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Safe Spaces and Silent Struggles: From Acceptance to Inclusion of Members of the LGBTQIA+ Community in Nueva Ecija

Denise Marcer F. Velasco
Wesleyan University-Philippines, Cabanatuan City, Nueva Ecija, Philippines

Email: velascodenisemarcer@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

This study explored how LGBTQIA+ community members in Nueva Ecija, Philippines, experienced social acceptance, discrimination, identity concealment, safe spaces, coping, and meaningful inclusion. Using a qualitative design with a phenomenological orientation, the study examined 20 completed online questionnaire entries from adults aged 18–34 across six Nueva Ecija localities. Nonprobability, criterion-based voluntary-response sampling was used, and a researcher-developed Google Forms questionnaire collected narratives through 12 open-ended questions. Responses were interpreted using reflexive thematic analysis. Six interconnected themes emerged: conditional acceptance and incomplete inclusion; discrimination, stereotyping, and unequal treatment; identity concealment and silent struggles; safe spaces and supportive relationships; coping strategies and resilience; and changing social attitudes alongside persistent barriers. Respondents described acceptance without full recognition of their relationships, abilities, or opportunities to participate without stereotyping. They associated safety with trusted relationships and freedom from judgment, while personal coping strategies did not eliminate exclusionary conditions. Although some perceived improving attitudes, inclusion remained inconsistent across social settings. The study concluded that meaningful inclusion requires equitable participation and consistent respect rather than acknowledgment alone. Schools, workplaces, community organizations, and families should strengthen respectful communication, fair treatment, privacy protection, and responses to discrimination. Interpretation was limited by the small voluntary sample, self-reported online accounts, the absence of follow-up interviews, and the need to confirm the independent origin of submissions. By distinguishing expressed acceptance from lived inclusion, the study provides context-specific insights to inform community awareness and more inclusive institutional practices.

Keywords: *Conditional Acceptance, Identity Concealment, LGBTQIA+ Inclusion, Nueva Ecija, Phenomenological Inquiry, Safe Spaces, Social Discrimination*

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background and Context of the Study

Social acceptance, equality, and meaningful inclusion remain significant concerns for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and other gender- and sexuality-diverse (LGBTQIA+) people in the Philippines. Greater public visibility does not necessarily ensure fair treatment, freedom of expression, or participation in everyday life. Acceptance may involve recognition or respect for a person's identity, whereas inclusion requires opportunities to participate without discrimination or pressure to conceal that identity. In a study of higher education in the Philippines and the United Kingdom, Evangelista et al. (2022) showed how social belonging and visible institutional support contributed to more inclusive campus climates. Abesamis and Alibudbud (2024) likewise documented competing understandings of LGBTQ+ rights in Philippine public discourse, demonstrating that recognition and equal treatment remain contested in some settings. These tensions are experienced through relationships with families, peers, schools, workplaces, and communities. Amistad (2022) described how lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth navigated bullying, isolation, identity conflicts, and acceptance during secondary education. Fernando and Cabardo (2024) similarly found that experiences of rejection and discrimination could coexist with supportive relationships among LGBTQIA+ college students. Beyond overt mistreatment, anticipated rejection and concealment can shape daily choices. Minority Stress Theory conceptualizes such pressures as consequences of stigma and adverse social conditions rather than of sexual minority identities themselves (Meyer, 2003). Safe spaces can provide a counterweight: Filipino queer youth described safety in terms of trustworthy people, affirming interactions, comfort, and freedom to disclose their identities (Gaza, 2024). In Nueva Ecija, these intersecting experiences raise a specific question: whether the acceptance LGBTQIA+ individuals encounter in particular relationships translates into genuine inclusion across their wider community lives.

