sexual minority individuals (Csoti & McLaren, 2025; Kabir & Brinsworth, 2021; Pachankis et al., 2020). In the Philippines, recent national survey data report high levels of suicidal ideation and attempts among LGBTQ+ youth, reinforcing the need for inclusive mental health support and social awareness (Reyes et al., 2024; World Health Organization, 2025).

In North Cotabato and the wider Mindanao context, LGBTQIA+ individuals are not criminalized under Philippine law, yet stigma and discrimination persist in families, schools, and communities, placing safety and well-being at risk (Psychological Association of the Philippines, 2020). At the national level, the absence of an enacted comprehensive anti-discrimination law remains a continuing concern, as the proposed SOGIE Equality Bill has been pending for years (Time, 2023). Meanwhile, reports from culturally conservative

settings such as BARMM continue to document vulnerabilities experienced by LGBTQI+ persons, which mirrors realities in communities with strong religious and cultural control (Amnesty International, 2021).

Being both Muslim and LGBT is a complicated situation that demands serious attention because identity is negotiated under pressure—pressure to conform, to silence oneself, and to “fit” within ethno-cultural and religious expectations. Evidence suggests that coming-out struggles among Muslim LGBT individuals deeply affect both mind and spirit, while stigma rooted in strict religious beliefs and cultural roles continues to shape their daily experiences (Molde & Embornas, 2024; Rasheed, 2022; Zehra et al., 2023). Despite existing studies on coming-out struggles internationally and locally, many Philippine studies are still centered on Christian perspectives, with limited attention to Muslim LGBT individuals, especially those living in conservative Muslim-majority areas such as Cotabato, Mindanao. As a result, their voices remain underrepresented in literature, even though their struggles and resilience deserve public understanding.

Guided by an integrated analytic framework, this study draws on multiple complementary theories to examine the coming-out experiences of Muslim LGBT individuals in Cotabato. Cass’s Model of Homosexual Identity Formation (1979) is used to interpret stages of identity development and self-recognition, while Meyer’s Minority Stress Theory (2003) explains how stigma, discrimination, and anticipated rejection shape participants’ psychological struggles. Schlossberg’s Theory of Marginality and Mattering (1989) frames participants’ sense of belonging and perceived social exclusion within family, community, and religious spaces. Festinger’s Cognitive Dissonance Theory (1957) provides a lens for understanding the internal conflict arising from tensions between personal identity and religious expectations. Finally, Ryan and Deci’s Self-Determination Theory (2000) informs the analysis of motivation, resilience, and meaning-making processes reflected in participants’ coping strategies and life lessons. Rather than functioning as separate perspectives, these theories are mobilized as analytic clusters that collectively illuminate identity negotiation, stress experiences, cognitive conflict, and pathways toward resilience. Through this integrated framework, the study explores struggles of mind and spirit, coping mechanisms, and the life lessons shared by participants within their lived cultural and religious contexts.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design

This study seeks to explore the coming-out struggles of Muslim LGBT individuals in terms of mind and spirit. It was therefore reasonable to employ a qualitative research design, as this approach emphasizes and describes the lived experiences of participants (Moustakas, 1994). In this study, the researchers focused on understanding the participants’ personal meanings and subjective realities; thus, a descriptive phenomenological method was used. Descriptive phenomenology centers on individuals’ experiences and aims to understand the structure of these experiences as they are lived and perceived. It is primarily

concerned with participants' accounts rather than with the researcher's personal interpretations (Creswell, 2019; Moustakas, 1994; Redocto & Sumayo, 2024)

2.2 Respondents and Sampling Procedure

This study involved 20 participants: 11 participated in in-depth interviews (IDI) and nine in a focus group discussion (FGD). Creswell (2019) noted that at least 15 participants is acceptable for phenomenological research; thus, the sample size was sufficient for this study. Participants were selected based on the following criteria: (a) Muslim individuals residing in North Cotabato, with representation from different municipalities; (b) identified as "out" LGBT individuals within their family or peer circle; and (c) aged 18–35 at the time of the interview. Closeted Muslim LGBT individuals, those uncertain about their gender preference, and those residing outside North Cotabato were excluded because the study specifically focused on the lived experiences of "out" Muslim LGBT individuals within the province. Participants who had joined similar studies were also excluded to reduce the risk of bias and avoid repeated exposure to sensitive questions that may cause distress. A referral-based snowball sampling technique was used (Raina, 2015). After identifying initial participants, others were recruited through referrals from relatives, friends, and colleagues. Data collection was conducted at participants' preferred time and setting. Google Meet or recorded phone calls were used when participants opted not to meet face-to-face or when in-person meetings were not safe or feasible.

2.3 Research Instruments

The primary instrument used in this study was a researcher-made semi-structured interview guide. It contained guide questions developed to elicit data aligned with the research questions. The interview guide was validated by faculty members from the University of Mindanao Professional Schools and an external validator from Ateneo de Davao University, who is an expert in the field. The validation focused on the clarity, appropriateness, and alignment of the guide questions with the purpose of the study to help establish the instrument's validity. The interview guide is structured around the three main research questions and is organized into research questions, main questions, and probing questions. It begins with brief preliminary statements intended to build rapport, followed by open-ended main questions that encourage participants to describe their coming-out experiences in detail. Each main question is supported by probing questions that allow deeper exploration of participants' thoughts, emotions, spiritual struggles, and coping practices without forcing or leading their responses. The sequence of questions moves from general to more sensitive areas to help participants share comfortably and naturally.

2.4 Data Collection and Analysis

After obtaining the necessary institutional and local permissions, the researchers coordinated with the Provincial Government of North Cotabato and relevant local officials solely to secure access permission and facilitate entry into the study sites. Local officials did not assist in identifying participants, and no gatekeepers were involved in recruitment. Participants were recruited through referral-based snowball sampling, starting from initial contacts and expanding through recommendations from qualified participants. Data were collected through in-depth interviews (30–45 minutes) and a focus group discussion (about

1–1.5 hours) using a researcher-made semi-structured interview guide. Interviews were scheduled based on participants' preferred time and were conducted in safe, private, and distraction-free settings. When face-to-face interviews were not feasible due to safety concerns or participant preference, online platforms (e.g., Google Meet) or recorded phone calls were used. Before each session, the researchers explained the study purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality measures, and participants' right to withdraw at any time. Written informed consent was secured, and participants were assigned codes to protect their identities. With permission, sessions were audio-recorded, and brief field notes were taken to capture relevant non-verbal cues and contextual observations (Harding & Whitehead, 2016; van den Berg, 2005). Data collection was completed within six months.

All recordings were transcribed verbatim in the original language(s) used during data collection (Tagalog, Cebuano, and Maguindanaon) and were translated into English by a qualified English professor. Back-translation was not conducted; instead, meaning equivalence was verified by cross-checking translated segments against the original transcripts. For transcripts containing Maguindanaon responses, a Maguindanaon speaker was invited to validate the English translations to ensure accuracy and meaning equivalence. No idiomatic expressions were identified in the transcripts; therefore, translation focused on preserving participants' intended meaning through clear, direct English renderings. Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological method: (1) repeated reading of transcripts for familiarization, (2) extraction of significant statements, (3) formulation of meanings, (4) clustering of meanings into categories and themes, and (5) development of an integrated description of the participants' experiences. To strengthen credibility, preliminary findings were returned to selected participants for validation through a follow-up discussion (member checking). Saturation was considered achieved after the later interviews, when no new significant statements emerged and responses began to reiterate previously identified meanings.

2.5 Researcher Positionality

Given the sensitive nature of the topics explored, including religion, sexual identity, and cultural power relations, reflexivity was maintained throughout the research process. The researchers acknowledged personal assumptions and potential biases that could influence interpretation and engaged in continuous self-reflection during data collection and analysis. Efforts were made to bracket personal views and prioritize participants' lived experiences, consistent with descriptive phenomenological principles. To minimize power imbalances, interviews were conducted in a respectful, nonjudgmental manner, allowing participants to describe their perspectives in their own terms. Analytical decisions were grounded in participants' statements rather than researcher interpretation alone, and member checking was employed to support credibility.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

Participants were clearly informed about the objectives, procedures, and scope of the study prior to their participation. Informed consent was obtained before data collection. Anonymity and confidentiality were ensured by excluding personal identifiers from all records. Participants were also informed of their

right to withdraw from the study at any stage without any form of penalty. In conducting this study, it was ensured that participants were not exposed to psychological, academic, or reputational risks. All data were collected, processed, and analyzed strictly for academic and scientific purposes. These procedures followed the ethical standards observed in earlier studies involving human participants (Fernandez et al., 2025; Obenza et al., 2025; Redocto & Sumayo, 2024)

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Coming Out Struggles of Muslim LGBT Individuals in Mind and Spirit

From the data collected, the participants' coming out struggles in mind and spirit emerged five (5) main themes, which are depicted in Table 1. These themes emphasized the core concepts relevant to understanding the experienced struggles of Muslim LGBT individuals in North Cotabato. These themes are internal conflict and guilt, fear of judgment and rejection, family pressure and community discrimination, selective disclosure, and religious and cultural conflict.