1.2. Research Problem

The central problem is the possible disconnect between social acceptance and meaningful inclusion among LGBTQIA+ individuals in Nueva Ecija. Someone may be welcomed by friends or family yet remain hesitant to express an identity openly, participate in community activities, or challenge unequal treatment. Such experiences may involve visible discrimination alongside less apparent struggles, including fear of judgment, selective disclosure, and efforts to meet social expectations. Philippine research has documented these overlapping experiences in educational settings (Amistad, 2022; Fernando & Cabardo, 2024). National survey findings also link accepting communities and supportive relationships with more favorable mental-health outcomes among LGBTQ+ young people, emphasizing the importance of the environments in which acceptance occurs (The Trevor Project, 2024). Republic Act No. 11313, or the Safe Spaces Act, prohibits specified forms of gender-based sexual harassment in public, educational, workplace, and online settings (Republic Act No. 11313, 2019). These protections are important, but legal safeguards against harassment do not, by themselves, explain whether individuals experience belonging and equal participation in everyday relationships. Consequently, an important issue remains: how LGBTQIA+ people in Nueva Ecija interpret acceptance, navigate subtle exclusion, and assess what genuine inclusion would require in their own social environments.

1.3. Research Gap

Existing Philippine studies illuminate important aspects of LGBTQIA+ experience but frequently focus on particular educational or identity-expression contexts. Evangelista et al. (2022) examined institutional belonging in higher education, while Tomas (2024) investigated social attitudes and acceptance among students at Nueva Ecija University of Science and Technology. Also in Nueva Ecija, Adigue and Cruz (2024) explored clothing, gender expression, and the social

expectations surrounding acceptance. These studies provide valuable evidence about campus climates and personal expression, yet they do not fully explain how community members distinguish being accepted from being included across family, friendship, public, and other everyday settings, particularly when social expectations differ between familiar and unfamiliar people. The specific gap concerns the personal meanings and interconnected experiences of safe spaces, silent struggles, identity concealment, coping, and participation within the province. A phenomenological account can address this gap by centering individuals' own descriptions rather than assuming that positive attitudes necessarily represent inclusive lived experiences.

1.4. Purpose and Objectives of the Study

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals in Nueva Ecija, with particular attention to the movement from social acceptance toward meaningful inclusion. Using participants' responses to open-ended questions, it sought to describe everyday experiences of being LGBTQIA+; identify situations involving acceptance, exclusion, judgment, or unequal treatment; and examine the people and settings perceived as safe and supportive. It further explored personal struggles associated with identity concealment and social expectations, the coping strategies used when facing rejection or discrimination, and participants' views on changes needed for genuine inclusion. These objectives directed attention to participants' interpretations of belonging and participation without presuming that acceptance and inclusion were equivalent.

1.5. Significance and Practical Contribution of the Study

The study contributes a locally grounded account of LGBTQIA+ experiences in Nueva Ecija by clarifying how acceptance, safety, discrimination, and social belonging are understood in everyday life. Its qualitative insights may help community organizations, educators, institutional leaders, and local decision-makers recognize forms of exclusion that remain overlooked when acceptance is judged only through visible approval or positive attitudes. Participants' descriptions of supportive relationships and coping strategies may also inform more responsive awareness activities, respectful practices, and community-based inclusion initiatives. Rather than claiming to measure the effectiveness of an intervention, the study offers contextual evidence that stakeholders may consider when improving the conditions for dignity, open self-expression, and equitable participation.

1.6. Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) Alignment

The study directly aligns with Sustainable Development Goal 10, Reduced Inequalities, by examining whether LGBTQIA+ individuals can participate socially without identity-based exclusion. Its attention to subtle discrimination, unequal treatment, and the difference between acceptance and inclusion is relevant to the goal's emphasis on social inclusion and equal opportunity. It also supports Sustainable Development Goal 16, Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, particularly the promotion of inclusive environments and nondiscriminatory practices (United Nations, n.d.). By documenting how participants experience safe spaces, judgment, and belonging in Nueva Ecija, the research may inform community dialogue and more respectful institutional responses. Its contribution is therefore an evidence-informed basis for local inclusion efforts, not a claim that the study itself achieved these development targets.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1. Research Design

The study employed a qualitative design with a phenomenological orientation to explore how LGBTQIA+ individuals in Nueva Ecija understood experiences of social acceptance, discrimination, identity expression, safe spaces, personal struggles, and inclusion. This

approach prioritized the meanings participants attributed to everyday interactions within families, friendships, educational settings, workplaces, and communities. An interpretive orientation guided examination of written narratives rather than measurement of predetermined variables or statistical relationships. Data were obtained using a self-administered, open-ended online questionnaire.

2.2. Research Locale, Population, and Participants or Respondents

The study was conducted in Nueva Ecija, Central Luzon, Philippines. The 20 completed questionnaires came from residents of Cabanatuan City, Gapan City, San Jose City, San Antonio, Talavera, and Santa Rosa. Eligible participants were adults aged at least 18 years who resided in the province and self-identified as LGBTQIA+ community members. Eight respondents were aged 18–24, and 12 were aged 25–34. Seven identified their sexual orientation as gay, six as lesbian, and seven as bisexual. These accounts described individual community experiences and were not intended to represent the province's entire LGBTQIA+ population.

2.3. Sampling Technique and Sample Determination

Participants were selected through nonprobability, criterion-based voluntary-response sampling. Inclusion depended on affirmative self-reports of age, provincial residence, LGBTQIA+ identification, and willingness to participate. The dataset comprised 20 completed, eligible responses; no probability-based selection or sample-size formula was described. Sample adequacy was considered in relation to the study's interpretive aims and the experiential information contained in participants' responses, consistent with qualitative sampling considerations discussed by Hennink and Kaiser (2022). The study did not seek statistical generalizability.

2.4. Research Instrument and Validation

A researcher-developed questionnaire was delivered through Google Forms. It contained one voluntary informed-consent item, one eligibility-screening item, four optional demographic questions, and 12 open-ended questions. The demographic items concerned age range, residence, gender identity, and sexual orientation. Narrative prompts addressed acceptance, discrimination, judgment, safe spaces, identity concealment, personal struggles, coping strategies, changes in community attitudes, and perceptions of genuine inclusion. Questions used accessible language and encouraged descriptions in participants' own words. Instrument content was aligned with the study objectives and used accessible language; no formal expert-validation procedure, pilot test, or reliability result was documented.

2.5. Data Gathering Procedure

Data were gathered in November 2026 using a self-administered online Google Forms questionnaire. Respondents first affirmed voluntary consent and eligibility, then could provide demographic details and complete the 12 narrative questions. The written format enabled descriptions of social interactions and identity-related experiences without face-to-face participation. Google Forms recorded submitted answers electronically. The responses were organized in Microsoft Excel for qualitative examination. All 20 completed entries included affirmative consent and eligibility answers and written responses to all 12 open-ended questions.

2.6. Data Analysis and Statistical Treatment

Responses were examined using reflexive thematic analysis informed by Braun and Clarke (2021, 2022). The analysis followed six recursive phases: familiarization, coding, initial theme construction, theme review and development, refinement and naming, and narrative reporting. Responses were arranged by research question and examined for explicit experiences and

underlying meanings concerning acceptance, exclusion, safety, and belonging. Codes addressed supportive relationships, stereotyping, discrimination, concealment, emotional concerns, and coping. Themes reflected patterns of meaning rather than word frequencies; contrasting accounts were retained. Minority Stress Theory and social belonging informed interpretation. No inferential statistical tests were used.