Table 1. Coming Out Struggles of Muslim LGBT Individuals in Mind and Spirit

Themes	Core Ideas
Internal conflict and guilt	● Confusion and denial due to religious beliefs ● Feelings of guilt due to perceived sinfulness ● Attempts to reconcile identity with faith ● Struggle with self-transformation
Fear of judgment and rejection	● Fear of being judged or rejected by family, community, or religious groups ● Hiding identity to avoid discrimination and judgment ● Worry about social isolation and exclusion ● Hiding one's identity from family
Family pressure and community discrimination	● Familial expectations causing anger and rejection ● Experiences of physical and emotional abuse ● Labels and derogatory remarks aimed at LGBTQIA+ individuals
Selective disclosure	● Choosing when and to whom to come out ● Hiding identity from parents and using humor as a defense mechanism ● Disclosure to trusted friends and siblings only

Religious and cultural conflict

- Conflict between religious teachings and personal identity
- Fear of divine punishment and community condemnation
- Experiencing exclusion in religious practices but finding a personal balance between faith and identity

3.1.1. Internal conflict and guilt

The participants expressed that their coming out struggles were marked by internal conflict and guilt. They shared experiences of confusion and denial due to religious beliefs, often feeling torn between their identity and their faith. Many also experienced feelings of guilt due to perceived sinfulness, as they believed their identity went against religious teachings. Some made attempts to reconcile identity with faith, while others spoke about the emotional weight of the struggle with self-transformation during this period. This theme is reflected in the participants' accounts below:

Actually Ma'am, I was confused before because at first I couldn't accept it. I didn't want to accept it... (IDI01)

But I also feel guilty about my beliefs because sometimes I still think I'm going to hell. (IDI01)

Half of my thoughts were telling me, 'It's okay, just come out. They'll accept you eventually.' But I also feel guilty about my beliefs... (IDI01)

Even though I'm like this, my trust in Him will never fade. (IDI08)

I tried to change, but it was so hard. It's really difficult because it's something that's truly in your heart. (IDI05)

Participants in this study shared that one of the hardest parts of coming out was dealing with their own thoughts and feelings. Many of them felt confused at first and did not want to accept that they were different. This confusion was made even harder by the religious teachings they grew up with, which labeled their feelings as sinful. Because of this, some of them felt guilty and believed they might be punished or go to hell.

This experience resonates with aspects of Cass's (1979) model, although participants' experiences also reflected overlapping emotional and spiritual negotiations beyond linear stages. Page et al. (2013) also found that religious LGBT youth reported guilt, internal conflict, and mental health issues as they worked through their identity. Similarly, Manalastas (2013) found that Filipino gay and bisexual men showed high levels of suicidal thoughts tied to guilt and perceived rejection, especially in religious environments.

This guilt and confusion affected not just how they saw themselves but also their sense of worth. According to Schlossberg's Theory of Marginality and Mattering (1989), people in transition often feel invisible and disconnected when

they don't fit traditional roles. The participants tried to hold on to their faith while also trying to be honest about who they are. Eidhamar (2014) emphasized that many Muslim LGBT individuals feel spiritually rejected and disconnected from Islam.

Yet, some still found peace in prayer and a personal relationship with God, showing strength despite their pain. Flett (2018) noted that when LGBT individuals felt they mattered despite religious conflict, their mental health outcomes were better. These studies suggest that balancing faith and identity is difficult but important for mental and emotional well-being. These experiences may be interpreted through the lens of Cognitive Dissonance Theory by Festinger (1957). The participants experience tension because their sexual identity does not align with the Islamic teachings that they were raised to believe in. Holding these two conflicting ideas at the same time creates guilt, confusion, and emotional discomfort.

3.1.2. Fear of Judgment and Rejection

Most of the participants experienced fear of judgment and rejection from their family, community, and religious groups during their coming out. They shared a strong fear of being judged or rejected, especially because they believed that being out was against their religious beliefs. As a result, many hid their identity to avoid discrimination and judgment, while also expressing deep worry about social isolation and exclusion from the people around them. The following excerpts capture how participants experienced this theme:

I was really scared, scared that they might judge me... I was afraid that they would be disgusted or wouldn't accept what I want.

I'm afraid to be judged.

I was scared, I felt ashamed, and things like that..... Fear was really the number one emotion.

Once they find out that you're LGBTQIA, there's a tendency that you could be killed or disowned in our community.

The judgment I faced was from people. At some point, I realized that I would change in the future.

Another common experience among the participants was being afraid of how others would react. Many were scared their families, friends, or neighbors would not accept them. Some were afraid they would be hated, bullied, or even harmed. These fears led them to hide who they truly were. This relates to the second stage in Cass' (1979) model, where people begin to feel different and worry about being rejected. Jaspal and Siraj (2011) also talked about how Muslim gay men feared for their safety and felt like their identity threatened their family's honor. Similarly, Reyes et al. (2019) found that people who hold strong religious and traditional gender beliefs were more likely to show negative attitudes toward LGBT individuals.

The fear of being judged or rejected by family and community can be understood through Minority Stress Theory proposed by Meyer (2003). This theory explains that sexual minorities often experience stress not only from actual discrimination but also from the constant expectation of rejection. Moreover, this fear made many people feel like they didn't belong. In Schlossberg's (1989) theory, this is called marginality, when someone feels invisible or unimportant.

The stories of being called hurtful names or being treated as less than human made some participants feel unloved and unwanted. Blossnich et al. (2016) emphasized that the mix of religious and social rejection can create mental health challenges for LGBT people. Wight et al. (2015) also found that mattering was linked to fewer depressive symptoms among gay-identified men, with mattering partially explaining (mediating) the link between minority-stress-related experiences and depressive symptoms. These studies support how fear of judgments and rejection impacts not only safety but also emotional health and self-esteem.

3.1.3. Family Pressure and Community Discrimination

When the participants began to present themselves as LGBT, they experienced family pressure and community discrimination. Many spoke about hiding one's identity from family to avoid conflict. Some shared how familial expectations caused anger and rejection, especially when they did not meet traditional roles. Several participants also recounted experiences of physical and emotional abuse. In addition, they received labels and derogatory remarks aimed at LGBTQIA+ individuals from family members, relatives, friends, and the broader Muslim community. The participants' statements below illustrate this theme:

I was hiding it from my family, but the people who knew me here in Kidapawan already knew. (IDI01)

They were really angry, -like, literally angry, -as if they hated me because they said what I was doing was a sin. They said it was haram. (IDI01)

None of them accepted me. They really see it as a sin, but I just stopped minding it. They called me kafir, a demon, and said I would go straight to hell..... I know my family is really faithful, they pray a lot, and they're usually very closed-minded. (IDI01)

On my relatives' side, it really feels different, Ma'am, because they say I am influenced by Satan.....especially in my father's younger sibling, they are very discriminatory. (IDI02)

My mother tried to set me up with a guy, but I told her, 'Not now,' because she already knew I had a girlfriend. (IDI10)

I never said anything. It was already very obvious because my mom would buy me boys' clothes, while my dad would buy me dresses. (IDI11)

My mom used to beat me because she really insisted on making me wear a skirt. (IDI08)

When my family figured out that I was different, they told me not to have a girlfriend because they said they would hang me or have my brother beat me up. (IDI06)

When I had a relationship that lasted six years, that was the most intense because she was also Muslim. There were a lot of threats. Our relationship wasn't hidden—she made it known to everyone. There was even a time when her uncle caught us. They wanted to kill me. But she fought for me, saying she would rather die first before they could harm me. (IDI11)

There's a lot of backstabbing and gossiping, and people tend to avoid you. (IDI10)

I was bullied because I was always with girls. (FGD1-04)

..it took me a long time to open up because I would always hear my friends say things like, 'Ew, that's gross!' (IDI01)

The participants also shared that much of the struggle came from their own families and the communities they lived in. Parents expected them to follow traditional roles, like marrying someone of the opposite sex or dressing a certain way. Some were even forced to hide their identity or face physical punishment. These actions made the participants feel like they had to choose between being accepted and being themselves. This fits with Cass's (1979) Identity Tolerance stage, where people start to accept themselves but feel pushed away by the larger group. Tamilchelvan and Ab Rashid (2017) also found that many Muslim gay men were forced to abandon their values or hide their true identity to meet expectations. Cheah and Singaravelu (2017) further emphasized how disclosure was often avoided to protect oneself from harm.