2.7. Ethical Considerations

Participation was voluntary and began with an informed-consent question, followed by eligibility screening. All 20 recorded entries indicated affirmative responses to both items. Respondents were not required to provide names, exact addresses, or other direct identifiers; demographic questions were optional. Participant codes were designated for reporting accounts, with care to avoid unnecessarily identifying details. Sensitive narratives concerning discrimination and identity disclosure were interpreted respectfully, with attention to participant dignity, autonomy, and privacy.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Participant Profile and Principal Thematic Patterns

The dataset comprised 20 completed qualitative questionnaires from self-identified LGBTQIA+ individuals residing in Nueva Ecija. Eight respondents were aged 18–24, and 12 were aged 25–34. Seven identified their sexual orientation as gay, six as lesbian, and seven as bisexual. The responses represented Cabanatuan City, Gapan City, San Jose City, San Antonio, Talavera, and Santa Rosa. These characteristics situate the narratives within several local communities; they do not establish demographic differences or support estimates for the wider LGBTQIA+ population of the province. The thematic analysis identified six connected patterns: conditional acceptance and incomplete inclusion; discrimination, stereotyping, and unequal treatment; identity concealment and silent struggles; safe spaces and supportive relationships; coping strategies and personal resilience; and changing social attitudes accompanied by continuing demands for meaningful inclusion. The final pattern also informed the participants' descriptions of the practical conditions necessary for inclusion. The themes were interpretive groupings of written experiences, not numerical measures of prevalence or ranked categories. A recurring distinction across the accounts was that acceptance involved acknowledgment or tolerance, while inclusion required respectful treatment in ordinary interactions, recognition of relationships, opportunities to participate, and freedom from stereotyping. Support and exclusion sometimes appeared within the same individual's social environment. This coexistence is comparable to accounts of community belonging among homosexual students reported by Alabata et al. (2025) and to the combination of perceived inclusion and discrimination documented among students in southern Philippines by Eldani and Amil (2026). The following discussion examines how those tensions appeared in the Nueva Ecija narratives.

3.2. Conditional Acceptance and Incomplete Inclusion

The first major theme described acceptance that did not consistently produce genuine belonging. Participants distinguished being told that their identities were acceptable from being treated as full participants in relationships, conversations, and shared activities. R04 explained, "Acceptance is saying it's okay. Inclusion is when they consider my feelings and don't assume who I should date." R06 similarly stated, "Some people say they accept me but refuse to talk about my relationship, so it feels like part of my life is being ignored." These statements illustrate that acknowledgment could coexist with assumptions or conversational boundaries that made aspects of personal identity difficult to express. The distinction also arose during social participation. R05 explained, "Being included means I can participate without becoming the joke

of the group." R09 noted, "Sometimes I get invited to events only because they expect me to decorate or entertain. I have other skills too." Both accounts show why an invitation or a friendly interaction, by itself, did not necessarily signify inclusion. For R05, the concern was ridicule during participation; for R09, it was being valued through a narrow identity-based role rather than individual capability. The underlying issue was not only access to social activities but also the terms under which participation was permitted. Relationship recognition represented a particularly salient form of conditional acceptance. R16 stated, "Some relatives invite me but still don't want me to bring my partner, so I don't feel fully welcome." The same respondent expressed the distinction directly: "Acceptance is allowing me to attend. Inclusion is making room for the person who matters to me." R14 similarly explained, "Inclusion means recognizing my partner as important in my life, not pretending she doesn't exist." These responses associated belonging with acknowledgment of significant relationships rather than with acceptance of the person in isolation. Ballaret (2024) likewise described how familial support, social expectations, and exclusion shaped same-sex couples' family formation and parenting experiences in the Philippines. Although the present respondents did not all address parenting, their accounts converged on the importance of social recognition of intimate relationships. The pattern extends the emphasis on support and belonging in Alabata et al. (2025) by clarifying how apparently positive treatment may remain conditional. In this dataset, inclusion was more than the absence of explicit rejection: it involved recognition of the individual's relationships, skills, and identity during everyday participation. Families, social groups, and community organizations seeking to promote inclusion therefore need to consider whether their routine interactions communicate the same respect as their verbal expressions of acceptance.

3.3. Discrimination, Stereotyping, and Unequal Treatment

The second theme concerned explicit discriminatory remarks and less visible identity-based assumptions in classrooms, public places, social activities, and employment-related situations. R04 recalled, "A classmate once said bisexual people are just confused. I didn't argue, but I remembered it for a long time." R05 described an encounter near a market: "Someone I didn't know called me names while I was walking near the market. I ignored it, but it bothered me." These experiences show that a person's decision not to respond did not erase the significance of the encounter. Both narratives located social discomfort in ordinary settings rather than exclusively in formal disciplinary or institutional contexts. Stereotypes were not always phrased as insults. R13 stated, "One person said all gay men are good at makeup. It sounded like a compliment, but it was still an assumption." R18 also described comments questioning the capacity of bisexual women to remain committed in relationships. Such assumptions framed individuals according to generalized expectations about sexuality, appearance, ability, or personal conduct. As illustrated by R09's account of being asked mainly to entertain or decorate, stereotyping could constrain opportunities to be recognized for other interests and contributions. One respondent reported concern about treatment during recruitment. R11 stated, "At one interview I was asked personal questions that did not seem related to the position. I wondered if my identity affected it." This account documents perceived uncertainty about professional fairness, not evidence that the interview decision was caused by discrimination. Its importance lies in the respondent's awareness that identity-related judgments might shape an interaction in which assessment should concern job-related qualifications. Presto (2025) similarly identified tensions between formal commitments to inclusion and enduring discriminatory practices in Philippine workplaces. The comparison suggests that respectful language and institutional policy require consistent implementation to

be meaningful in practice. Abesamis (2024) examined how university students responded as bystanders to harassment based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and expression, emphasizing the interpersonal conditions surrounding responses to discriminatory incidents. Eldani and Amil (2026) also described discrimination alongside perceived inclusion in a tertiary setting. The Nueva Ecija accounts support the relevance of examining both overt harassment and socially normalized stereotypes, while extending the discussion to participants' family, public, and occupational encounters. The practical implication is that respectful communication, fair consideration of individual abilities, and appropriate responses to derogatory conduct are integral to inclusion rather than optional additions to general acceptance.

3.4. Identity Concealment and Silent Struggles

The third theme involved decisions to withhold information about identity, relationships, or personal concerns because of anticipated judgment. R06 explained, "Yes, I avoid mentioning my partner when people at home ask about my love life." R12 similarly stated, "I sometimes introduce a person I'm dating as just a friend to avoid unnecessary questions." These statements show how respondents could maintain interaction with others while selectively limiting what they shared. The concealment described was contextual: it concerned the anticipated reactions of particular people or environments, not necessarily uncertainty about one's own identity. Other written accounts showed different forms of identity management. R14 described caution when meeting unfamiliar coworkers because their attitudes toward LGBTQIA+ people were unknown. R17 recalled previously acting as though he was interested in women to avoid questions concerning his sexuality. These examples suggest that disclosure decisions were shaped by judgments of interpersonal safety and by expectations about how others might respond. Minority Stress Theory offers a relevant interpretive lens because it identifies anticipated rejection and concealment among the processes associated with stigma-related stress (Meyer, 2003). The present narratives are consistent with those concepts, although the questionnaire was not designed to assess clinical distress or measure minority stress quantitatively. The accounts also revealed less visible concerns about privacy, reputation, relationships, and future acceptance. R08 feared that personal information might be disclosed without permission. R15 worried about assumptions of infidelity in relation to bisexual identity, while R18 expressed concern that rumors could affect professional relationships. Family-related worries appeared in R17's concern about how a partner might be treated at future gatherings and in R12's discomfort when acceptance was accompanied by an expectation of secrecy. These reflections indicate that exclusion could be experienced in anticipation, even without a new discriminatory incident being described. Ates and Pit (2025) reported how Filipino gay men negotiated discrimination and its personal consequences, offering a useful comparison for the strategies described here. The present findings suggest that the ability to decide when and to whom to disclose personal information was an important component of perceived safety. Consequently, efforts to strengthen social inclusion should protect privacy while reducing the negative assumptions that make ordinary disclosure feel risky. The central concern is not whether individuals choose to share every aspect of identity, but whether such choices can be made without coercion, humiliation, or fear of social exclusion.