This theme strongly aligns with Minority Stress Theory by Meyer (2003), since participants described direct experiences of stigma, rejection, and pressure to conform to religious and cultural norms. These repeated experiences create chronic stress that affects their emotional well-being. At the same time, these stories also reflect Schlossberg's theory of marginality.

Participants felt excluded from the roles expected of them and were often treated harshly. Some were labeled "kafir" or even threatened with violence, which shows how dangerous rejection from one's own family and community can be. Szymanski and Ikizler (2013) explained that when people feel left out and unsupported, it can lead to low self-worth and mental distress. Willoughby et al. (2010) also showed how family rejection worsens psychological outcomes for LGBT individuals. These findings help us understand that discrimination and pressures from family and community make it harder for LGBT Muslims to come out and live freely and peacefully.

3.1.4. Selective Disclosure

Selective disclosure emerged as a significant theme in the participants' coming-out struggles. Many of them shared that they were choosing when and to whom to come out, carefully deciding who could be trusted. Some participants mentioned hiding their identity from parents and often using humor as a defense mechanism to deflect suspicion or avoid serious conversations. In most cases, disclosure was made only to trusted friends and siblings, allowing them to gain courage and confidence to maintain a sense of safety and control over their situation. This theme is reflected in the participants' accounts below:

I can express it to the people close to me, but not to my family. No matter how much I try to explain to them, all they say is, 'You can't do anything about it, no matter how you feel, it's still a sin.' (IDI01)

I haven't formally come out to my family, I just joke about it. (IDI07)

When I opened up to my friends and my brother, it felt like our interaction was okay. (IDI07)

To protect themselves, many participants chose to come out only to a few trusted people. They told their close friends, siblings or cousins but kept it a secret from their parents or elders. Some even used jokes to talk about it lightly, just to test if it was safe to say more.

This behavior shows that they were being careful and thoughtful about when and where to be open. In Cass's model (1979), this fits with the Identity Acceptance stage, where people accept who they are but still hide it in unsafe environments. Cheah and Singaravelu (2017) noted that hiding one's identity in Muslim societies is a form of protection and a way to keep some peace. Similarly, Docena (2013) found that many Filipino gay individuals chose not to come out fully to avoid painful rejection. Selective disclosure can be explained through Minority Stress Theory by Meyer (2003), particularly the idea of concealment as a coping strategy. Participants choose to hide their identity to protect themselves from possible harm and rejection.

Additionally, this behavior also connects to Schlossberg's idea of mattering. The participants wanted to be themselves but didn't want to lose the love and respect of their families. Instead, they created small, safe spaces where they could share their identity with people who supported them. Kiekens and Mereish (2022) found that even limited support helped reduce the emotional burden of living in hiding. In their daily-diary study, concealment was linked to higher negative affect, but this link was attenuated by family support. The Trevor Project (2019) also showed that feeling valued—even by a few people—can help improve mental health for LGBT individuals. Specifically, LGBTQ youth with at least one accepting adult were significantly less likely to report a suicide attempt in the past year. These studies help explain why selective disclosure is a practical choice for those facing harsh judgment.

3.1.5. Religious Conflict and Cultural Conflict

The participants emphasized the deep religious and cultural conflict they experienced while coming out. Many struggled with the conflict between

religious teachings and personal identity, as their faith viewed their sexual orientation as unacceptable. They shared a fear of divine punishment and community condemnation, which intensified their emotional burden. Some also described experiencing exclusion in religious practices, yet others found ways of finding a personal balance between faith and identity, allowing them to hold on to their beliefs while embracing who they are. The participants shared the following:

Our religion is very homophobic. It's very closed-minded. There's no way they can accept something like that. (IDI01)

In the Muslim community, being gay is strictly forbidden. (FGD1-03)

In the Muslim community, ma'am, they have serious anger issues when it comes to gay people. (FGD1-04)

Before, I was also studying Arabic, and it was taught there that it should only be between a man and a woman. (IDI07)

Once they find out that you're LGBTQIA, there's a tendency that you could be killed or disowned in our community. (IDI10)

When we pray (salah), judgmental people stare at us and say, where will you stand, with the men or the women? (FGD1-02)

Even though we are like this, we still go to prayer. (FGD1-03)

These perceptions reflect participants' lived experiences within their specific local religious and cultural context and should not be interpreted as representing the full diversity of Islamic interpretations or beliefs across Muslim communities.

A big challenge for many participants was trying to stay true to their faith while being part of the LGBT community. They grew up learning that being LGBT was wrong, and this made them feel torn between who they are and what they believe. Some felt judged when they prayed or went to religious gatherings, while others kept practicing their faith quietly.

This struggle reflects both the Identity Confusion and Identity Acceptance stages in Cass's (1979) model. Kugle (2010) found that many LGBT Muslims want to stay connected to their religion while living openly, but they often feel tension between belief and identity. Eidhamar (2014) also discussed how Muslim LGBT individuals face exclusion and must find personal ways to stay spiritual.

These experiences may be interpreted through the lens of Cognitive Dissonance Theory by Festinger (1957), because the conflict arises when religious beliefs contradict personal feelings and identity.

The resulting tension leads to emotional pain and spiritual struggle. More so, in Schlossberg's theory, this kind of rejection is a form of marginality.

Participants said they felt out of place in religious settings and were unsure how to act. Yet many still found peace in prayer, showing that their faith was still important.

Kiekens and Mereish (2022) explained that mattering is key to mental health, even if acceptance doesn't come from the larger group, support from a few people or one's own spiritual practices can help. Flett (2024) also showed that when LGBT people feel they matter, they are less likely to have suicidal thoughts and that mattering is linked with reduced suicide ideation and attempts, especially among marginalized youth.

These findings show that faith and identity do not always have to be in conflict. For many, they find a way to keep both.

3.2. Coping Mechanisms of Muslim LGBT Individuals during their Coming Out Experiences

In the data gathered, there were five (5) main themes concerning the coping mechanisms of Muslim LGBT individuals during their coming out experience. These are presented in Table 2, namely, family support, peer support, religious faith, resilience and self-acceptance, personal growth, and advocacy.

Table 2. Coping Mechanisms of Muslim LGBT Individuals during their Coming Out Experiences

Themes	Core Ideas
Family support	● Acceptance and unconditional support from family members ● Confiding in trusted family members and seeking validation for identity ● Guidance, comfort and guidance from family
Peer support	● Acceptance and understanding from friends ● Advice and emotional/moral support from friends ● Encouragement to express true self
Religious faith	● Turning to Allah or God for guidance and comfort ● Seeing faith as a source of strength ● Balancing religious beliefs with identity
Resilience and self-acceptance	● Finding strength in personal identity ● Acceptance of identity despite social rejection ● Holding self-respect and self-confidence ● Projecting strong character; not being affected by others' opinions

Personal growth and advocacy

- Focusing on advocacy for the LGBT community
- Engagement in social activities
- Engaging in self-care and personal enjoyment

3.2.1. Family Support

In confronting the adversities that came with coming out, family support emerged as the most common coping strategy among the participants. Many of them shared experiences of acceptance and unconditional support from family members, which provided emotional strength during difficult times. They also talked about confiding in trusted family members and seeking validation for their identity, which helped them feel seen and understood. In addition, participants found guidance, comfort, and reassurance from family, all of which played a vital role in helping them overcome the struggles of being out as LGBT. The excerpts below present the participants' lived experiences related to this theme:

My mom, my siblings, and my older sister...They accept me and continue to guide me. (IDI08)

*It was also confirmed by IDI02 saying,
I didn't care about what others said because my mom and my brother supported me fully. I don't need to explain myself to other people. (IDI02)*

Voicing out my thoughts about coming out to a family member like my closest sister really helped me. (IDI05)

It was my aunt...Her support gave me the strength to stand firmly in my gender identity. (FGD1-04)

My older sister and my cousins...They comforted me by saying, "It's okay, day".....That's when I really felt their support because, of course, they were the ones who pushed me to come out, so they were still the ones supporting me through that struggle. (IDI04)

My mom, my siblings, and my older sister.....really guide me, and even though I'm like this, they accept me and continue to guide me. I don't really pay attention to the people around me anymore, because, as they say, no matter what, as long as you're not doing anything wrong. (IDI08)

The person who truly helped me come out was my cousin...He was the one who pushed and strengthened me to tell the truth to my parents. (FGD1-03)

Whenever I have a problem, I go straight to my family... (FGD2-09)

For many participants, the support of family members played a major role in helping them face the struggles of coming out. Some shared that their mothers, siblings, cousins, or aunts stood by them and provided encouragement. This kind of support helped reduce fear and gave them the courage to be open about who they are. These findings are consistent with Bockting et al. (2013), who identified that emotional closeness and acceptance from family helped

lessen stress in LGBT individuals. Similarly, Ryan et al. (2010) emphasized that having strong social support from family contributes to better mental health outcomes among LGBT individuals.

In Cass's (1979) model, this support helps individuals move from identity tolerance to identity acceptance, where they begin to feel more confident being themselves around others. From a theoretical perspective, Schlossberg's (1989) concept of mattering also helps explain the impact of family support. When participants felt seen, heard, and accepted by family, they felt more secure during their transition. It is explained that mattering reduces emotional distress and strengthens coping skills. In the same way, Wight et al. (2015) found that when gay people feel they matter, their risk of anxiety and depression decreases. These studies help show that support from even one or two family members can provide the emotional strength needed to face rejection from others. This theme also connects to Self-Determination Theory by Ryan and Deci (2000), because family support strengthens relatedness, which is one of the basic psychological needs for well-being.

3.2.2. Peer Support

The participants similarly emphasized the importance of peer support in their coming out journey. Many shared how they received acceptance and understanding from friends, which made them feel less alone. They also acknowledged the advice and emotional or moral support their friends provided, especially during moments of uncertainty and fear. Most importantly, friends offered encouragement to express their true self, helping them build confidence and cope with the different struggles they faced while coming out.

This theme was evident in the participants' responses, as reflected in the following excerpts:

My best friend, she's nonchalant. When I tell her something...She supports me no matter what I want. (IDI06)

My long-time best friend...she accepted me. Acceptance and understanding were what helped me come out. (IDI01)

My friends...They encouraged me to show my true self. (FGD1-02)

...my best friend give me advice...gave me advice and warm support, which really helped me. (IDI07)

The most important thing for me was my friends...They provided moral support and a sense of belonging. (FGD1-01)

I share more with my friends...Their presence helps a lot. I've [become] more comfortable with the LGBTQIA community. (IDI10)

Aside from family, friends also became a major source of comfort for the participants. Many said that their best friends or classmates provided reassurance, encouragement, and a safe space to be themselves. This type of peer support

made a difference, especially when family support was absent or uncertain. Higa et al. (2014) found that peer networks and community involvement helped LGBT youth develop a stronger sense of identity. Similarly, Singh et al. (2011) emphasized the role of peer understanding and shared experiences in building emotional strength among transgender youth.

According to Cass's (1979) model, peer support often becomes stronger during the identity acceptance stage when individuals seek out people who affirm their identity. Schlossberg's theory also supports this, suggesting that belonging to a peer group makes individuals feel they matter, especially when they are navigating change.

Brandt and Carmichael (2020) found that feelings of mattering and online identity-related support were linked to better mental health and well-being among sexual minority men. These findings affirm how important it is for young LGBT people to have close friends who listen and offer non-judgmental support during their coming out journey. It also connects to Self-Determination Theory by Ryan and Deci (2000), because peers help meet the need for relatedness and can increase confidence and emotional strength.

3.2.3. Religious Faith

Religious faith served as a meaningful coping strategy for many participants during their coming out experiences. Despite the undesirable narratives and rejection they faced, they continued turning to Allah or God for guidance and comfort. Participants described how they saw their faith as a source of strength, helping them remain grounded in moments of doubt and fear. Rather than abandoning their beliefs, they sought a deeper understanding and worked on balancing their religious beliefs with their identity, allowing them to find peace within themselves. The following excerpts capture how participants experienced this theme:

It's only Allah that I turn to...Even though I'm like this, He's the one in control of me. (IDI08)

I turned to the Lord because [God] is the source of happiness. (IDI09)

I've visited different churches...Now, I have a lot of perceptions and beliefs, not just limited to my religion. (IDI01)

While religion often posed a challenge, some participants shared that their faith also served as a source of strength. They turned to God for comfort and guidance, even if they felt judged by religious communities. Others shared how they redefined their spirituality to include more accepting beliefs. This aligns with the findings of Meanley et al. (2016), who noted that young gay and bisexual men used spirituality as a positive coping tool, even when religious teachings made them feel rejected. Similarly, Austin et al. (2020) shared that many transgender youth turned to personal faith and online communities to heal and feel connected.

Religious faith as a coping mechanism can be viewed through Self-Determination Theory by Ryan and Deci (2000), as faith gives meaning and inner

motivation to endure struggles. For some participants, faith becomes a personal resource rather than only a source of conflict. More so, the role of religious faith reflects Cass's stages of identity confusion and identity acceptance, where people try to balance religious values and personal identity. Schlossberg's theory of marginality and mattering also applies here, participants felt like outsiders in their own faith communities but still tried to hold on to spiritual practices that gave them hope. These stories show how Muslim LGBT individuals find ways to believe and belong without letting go of either their faith or their identity.

3.2.4. Resilience and Acceptance

The participants shared that they developed resilience and self-acceptance by embracing who they truly are. Many spoke about finding strength in personal identity, which empowered them to face the challenges brought by coming out. Even in the face of social rejection, they chose acceptance of identity, recognizing their worth beyond others' opinions. This journey also helped them hold on to self-respect and self-confidence, allowing them to project a strong character and not be affected by others' opinions, no matter how negative or judgmental. The participants' statements below illustrate this theme:

I just kept thinking that I can do this, I have to endure... (IDI09)

I don't think negatively...If you like me, that's okay. If you don't like me, that's fine too.... When I finally came out, I felt free. (IDI10)

I show them that lesbians are not to be underestimated...I hold my head high. (IDI11)

I try to look as strong, more masculine...That's one of the coping mechanisms I use. (IDI03)

Several participants explained how they found inner strength by learning to accept themselves. They talked about holding their heads high, staying confident, and focusing on what makes them strong rather than what others say. These coping strategies reflect personal resilience, a key theme found in Grossman et al. (2011), who described how self-esteem and mastery helped transgender youth deal with stigma. Budge et al. (2018) also found that expressing emotions and recognizing one's strengths helped LGBT youth manage identity-related stress.

In Cass's model, this process reflects the movement toward identity pride, where individuals begin to value themselves as part of the LGBTQ+ community. In terms of Schlossberg's theory, resilience and self-acceptance help individuals resist feeling left out. Flett (2024) and Szymanski and Ikizler (2013) both found that self-worth and a sense of mattering reduce mental health risks. These findings show that even when external support are weak, believing in oneself becomes a powerful tool to survive and thrive. It also connects to Self-Determination Theory by Ryan and Deci (2000), because self-acceptance shows autonomy and inner control over one's life decisions.

3.2.5. Personal Growth and Advocacy

Amidst their struggles, the participants found strength through personal growth and advocacy. Many became actively involved in advocacy for the LGBT community, using their voices to raise awareness and promote acceptance. They also shared their engagement in social activities, which helped them feel a sense of belonging and purpose. In addition, they emphasized the importance of engaging in self-care and personal enjoyment, which allowed them to heal, recharge, and celebrate their identities despite the challenges they faced. The following utterances substantiate this theme:

I focus on my advocacy...Empowering the LGBT community in our area.
(FGD2-08)

Joining pageants, spending time with friends, you know how it is—when gays are together, it's always fun. and playing volleyball, the game really helped me cope with my struggles. (FGD2-05)

I go to fun places and entertain myself...I just rest and think about how to fix my problems. (FGD2-07)

Some participants found healing and strength through helping others, joining advocacy activities, and spending time in spaces that made them happy. They mentioned joining pageants, spending time with friends, playing sports, and working with LGBT organizations in their area. These actions helped them focus on positive things and use their experience to support others. Singh et al. found that activism and being a role model helped transgender individuals develop resilience. Johns et al. (2021) also explained that social activities and group affiliation helped LGBT youth turn personal struggle into community action.

Personal growth and advocacy can be explained using Self-Determination Theory by Ryan and Deci (2000), as advocacy reflects autonomy and competence. Choosing to speak up or move forward shows inner motivation despite social pressure. Additionally, Cass's (1979) stage of identity synthesis is reflected in this theme, where individuals integrate their identity into other aspects of their life, including their interests and social contributions.