3.5. Relational Safe Spaces and Supportive Networks

The fourth theme identified safety primarily through interpersonal trust, familiarity, and freedom from judgment rather than through designated physical settings alone. R07 described a family member's home as comfortable because "nobody turns my identity into a topic." R05 similarly

identified being at home with supportive cousins as a situation in which "I don't have to pretend around them." These accounts characterized safety as the ability to take part in ordinary interaction without feeling obligated to explain or defend one's identity. Other responses located safety in friendship networks, private residences, and familiar public spaces. R06 described feeling comfortable in a small café with close friends because the group's reactions were not a source of concern. R14 characterized a shared apartment with a partner as a place "where we don't have to explain ourselves." The contrast between an everyday café and a private residence underscores that the decisive feature of safety in these accounts was the relational environment rather than a specific type of venue. The same location could plausibly be experienced differently depending on the people present, although the questionnaire did not systematically compare settings. Supportive actions also included maintaining friendships after disclosure, listening without judgment, acknowledging a partner, and respecting privacy. These ordinary expressions of trust contributed to participants' descriptions of belonging. Baan and Poralan (2023) likewise identified acceptance, support systems, and fair treatment as important aspects of LGBTQIA+ students' experiences in physical education. Alabata et al. (2025) connected social support and community acceptance with belonging among homosexual students. The present accounts extend those discussions beyond specific school activities by demonstrating how participants identified supportive relationships across home, friendship, and community settings. The implication is that safe-space initiatives should not be understood solely as the provision of a named room, venue, or designated activity. Participants' experiences emphasized dependable respect, confidentiality, and the freedom to interact without being singled out. Such interpersonal conditions may be strengthened by families, schools, workplaces, and community groups through consistent behavior. In the recorded accounts, belonging emerged where people were recognized as individuals and could engage in relationships without constant negotiation over identity.

3.6. Coping Strategies and Resilience

The fifth theme concerned responses to unfavorable remarks, uncertainty, and identity-related stressors. Participants described seeking trusted people, maintaining boundaries, disengaging from difficult encounters, writing privately, and using recreational activities to manage discomfort. R07 stated, "I take a break from social media and talk with someone I trust." R15 described keeping a journal and turning to people who understood them beyond sexual orientation. These accounts illustrate the combination of interpersonal support and private reflection that some respondents used when difficult situations arose. Other strategies involved familiar activities and clear personal limits. R10 described sports, music, and supportive teammates as helpful. R17 explained, "I set boundaries and leave conversations when they become disrespectful." In contrast, R03 summarized one response as "I just shake it off." These strategies differed in their degree of engagement with the source of discomfort: some respondents spoke with trusted individuals, some redirected attention to personal activities, and others avoided or disengaged from challenging conversations. The accounts do not establish that any particular coping strategy was uniformly effective. Ates and Pit (2025) described identity negotiation and resilience among Filipino gay men facing societal discrimination, while Baan and Poralan (2023) reported support systems and adaptive responses among LGBTQIA+ students. Those studies provide context for the range of responses represented here. At the same time, the Nueva Ecija narratives demonstrated that resilience should not be confused with an absence of harm. R05's account of ignoring harassment near a market while remaining bothered by it illustrates how outward disengagement and emotional discomfort may coexist. The findings

therefore distinguish individual coping from responsibility for changing discriminatory circumstances. Boundaries, self-reflection, hobbies, and supportive relationships may help individuals navigate difficult interactions, but these strategies do not remove the stereotypes or exclusions that prompted them. A practical response to the findings would combine recognition of personal coping resources with community and institutional action against demeaning language, harassment, and unfair treatment. Resilience was evident in how participants managed their situations; meaningful inclusion requires that they not be expected to manage those situations alone.