Schlossberg's (1989) theory also applies, the feeling of being useful and valued through advocacy helps counteract feelings of marginality. Frost and Meyer (2012) found that participating in supportive LGBT communities was associated with improved well-being and reduced psychological distress. These stories show that growth is possible after difficult experiences, especially when people are able to use their voices to support others and find meaning in their journey.

3.3. Life Lessons of Muslim LGBT Individuals

From the collected data, there are five (5) themes of life lessons from the participants' accounts that have emerged. Table 3 shows the themes and core ideas of their responses to the question. These themes are to cultivate self-acceptance and a positive mindset, develop resilience through empathy and perseverance, embrace family's unconditional love for personal growth, show

your worth through dedication and achievements, and focus on self-growth and moving forward.

Table 3. Life Lessons of Muslim LGBT Individuals during their Coming Out Experiences

Themes	Core Ideas
Cultivate self-acceptance and positive mindset	● Accept yourself rather than seeking validation from others. ● Prepare yourself for adversity and stand firm in your identity ● Strengthen your mindset and resist negative influence
Develop resilience through empathy and perseverance	● Broaden your perspective and develop empathy towards others ● Continue fighting for acceptance without harming others. ● Have the ability to persist in the face of adversity
Embrace family's unconditional love for personal growth	● Seek understanding and support from family as a foundation of confidence ● Family acceptance contributes to emotional stability life path discovery, and social engagement ● Acceptance from your family should empower you to fully accept yourself
Show your worth through dedication and achievements	● Demonstrate your worth through hard work and dedication ● Let your accomplishments speak for your capabilities ● Acknowledge positive contributions to family ● Channel negativity into self-improvement
Focus on self-growth and moving forward	● Stay true to your personal values ● Keep pursuing your dreams

3.3.1. Cultivate self-acceptance and Positive Mindset

Cultivating self-acceptance and a positive mindset was one of the key life lessons shared by the participants. This was clearly depicted in their interview accounts, where they emphasized the importance of accepting oneself rather than seeking validation from others. They highlighted the need to prepare for adversity and stand firm in their identity, especially when facing discrimination and rejection. Additionally, they stressed the value of strengthening their mindset and resisting negative influence, which helped them maintain fortitude and confidence throughout their journey. The following excerpts capture how participants experienced this theme:

Accepting yourself is the most important than minding those who doesn't really appreciate you. You can't find happiness if you depend on them. If you keep pleasing them, you can't see any happiness. You won't be happy if you just stay there, following what they want just to please them. Choose yourself always. (IDI01)

My piece of advice is first, accept yourself. (FGD1-04)

Build yourself. You can't just come out suddenly if you're not ready to stand by it. You need to be ready to fight for it. You have to be prepared to accept the negativity and judgment. You should be ready for those kinds of things. At the same time, make yourself strong. The words they throw at you can hurt more than a physical attack. What's most important is that you strengthen your mindset. Don't let them influence you right away. (IDI01)

I've learned to love myself more, become stronger, and I've grown mentally stronger. (IDI01)

The participants stressed that self-acceptance was the foundation of their journey. They learned that happiness could not be found through pleasing others or seeking constant validation. Many emphasized the need to accept themselves first before expecting others to do the same. This insight is consistent with the findings of Siraj (2012), who revealed that Muslim lesbians developed a stronger sense of self by reinterpreting religious teachings to fit their realities. Similarly, Manalansan (2003) noted that Filipino gay men often sought spaces where they could live authentically, highlighting the role of self-acceptance in their resilience. This process connects with Cass's (1979) identity acceptance stage, where individuals recognize and affirm their sexual identity internally, even without full external validation. Strengthening the mind against negativity was also a key strategy mentioned. Participants shared that dealing with hurtful words and discrimination required strong mental preparation. Jaspal and Cinnirella (2010) similarly found that learning about one's identity and building a supportive mindset helped British Pakistani gay men withstand community pressures.

Schlossberg's (1989) theory supports this as well, noting that feelings of mattering can shield individuals from the emotional burden of marginalization. Overall, participants learned that self-acceptance was the first key step in the process of coming out, and that being mentally prepared and cultivate a positive mindset made them more resilient to external judgments. This also fits Self-Determination Theory by Ryan and Deci (2000), because a positive mindset supports autonomy and internal motivation.

3.3.2. Develop Resilience through Empathy and Perseverance

In their coming out experiences, the participants shared that developing resilience through empathy and perseverance was an important life lesson they had learned. They emphasized the need to broaden their perspective and develop empathy towards others, even those who may not understand or accept them. Rather than responding with anger or resentment, they chose to continue fighting for acceptance without harming others, showing patience and compassion. Above

all, they highlighted the importance of having the ability to persist in the face of adversity, which helped them move forward despite challenges. This theme is reflected in the participants' accounts below:

My perspective has become wider, and I've become more open-minded and understanding. I can now empathize with someone else's struggles. I don't judge as quickly anymore. (IDI01)

Like, I've learned that being LGBT is hard. But I'll keep fighting, as long as I'm not stepping on others, then go. That's what they say, 'If others can do, so can I. (IDI08)

As an LGBT individual, don't feel down about yourself. What you need to do is to improve yourself in positive ways. You must persevere for your family and never give up on whatever challenges you might encounter along the way." (FGD1-03)

Participants explained that facing hardship taught them to be more open-minded and empathetic toward others' struggles. They shared that their personal battles opened their hearts and made them less judgmental. This matches the findings of Nadal (2013) who observed that visibility and openness helped LGBT individuals, including Filipinos, develop deeper compassion for marginalized communities. Similarly, Rahman (2010) described how LGBT Muslims cultivated resilience by embracing complexity rather than rejecting parts of themselves. In Cass's model, this ability to widen perspectives reflects progress toward identity pride and identity synthesis, where personal struggles become sources of strength.

The lessons of perseverance were clear: participants shared that challenges should not discourage them from pushing forward. They emphasized that persistence was necessary, not just for personal success but also for setting an example to others. It illustrated how Muslim LGBT individuals kept moving forward despite overwhelming adversity, finding strength in shared experiences. From a theoretical lens, Schlossberg's emphasis on overcoming marginality highlights how persevering through difficult transitions strengthens one's sense of mattering and belonging. These experiences helped participants realize that being persistent and empathetic could be a powerful form of resistance. It also relates to Self-Determination Theory by Ryan and Deci (2000), because perseverance reflects competence and belief in one's ability to survive challenges.

3.3.3. Embrace Family's Unconditional Love for Personal Growth

Embracing family's unconditional love for personal growth was also one of the meaningful insights drawn from the participants' responses. They stressed the importance of family love and acceptance as a key factor in building self-confidence, life purpose, and emotional well-being. Many shared how seeking understanding and support from family became a strong foundation for their sense of identity. They also noted that family acceptance contributes to emotional stability, life path discovery and encourages social engagement, allowing them to live more openly and meaningfully. For the participants, being accepted by their family empowered them to fully accept themselves, helping them to find life's

purpose and grow as individuals. The participants described this theme through the following statements:

Don't lose hope in sharing with others. There might really be someone out there who will accept you. Family should always be the first to open up to... (IDI02)

I became confident because of the acceptance from my parents. Before, I was really shy, but now my confidence has grown, and I can socialize with other people. (IDI02)

Don't just believe what others say. Focus on yourself, your family, and your own well-being. Don't let others influence your mind. If your family accepts you, then you should accept yourself as well. (IDI02)

Once I was accepted, it felt like my life finally had direction. (IDI10)

If they plan to come out or open up to their parents or the people around them, they should be prepared. And whatever negative things others might think, they should just accept it.... (IDI07)

Many participants highlighted how their family's unconditional love helped them build confidence, emotional stability and even found their purpose. They shared that family should be the first - through their love and acceptance it made easier for them to be confident, pursue dreams, and maintain good mental health. This aligns with the findings of Bockting et al. (2013), who reported that family support protects LGBT individuals from psychological distress. Higa et al. (2014) also emphasized that family involvement plays a significant role in LGBT youths' healthy identity development. Cass's (1979) model reflects this through the identity acceptance stage, where positive relationships help individuals affirm their identity more openly.

Participants noted that family's love and support helped them tune out external negativity. They found that when their family loved and accepted them, it was easier for them to accept, love and believe in themselves. This connection is consistent with Schlossberg's (1989) concept of mattering, which explains how feeling valued by key people buffers against the pain of societal rejection. Flett (2024) also found that mattering helps reduce anxiety and depression among LGBT individuals. Thus, family's love and acceptance did not just affirm participants' identities, it gave them the emotional tools needed to thrive and direction towards growth. It also fits Self-Determination Theory by Ryan and Deci (2000) through the need for relatedness.

3.3.4. Show your Worth through Dedication and Achievements

The participants also highlighted the importance of showing their worth through dedication and achievements. They shared that demonstrating their worth through hard work and dedication helped them gain respect and recognition, especially from their families and communities. Many believed that by letting their accomplishments speak for themselves, they could challenge negative stereotypes and change perceptions. They also emphasized the value of

acknowledging their positive contributions to their families, seeing their efforts as a way to prove that their identity does not hinder their ability to succeed and care for those they love. The participants' accounts provide clear support for this theme, as presented below:

We have something called 'The Right Time to Come Out.' If you're gay but haven't achieved much in life yet and you come out, people will likely mock you and belittle you. But if you've proven something in your life, like being professional or having a stable job, acceptance and respect come easier. (IDI03)

Just prove yourself. Don't ever let other people bring you down. I support the LGBTQIA+ community—be successful and don't listen to negative people. (IDI11)

Being LGBT is not a bad thing. Nowadays, many LGBT people are successful and have helped their families (IDI03)

The participants stressed that proving themselves through hard work was important for gaining respect. They shared that having a stable job or notable achievements helped others see their value beyond their sexual identity. This mirrors the findings of Rumens and Ozturk (2019), who showed that gay men in heteronormative (often conservative) settings often emphasized professional success and achievement to be seen as acceptable and to gain dignity and social recognition. Similarly, Johns et al. (2021) explained that success stories within the LGBT community help break stereotypes and promote positive change. Cass's (1979) identity pride stage also speaks to this, where individuals actively affirm their value and identity in society.

Participants also believed that success helped counter negative labels. Rather than being defined by stigma, they wanted their accomplishments to tell their story. This directly connects with Schlossberg's theory of mattering, where positive contributions to society affirm one's significance. Flett (2018) emphasized that feeling useful and valued promotes resilience and emotional well-being. Generally, participants learned that demonstrating their worth through actions built stronger bridges toward acceptance and respect. It also connects to Self-Determination Theory by Ryan and Deci (2000), particularly the need for competence and self-worth.

3.3.5. Focus on Self-growth and Moving Forward

Another essential insight shared by the participants was the importance of focusing on self-growth and moving forward. From their responses, it became clear that they had learned to channel negativity into self-improvement, using their experiences as motivation to pursue, grow stronger and wiser. They emphasized the value of staying true to their personal values, even in the face of rejection or misunderstanding. Many also expressed a renewed determination to keep pursuing their dreams, seeing their journey not as a setback, but as a stepping stone toward becoming their best selves. The following utterances substantiate this theme:

As an LGBT individual, don't feel down about yourself. What you need to do is to improve yourself in positive ways. (FGD1-03)

Just be a good person. Keep being good. No matter what others say, no matter what people think, just let it go. As long as you're happy with what you're doing. (IDI09)

Just keep going and pursue what you want. Even if others judge you, just keep moving forward and don't let being gay be an obstacle to your dreams. (IDI09)

Participants emphasized that their coming out journey taught them the value of continuous self-improvement. They mentioned that channeling negativity into positive actions, like pursuing education, building skills, and setting personal goals, helped them rise above the challenges they faced. This experience mirrors Budge et al. (2018), who found that LGBT youth coped better when they used adversity as motivation for self-growth. Similarly, Austin et al. (2020) shared how online communities encouraged LGBT youth to keep moving forward despite discrimination. Cass's (1979) model suggests that reaching identity synthesis involves recognizing that identity is just one part of a much larger life journey.

Participants also highlighted the importance of staying true to personal values despite criticism. They believed that kindness, honesty, and perseverance mattered more than conforming to others' expectations. This relates to Schlossberg's (1989) focus on maintaining self-worth during transitions. Szymanski and Ikizler (2013) emphasized that self-driven growth and a strong sense of mattering protect mental health in LGBT individuals. In sum, the participants learned that moving forward meant focusing on becoming the best version of themselves, regardless of societal pressures. It also reflects Self-Determination Theory by Deci and Ryan (1985), because choosing growth shows autonomy and personal direction.

4. Implications

4.1. Implications for Practice

The findings of this study highlight the need for culturally and religiously sensitive support systems for Muslim LGBT individuals, particularly in rural communities in Cotabato Province. Mental health professionals, educators, and community workers should recognize that participants' struggles are shaped by the intersection of sexual identity, faith, and family expectations. Support services must therefore address not only psychological well-being but also religious beliefs, cultural values, and concerns about family honor. In clinical settings, counselors and therapists may benefit from client-led meaning-making approaches that respect religious commitments while reducing harmful self-blame and internal conflict. Approaches such as Acceptance and Commitment Therapy and Narrative Therapy may help clients explore personal meaning, strengthen coping, and reconstruct empowering narratives without requiring changes to their faith traditions. Family-based counseling may also be

helpful when families are willing to participate, as it can promote understanding without directly challenging religious beliefs.

Creating safe and nonjudgmental spaces is essential, especially for individuals who are still uncertain or hesitant about their identity. At the policy and community level, local governments should strengthen the implementation of SOGIE-related policies and anti-discrimination ordinances. Barangay-based Gender and Development programs may serve as platforms for advocacy, counseling, and referral services for LGBT youth. This study also supports the goals of SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being) and SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities) by emphasizing the need for inclusive mental health services and reduced discrimination against marginalized groups. Religious leaders and institutions may also play a significant role in promoting compassion and understanding. Interfaith dialogues and values formation programs that address gender, sexuality, and mental well-being can help build more inclusive faith communities. The findings suggest that inclusion does not require rejecting religious beliefs but finding common ground grounded in respect and humanity.

4.2. Implications for Future Research

This study provides a foundation for further research on Muslim LGBT individuals in Mindanao and other religiously conservative contexts in the Philippines. Future studies should include participants from BARMM and other underserved areas to improve representation. Comparative studies involving Christian, Indigenous, and Muslim LGBT communities may also deepen understanding of how culture and religion shape identity development. Future research may also examine the perspectives of families, educators, and religious leaders to better understand changing attitudes toward sexual and gender diversity. Qualitative, mixed-methods, and systematic review studies can explore how support systems influence coming-out experiences and well-being. Since this study used a descriptive phenomenological design, future researchers may employ quantitative and mixed-method approaches to examine mental health outcomes such as anxiety, stress, and quality of life. Longitudinal studies may also investigate the long-term effects of marginalization and the impact of interventions such as group counseling and family involvement. Finally, participatory approaches such as youth-led research, digital storytelling, and photovoice may empower LGBT individuals to share their experiences and contribute to advocacy efforts. Evaluating existing support programs and safe spaces may also help develop evidence-based models for wider implementation.

5. Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations that should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study involved a limited number of participants from selected areas in Cotabato Province, which may restrict the analytical transferability of the findings to other Muslim LGBT populations in different provinces, rather than allowing statistical generalization. As with most qualitative phenomenological studies, the aim was to provide in-depth contextual understanding rather than produce statistically generalizable conclusions. In addition, the study primarily included participants who were willing to share their experiences and had reached varying levels of disclosure. Closeted Muslim

LGBT individuals who chose not to participate were not represented; therefore, the findings reflect experiences shaped by degrees of “outness” and may emphasize disclosure-related narratives. This introduces a form of selection bias that influences how the phenomenon is understood within the study. Second, the data were based on self-reported narratives from interviews and focus group discussions. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, some participants may have withheld information or presented themselves in socially desirable ways, which may have influenced the depth and openness of their responses. Third, the study used a descriptive phenomenological design that focused on participants’ lived experiences at a specific point in time. As a result, the findings do not capture changes in experiences or coping processes over time. Finally, cultural and religious sensitivities may have limited the scope of some discussions, particularly regarding family and community relationships. Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into the lived experiences of Muslim LGBT individuals in rural Philippine contexts.

Supplementary Details

Supplementary Materials & Data availability statement (If Applicable):

Due to the sensitive nature of the topic and the risk of participant identification, interview and focus group transcripts are not publicly available.

Author Contributions:

Conceptualization, M.A.A. and M.G.A.L.; Methodology, M.A.A. and M.G.A.L.; Validation, M.A.A.; Formal analysis, M.A.A. and M.G.A.L.; Investigation, M.A.A.; Resources, M.A.A.; Data curation, M.A.A.; Writing—original draft, M.A.A.; Writing—review and editing, M.A.A. and M.G.A.L.; Supervision, M.G.A.L. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding:

This study was supported by Southern Christian College through thesis assistance. The funding source had no involvement in the conduct of the study or in the preparation of the manuscript.

Institutional Review Board Statement

This study received ethical approval from the University of Mindanao Ethical Review Committee (UMERC) under Certificate No. UMER-2024-097.