3.7. Changing Social Attitudes and Continuing Barriers

The sixth theme concerned perceived improvements in acceptance that remained uneven across settings. R04 observed, “Some of my classmates are more open now compared with when we were younger. At home it hasn't changed much.” R19 similarly stated, “I've seen improvement, especially among younger coworkers, though not everywhere.” These comments reflect the respondents’ perceptions of changes within their own relationships, not a measured province-wide trend. They nonetheless show that increased openness in one environment could coexist with more restrictive expectations in another. Some respondents described family members becoming more willing to ask questions or discuss identities respectfully. R12 reported greater openness by a family member, while R17 described increased patience among parents despite continued difficulties during extended family gatherings. Conversely, R10 perceived less overt teasing but continued assumptions related to appearance. R11 expressed the distinction between visible politeness and underlying beliefs: “People at work are more careful with their words now, but I don't know if attitudes changed completely.” This observation highlights the interpretive limits of improved outward behavior; a reduction in offensive comments does not necessarily demonstrate a corresponding change in attitudes. The pattern parallels the coexistence of inclusion and discrimination reported by Eldani and Amil (2026). It is also compatible with Presto’s (2025) account of workplaces in which affirming policies or interactions were undermined by exclusionary norms. The Nueva Ecija narratives add a cross-setting perspective: respondents compared family, school, friendship, and employment environments and described different degrees of acceptance within them. As a result, progress toward inclusion was understood as uneven and conditional rather than complete. These findings imply that public awareness alone is an incomplete indicator of inclusion. Participants drew attention to whether respectful language was sustained, partners were recognized, discriminatory jokes were discouraged, and opportunities were granted without identity-based expectations. The useful question for institutions and communities is therefore not merely whether people express favorable attitudes toward LGBTQIA+ individuals, but whether those attitudes translate into consistent interpersonal conduct and equitable participation.

3.8. Conditions for Meaningful Inclusion in Nueva Ecija

The concluding analytic focus concerned how participants defined genuine inclusion and what changes they considered necessary. Across the responses, inclusion involved recognition of personal relationships and individual capabilities, fair treatment, freedom of expression, and participation without repeated explanation or justification. R09 stated, “Being included means my abilities are noticed, not just my identity.” R07 explained, “Real inclusion is not requiring me to defend or explain myself every time.” These descriptions connect inclusion to everyday dignity rather than simply to permission to enter a social space or take part in an activity. The participants also identified concrete areas for improvement. R04 stated, “I want schools to