Informed Consent Statement:

Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to sincerely thank the study participants for their willingness to share their experiences. The authors also express their gratitude to the examining committee for their valuable guidance and constructive feedback.

Conflicts of Interest:

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Disclosure Statement:

The authors used Grammarly solely for language editing and Mendeley for reference management. No AI tools were used for data analysis or for generating the study's results. All content was reviewed and validated by the authors, who take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the manuscript.

References

- Amnesty International. (2021). Hate crimes against LGBTQI+ in BARMM must not go unpunished. <https://www.amnesty.org.ph/2021/09/hate-crimes-against-lgbtqi-in-barmm-must-not-go-unpunished/>
- Austin, A., Craig, S. L., Navega, N., & McInroy, L. B. (2020). It's my safe space: The life-saving role of the internet in the lives of transgender and gender diverse youth. *International Journal of Transgender Health*, 21(1), 33–44. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15532739.2019.1700202>
- Blosnich, J. R., Marsiglio, M. C., Gao, S., Gordon, A. J., Shipherd, J. C., Kauth, M., Brown, G. R., & Fine, M. J. (2016). Mental health of transgender veterans in US States with and without discrimination and hate crime legal protection. *American Journal of Public Health*, 106(3), 534–540. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2015.302981>
- Bockting, W. O., Miner, M. H., Swinburne Romine, R. E., Hamilton, A., & Coleman, E. (2013). Stigma, mental health, and resilience in an online sample of the US transgender population. *American Journal of Public Health*, 103(5), 943–951. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2013.301241>
- Brandt, S. A., & Carmichael, C. L. (2020). Does online support matter? The relationship between online identity-related support, mattering, and well-being in sexual minority men. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 111, 106429. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2020.106429>
- Brooks, K. D. (2014). Telling the stories of gay, lesbian, and transgender Muslims. *Sex Roles*, 71(9–10), 351–353. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-014-0420-6>
- Budge, S. L., Belcourt, S., Conniff, J., Parks, R., W. Pantalone, D., & Katz-Wise, S. L. (2018). A grounded theory study of the development of trans youths' awareness of coping with gender identity. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*, 27(9), 3048–3061. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10826-018-1136-y>
- Cass, V. C. (1979). Homosexual identity formation: A theoretical model. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 4(3), 219–235. https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v04n03_01
- Cheah, W. H., & Singaravelu, H. (2017). The coming-out process of gay and lesbian individuals from Islamic Malaysia: Communication strategies and motivations. *Journal of Intercultural Communication Research*, 46(5), 401–423. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17475759.2017.1362460>
- Colaizzi, P. F. (1978). Psychological research as the phenomenologist views. In Valle, R.S. and Mark, K., Eds., *Existential Phenomenological Alternatives for Psychology* (pp. 48–71). Oxford University Press.
- Creswell, J. (2019). *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Method Approaches*. Sage Publications.

- Csoti, J. P., & McLaren, S. (2025). Sexual orientation concealment, hope, and depressive symptoms among gay and bisexual men: a moderated-moderation model. *Psychology & Sexuality*, 16(1), 72–85. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19419899.2024.2348717>
- Denison, E., Jeanes, R., Faulkner, N., & O'Brien, K. S. (2021). The relationship between 'coming out' as lesbian, gay, or bisexual and experiences of homophobic behaviour in youth team sports. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 18(3), 765–773. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-020-00499-x>
- Docena, P. S. (2013). Developing and managing one's sexual identity: Coming out stories of Waray gay adolescents. *Philippine Journal of Psychology*, 46(2), 75–103. https://www.academia.edu/download/47705479/Docena_2013_Waray_coming_out_stories.pdf
- Eidhamar, L. G. (2014). Is gayness a test from Allah? Typologies in Muslim stances on homosexuality. *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 25(2), 245–266. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09596410.2013.869882>
- Fernandez, A. A., Obenza, B., Cutamora Jr., M., Libby, G. C., Bragat, R. M., Arreglo, D. C., Nepa, J., & Sumayo, G. (2025). Academic stress, procrastination, and mental well-being among engineering students: A multivariate correlational and predictive study. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Higher Education*, 2(2), 132–157. <https://doi.org/10.70847/619114>
- Festinger, L. (1957). *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Stanford University Press.
- Flett, G. L. (2018). *The psychology of mattering: Understanding the human need to be significant*. Elsevier Academic Press.
- Flett, G. L. (2024). Mattering matters in youth suicidality: Implications for implementing in practice. *Child Protection and Practice*, 2, 100041. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chipro.2024.100041>
- Frost, D. M., & Meyer, I. H. (2012). Measuring community connectedness among diverse sexual minority populations. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 49(1), 36–49. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2011.565427>
- Grossman, A. H., D'augelli, A. R., & Frank, J. A. (2011). Aspects of psychological resilience among transgender youth. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 8(2), 103–115. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19361653.2011.541347>
- Harding, T., & Whitehead, D. (2016). Analysing data in qualitative research. In *Nursing and Midwifery Research: Methods and Appraisal for Evidence-Based Practice* (pp. 128–138). Elsevier: Churchill Livingstone. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/284372016_Analysing_data_in_qualitative_research
- Higa, D., Hoppe, M. J., Lindhorst, T., Mincer, S., Beadnell, B., Morrison, D. M., Wells, E. A., Todd, A., & Mountz, S. (2014). Negative and positive factors associated with the well-being of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Questioning (LGBTQ) youth. *Youth & Society*, 46(5), 663–687. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X12449630>
- House of Commons Library. (2022). *LGBT+ rights and issues in the Middle East* (Commons Library Research Briefing CBP-9457). UK Parliament. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9457/>

- Human Dignity Trust. (2026, February 1). A history of LGBT criminalisation. Human Dignity Trust. <https://www.humandignitytrust.org/lgbt-the-law/a-history-of-criminalisation/>
- ILGA World. (2020). State-sponsored homophobia 2020: Global legislation overview update. https://ilga.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/ILGA_World_State_Sponsored_Homophobia_report_global_legislation_overview_update_December_2020.pdf
- International Commission of Jurists. (2023). Southeast Asia: New ICJ report highlights discriminatory online restrictions against LGBT people. <https://www.icj.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/ICJ-Silenced-But-Not-Silent-Report.pdf?>
- Jaspal, Rusi., & Cinnirella, Marco. (2010). Coping with potentially incompatible identities: Accounts of religious, ethnic, and sexual identities from British Pakistani men who identify as Muslim and gay. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 49(4), 849–870. <https://doi.org/10.1348/014466609X485025>
- Johns, M. M., Zamantakis, A., Andrzejewski, J., Boyce, L., Rasberry, C. N., & Jayne, P. E. (2021). Minority stress, coping, and transgender youth in schools—Results from the resilience and transgender youth study. *Journal of School Health*, 91(11), 883–893. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josh.13086>
- Kabir, A., & Brinsworth, J. (2021). Mental health symptoms and suicidality in Iranian gay men. *Psychological Medicine*, 51(9), 1581–1586. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291721001264>
- Kiekens, W. J., & Mereish, E. H. (2022). The association between daily concealment and affect among sexual and gender minority adolescents: The moderating role of family and peer support. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 70(4), 650–657. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2021.11.019>
- Kugle, S. S. A.-H. (2010). *Homosexuality in Islam: Critical reflection on gay, lesbian, and transgender Muslims*. Oneworld Publications.
- Libiran, T. J. DC., Cepeda, R. L. C., Ramos, C. K. M., Alano, J. C. O., & Guballa, M. J. S. (2024). Understanding the challenges faced by Filipino LGBTQ+ Individuals with strong religious ties. *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science*, VIII(I), 2520–2547. <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2024.801186>
- Manalansan, M. F. , IV. (2003). *Global divas: Filipino gay men in the diaspora*. Duke University Press. <https://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/827/Global-DivasFilipino-Gay-Men-in-the-Diaspora?>
- Manalastas, E. J. (2013). Sexual orientation and suicide risk in the Philippines: Evidence from a nationally representative sample of young Filipino men. *Philippine Journal of Psychology*, 46(1), 1–13. https://pages.upd.edu.ph/sites/default/files/ejmanalastas/files/manalastas_2013_fil_gay_suicide_risk.pdf
- Meanley, S., Pingel, E. S., & Bauermeister, J. A. (2016). Psychological well-being among religious and spiritual-identified young gay and bisexual men. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 13(1), 35–45. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-015-0199-4>
- Meyer, I. H. (2003). Prejudice, social stress, and mental health in lesbian, gay, and bisexual populations: Conceptual issues and research evidence. *Psychological Bulletin*, 129(5), 674–697. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.129.5.674>