discuss respect without making LGBTQIA+ students feel like they're the problem." This recommendation locates responsibility for respectful behavior within the wider educational environment instead of assigning it to those experiencing discrimination. R11 proposed that "Workplaces should focus on skills and have clear ways to report discrimination." R16 emphasized fuller family recognition, particularly allowing partners to participate in gatherings without exclusion. Other narratives called for more respectful communication, reduced stereotyping and gossip, and acknowledgment of diverse relationships. These suggestions were expressed by participants and should be understood as practice-oriented perspectives rather than as interventions tested by this study. The recommendations are consistent with Abesamis (2024), whose work highlighted interpersonal responses to SOGIE-based harassment, and with Baan and Poralan (2023), who identified fair treatment and institutional support as important in educational environments. Presto (2025) further emphasized the need to align formal workplace inclusion with everyday practice. Applied to the present narratives, these comparisons support attention to community education, respectful family interactions, fair assessment of professional capabilities, and clear responses to discriminatory conduct. Their practical relevance rests on the problems participants described; the present qualitative design does not establish that any specific program would produce a measurable effect. Taken together, the themes indicate that acceptance and inclusion were related but distinguishable experiences. Supportive relationships sometimes coexisted with stereotyping, restricted disclosure, or selective recognition of intimate partners. Trusted individuals and familiar environments provided safety, while coping strategies helped respondents manage difficult interactions without necessarily changing their underlying causes. Perceived improvements in public attitudes were therefore meaningful but incomplete when ordinary behavior continued to impose identity-based limits. In this study, the movement from acceptance toward inclusion was understood as the consistent recognition of people's identities, relationships, abilities, and equal standing in everyday community life. These conclusions are confined to 20 self-reported written accounts from six Nueva Ecija localities. Because the questionnaire was self-administered and did not include follow-up interviews, some experiences could not be explored in greater depth. The purposive eligibility criteria and voluntary-response recruitment also preclude statistical generalization to the province's LGBTQIA+ population. Nevertheless, the accounts provide context-specific qualitative insight into how respondents interpreted acceptance, safety, discrimination, concealment, coping, and the conditions of genuine inclusion.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The study explored the experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals in Nueva Ecija concerning social acceptance, discrimination, personal struggles, safe spaces, and meaningful inclusion. The thematic analysis revealed that acceptance did not always translate into genuine inclusion, as the recorded experiences reflected continuing challenges involving stereotyping, unequal treatment, identity concealment, and social expectations. Although supportive relationships and improving community attitudes contributed to participants' sense of belonging, certain interpersonal and institutional environments continued to influence their freedom of self-expression and social participation. Safe spaces were primarily associated with trusted relationships, emotional security, mutual respect, and freedom from judgment, while coping strategies reflected participants' efforts to manage discrimination and maintain personal resilience. The findings emphasized that genuine inclusion extended beyond tolerance or acknowledgment and required consistent respect, equitable opportunities, recognition of personal relationships, and meaningful participation in community life. Overall, the study

highlighted the importance of transforming expressions of acceptance into everyday practices that uphold the dignity, identity, and social belonging of LGBTQIA+ individuals.

Based on the findings, local government units, educational institutions, workplaces, community organizations, and families in Nueva Ecija are encouraged to strengthen initiatives that promote LGBTQIA+ awareness, respectful communication, nondiscrimination, and equitable participation. Community-based educational activities and inclusive institutional practices should address harmful stereotypes, inappropriate remarks, identity-based assumptions, and other behaviors that contribute to exclusion. Educational institutions and workplaces should reinforce fair treatment, provide accessible mechanisms for addressing discrimination, and foster environments in which individuals can express their identities without fear of judgment. Families and community members are likewise encouraged to establish supportive relationships that recognize LGBTQIA+ individuals' personal identities, relationships, and contributions. Particular emphasis should be placed on creating safe environments through consistent interpersonal respect, privacy protection, and equal opportunities rather than relying solely on expressions of acceptance. Future researchers are encouraged to examine LGBTQIA+ experiences across additional communities and identity groups using in-depth interviews and other qualitative approaches to strengthen understanding of the conditions that promote sustainable social inclusion.

The study was limited to 20 recorded questionnaire entries from LGBTQIA+ individuals aged 18–34 across six cities and municipalities in Nueva Ecija, which restricted the range of experiences represented in the analysis. The use of a nonprobability, voluntary-response approach and a self-administered online questionnaire may have favored individuals who were comfortable discussing their identities and had access to digital platforms. Although the open-ended questions provided opportunities for participants to describe their experiences, the absence of follow-up interviews limited further exploration of emotionally complex situations, interpersonal relationships, and the meanings attached to particular events. The findings also depended on self-reported narratives and the detail participants chose to disclose, while the research records required confirmation of the independent origin of each submission before publication. Furthermore, the study focused on a specific provincial context and a limited age range; therefore, the interpretations were not intended to represent the experiences of all LGBTQIA+ individuals in Nueva Ecija or the Philippines. Despite these limitations, the analysis offered context-specific insights into the distinction between social acceptance and meaningful inclusion and provided a foundation for future qualitative investigations involving broader participant groups and more extensive narrative exploration.

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