- Minty, S. (2025). Queer Muslim solidarity: Working against binaries. *Psychoanalysis, Culture & Society*, 30(3), 637–654. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41282-024-00515-8>
- Moagi, M. M., Der Wath, A. E. van, Jiyane, P. M., & Rikhotso, R. S. (2021). Mental health challenges of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people: An integrated literature review. *Health SA Gesondheid*, 26. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hsag.v26i0.1487>
- Mohd Sidik, S. S. (2015). *The making of a gay Muslim: Social constructions of religion, sexuality and identity in Malaysia and Britain*. King's College London.
- Molde, F. Y., & Embornas, A. (2024). Addressing stigma: Exploring the experiences of Mēranao LGBT. *Langkit: Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 13, 43–62. <https://doi.org/10.62071/jssh.v13i.626>
- Moustakas, C. E. (1994). *Phenomenological research methods*. Sage Publications, Inc.
- Nadal, K. L. (2013). *That's so gay! Microaggressions and the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender community*. American Psychological Association. <https://www.apa.org/pubs/books/4316152?>
- Obenza, B., Suerte, J. M., Raymunde Jr., P. P., & Sumayo, G. S. (2025). Adolescent fathers with unplanned pregnancies and their journey in English as a second language Learning: A multiple case study. *Journal of Educational, Health and Community Psychology*, 1037–1053. <https://doi.org/10.12928/jehcp.vi.30583>
- Pachankis, J. E., Mahon, C. P., Jackson, S. D., Fetzner, B. K., & Bränström, R. (2020). Sexual orientation concealment and mental health: A conceptual and meta-analytic review. *Psychological Bulletin*, 146(10), 831–871. <https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000271>
- Page, M. J. L., Lindahl, K. M., & Malik, N. M. (2013). The role of religion and stress in sexual identity and mental health among lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 23(4), 665–677. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12025>
- Psychological Association of the Philippines. (2020, August 14). PAP statement upholding the basic human rights and well-being of LGBT persons based on the psychological science of SOGIE. Psychological Association of the Philippines. <https://pap.ph/position-paper/12>
- Rahman, M. (2010). Queer as intersectionality: Theorizing gay Muslim identities. *Sociology*, 44(5), 944–961. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038510375733>
- Rahmawati, S. N., & Poerwandari, E. K. (2024). Tracing the integration journey: A qualitative study of conflict between gender/sexuality identity and religiosity among LGBTQ individuals in Indonesia. *KnE Social Sciences*. <https://doi.org/10.18502/kss.v9i30.17529>
- Raina, S. (2015). Establishing association. *Indian Journal of Medical Research*, 141(1), 127. <https://doi.org/10.4103/0971-5916.154519>
- Rasheed, P. T. (2022). *Reducing myth endorsement towards LGBTI+ to tackle prejudice towards gender diversity and sexual orientation* [Eastern Mediterranean University]. <http://hdl.handle.net/11129/5977>
- Ravat, S., & Wendland, M. W. (2020). Muslims under the rainbow: Five aspects of reconciling Islamic faith with queer identity. *International Journal of Undergraduate Research and Creative Activities*, 12(1), 1. <https://doi.org/10.7710/2168-0620.0304>

- Redocto, S. B., & Sumayo, G. S. (2024). The Teaching-Learning Process in Madrasah Multigrade Classes During the Pandemic: A Phenomenological Investigation. *AL-ISHLAH: Jurnal Pendidikan*, 16(1), 14–26. <https://doi.org/10.35445/alishlah.v16i1.5110>
- Reyes, M. E. S., Ballesteros, K. C. A., Bandol, P. A. A., Jimenez, K. A. H., & Malangen, S. D. R. (2019). Religiosity, gender role beliefs, and attitudes toward lesbians and gays in the Philippines. *North American Journal of Psychology*, 21(3), 559–572.
- Reyes, M. E. S., Torre, B. T., Bautista, A. D., Castañeda, J. G. M., Delos Santos, J. J. I., Muyargas, M. M., Taylor, A. B., Eden, T. M., Hobaica, S., Lara, E. A., Jauregui, J. C., Jarrett, B. A., Suffredini, K., & Nath, R. (2024). 2024 Philippines national survey on the mental health of LGBTQ+ young people. <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/survey-international/ph/2024/en/>
- Rosati, F., Pistella, J., Nappa, M. R., & Baiocco, R. (2020). The coming-out process in family, social, and religious contexts among young, middle, and older Italian LGBTQ+ Adults. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.617217>
- Rumens, N., & Ozturk, M. B. (2019). Heteronormativity and the (re)construction of gay male entrepreneurial identities. *International Small Business Journal: Researching Entrepreneurship*, 37(7), 671–688. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0266242619846609>
- Ryan, C., Russell, S. T., Huebner, D., Diaz, R., & Sanchez, J. (2010). Family acceptance in adolescence and the health of LGBT young adults. *Journal of Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Nursing*, 23(4), 205–213. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6171.2010.00246.x>
- Ryan, R. M., & Deci, E. L. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. *American Psychologist*, 55(1), 68–78. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.55.1.68>
- Schlossberg, N. K. (1989). Marginality and mattering: Key issues in building community. *New Directions for Student Services*, 1989(48), 5–15. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.37119894803>
- Singh, A. A., Hays, D. G., & Watson, L. S. (2011). Strength in the face of adversity: Resilience strategies of transgender individuals. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 89(1), 20–27. <https://doi.org/10.1002/j.1556-6678.2011.tb00057.x>
- Siraj, A. (2012). “I don’t want to taint the name of Islam”: The influence of religion on the lives of Muslim lesbians. *Journal of Lesbian Studies*, 16(4), 449–467. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10894160.2012.681268>
- Szymanski, D. M., & Ikizler, A. S. (2013). Internalized heterosexism as a mediator in the relationship between gender role conflict, heterosexist discrimination, and depression among sexual minority men. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, 14(2), 211–219. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0027787>
- Tamilchelvan, S., & Ab Rashid, R. (2017). Being a Muslim gay man: A systematic review. *Trames. Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 21(3), 273–284. <https://doi.org/10.3176/tr.2017.3.05>
- Thawer, R. (2022, January 12). How to be culturally competent when supporting LGBTQ+ Muslims. Medium. <https://medium.com/@rahimthawer/how-to-be-culturally-competent-when-supporting-lgbtq-muslims-7f7686a0563c>

- The Trevor Project. (2019, June). The Trevor Project research brief: Accepting adults reduce suicide attempts among LGBTQ youth . The Trevor Project. https://www.thetrevorproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Trevor-Project-Accepting-Adult-Research-Brief_June-2019.pdf
- Time. (2023, June 30). Southeast Asia's most gay-friendly country still has no law against LGBT discrimination. Time. https://time.com/6290762/philippines-pride-lgbt-discrimination-sogie-equality-bill/?utm_source=chatgpt.com
- van den Berg, H. (2005). Reanalyzing qualitative interviews from different angles: The risk of decontextualization and other problems of sharing qualitative data. *Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 6(1), 1–14. <https://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/499/1075>.
- Wallace, E. R., O'Neill, S., & Lagdon, S. (2024). Risk and protective factors for suicidality among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) young people, from countries with a high global acceptance index (GAI), within the context of the socio-ecological model: A scoping review. *Journal of Adolescence*, 96(5), 897–924. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jad.12308>
- Wight, R. G., LeBlanc, A. J., Meyer, I. H., & Harig, F. A. (2015). Internalized gay ageism, mattering, and depressive symptoms among midlife and older gay-identified men. *Social Science & Medicine*, 147, 200–208. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2015.10.066>
- Willoughby, B. L. B., Doty, N. D., & Malik, N. M. (2010). Victimization, family rejection, and outcomes of gay, lesbian, and bisexual young people: The role of negative GLB identity. *Journal of GLBT Family Studies*, 6(4), 403–424. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1550428X.2010.511085>
- World Health Organization. (2025, March 25). Suicide. World Health Organization. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/suicide?>
- Zehra, F., Nur, A., & Melike, Z. E. (2023). Religion and attitudes towards sexual orientation and gender identity. *Journal of Religious and Cultural Dynamics*, 2(1), 27–42.
- Cite as:** Abarre, M., & Lugtu, M. G. (2026). Faith, Identity, and Resilience: A Descriptive Phenomenological Study of Coming-Out Experiences among Muslim LGBT Individuals in North Cotabato, Philippines. *International Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies in Higher Education*, 3(1), 67–98. <https://doi.org/10.70847/689504>