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THE ROLE OF INTERSECTIONALITY ON QUEER FILIPINAS' LIVED EXPERIENCES

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Author

Agustin, Samantha

Publication Date

2026-06-15

THE ROLE OF INTERSECTIONALITY ON QUEER FILIPINAS' LIVED EXPERIENCE

By

Samantha San Gabriel Agustin

A capstone project submitted for Graduation with University Honors

May 07, 2026

University Honors

University of California, Riverside

APPROVED

Dr. Jack Cárvanes

Department of Gender and Sexuality Studies

Dr. Begoña Echeverría, Howard H Hays, Jr. Chair

University Honors

Abstract

Intersectionality emphasizes how the intersections of one's social identities are shaped by overlapping systems of oppression, producing distinct experiences in everyday life, particularly for marginalized individuals. Although previous research has examined how systems of power shape the experiences of queer Filipino men, such as their struggle with cultural religion and sexuality expression, there is an existing gap in the literature that looks specifically at how these systems operate in the lives of queer Filipina women and queer nonbinary Filipinas. Their experiences, although sharing similar social identities, are drastically different because of the intersecting identities of being queer, being Filipina, and being a woman or nonbinary. The present study investigates the lived experiences of queer and nonbinary Filipinas living in the US, exploring how the interlocking systems of power shaped by their race, gender, and sexuality shape their identities and daily lives. Through in-depth structured interviews, the research examines three aspects of their experiences—their relationships (platonic, familial, romantic), their identity development, and their mental health. The results suggest how one expresses their gender and sexual identity as well as how they navigate mental health is based on their Filipino background due to many Filipino households having religious roots (specifically Christianity) and cultural stigma that result in conservative worldviews. From cultural gender norms and conservative religious views, queer Filipinas are subject to many different forms of prejudice and discrimination due to how their identities interact. My study uses an intersectional framework to uplift queer Filipinas' lived experiences in hopes of bringing awareness to their unique experiences.

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to acknowledge my faculty mentor, Dr. Jack Cárvanes, for his guidance and support throughout this project and my research journey. Thank you for believing in me and for all the times you have dedicated to supporting me, I am beyond grateful to have you as my faculty mentor. Additionally, thank you to the Chancellor's Research Fellowship for funding my research project and all the opportunities provided during the fellowship that have shaped my career as a researcher.

I would like to thank my family, especially my parents, for their continued support throughout my academic and professional career. I love you and I am forever grateful for all you have done for me, I owe my success to you. I would also like to thank my dearest friends, whom I call my family too. Thank you for everything these past four years, my life would not be the same without you all.

Last but not least, I would like to dedicate this project to my younger self and to all the queer Filipinas out there feeling lost in who they are. Your voice matters and you deserve to feel seen. Always know you are not alone.

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Introduction

Out of the 26.4 million Asian Americans in the United States, 3.2 million of them are made up by the Filipino American population (U.S. Census, 2024). Of the 11.3 million LGBTQ adults in the United States, 685,000 of them are both AAPI (Asian American Pacific Islander) and LGBTQ (Choi et al., 2021). Yet when exclusively talking about the LGBTQ Filipino American community, much information about them is yet to be known.

Previous research has examined the lived experiences of LGBTQ Filipinos, but particularly for Filipinos in the Philippines. Queer Filipinos face discrimination amongst the Filipino community because of conservative worldviews due to culturally religious upbringing. Ochoa and colleagues (2016) found how reading the main sacred text (such as the Bible) from one's religion predicted Filipino's negative attitudes towards same-sex marriage. This is due to stigmatization rooted in interpretations of Biblical verses that highlight the sinfulness of homosexual acts (Yip, 1997). On queer Filipinos' experience with religion, Cornelio and Dagle (2022) uncover the intersectional hardships in navigating sexuality and religion for non-heterosexual Filipino men.

When seeking to understand the lived experiences of LGBTQ Filipino Americans, it is vital to utilize an intersectional lens when talking about identities that face multiple intersecting systems of oppression. The intersections of one's social identities drastically impact the experiences in their day-to-day life, creating unique systems of oppression for marginalized individuals. Intersectionality, coined by Kimberle Crenshaw (1989), is the framework that analyzes how structures of power intersect to create unique lived experiences. When society may spotlight only one facet of identity in isolation, intersectionality expands the picture further and addresses how all social identities—such as race, gender, and sexuality—must be looked at

holistically. This means how systems of oppression like racism, sexism, and homophobia interact altogether in the face of systems of privilege like white supremacy, the patriarchy, and cisheteronormativity.

Past studies have explored how the intersections of Filipino identity and sexuality have created unique lived experiences (Ochoa et al., 2016; Cornelio and Dagle, 2022; Reyes et al., 2017). However, the previous research on queer Filipinos centers the experience of men and masculinity. Additionally, much research highlights queer Filipinos living in the Philippines, and much less is known about queer Filipinos living in the United States. This study fills an important gap by centering queer Filipina women and queer nonbinary Filipinas living within the United States who experience deeper systems of oppression because of their racialized gender identities compared to their white counterparts. In addition to the struggle they face being queer and Filipino, queer Filipina women face inferiority and gendered expectations from being a woman (Aguilar, 1989). Meanwhile, for queer nonbinary Filipinos, a study done by Willoughby and colleagues (2010) with university students in the Philippines highlighted how non-gender-variant participants, such as nonbinary people, reported more genderism (the ideology that enforces the gender binary of two genders only) than gender-variant participants. From cultural gender norms to conservative religious views, queer Filipina women and queer nonbinary Filipinas are subject to many different forms of prejudice and discrimination due to how their identities of race, gender, and sexuality interact. This project expands on previous research done looking at cultural religion and gendered expectations' impact on identity and mental health, providing insight to help understand why queer Filipinas experience the struggles they may face.

Literature Review

Filipino Americans' Cultural Stigma and Mental Health

As every culture has different beliefs when it comes to mental health, the decision to further understand one's own mental health issues and to seek therapy is often impacted by their culture. Many cultures, including Filipino cultures, have a negative stigma surrounding mental health, which serves as one of the main barriers to help-seeking (Martinez et al., 2020). A study done by Park and colleagues (2023) highlights how "saving face," which is the fixation of how others perceive oneself and their families, was a significant correlate of stigma for Filipino Americans. With Filipino identity and culture having a strong emphasis on family and the ability to care for family, experiencing struggles with mental health can be seen as a hindrance to fulfilling familial obligations (Kramer et al., 2002). This value placed on one's ability to take care of their family and community is known as *utang na loob*, which roughly translates to debt (or norm) of reciprocity (Nadal, 2020). It is the concept of a lifelong obligation to repay someone for a significant favor that oftentimes is intergenerational, such as children expected to repay the sacrifices their immigrant parents had made. A study done by Dizon and colleagues (2025) revealed how Filipino college students still exhibit high levels of *utang na loob*, which suggests how the sense of indebtedness to parents may impact their emotional well-being and mental health. They had also found how some participants felt unable to refuse the repayment because of a combination of *utang na loob* and *hiya* (shame), thus potentially impacting their mental health because of the internalization of indebtedness (Dizon et al., 2025).

In regards to Filipino Americans, they are the third largest Asian subgroup in the United States, yet are an "invisible minority" due to the limited health and mental health related studies and interventions targeting this population (Javier et al., 2014). Additionally, data from the

Center for Disease Control's U.S. Youth Risk Behavioral Surveillance System found that Filipino youth have higher rates of adolescent female suicidal ideation (45.6%) and Filipina females ranked first (23.3%) among those who attempted suicide followed by Hispanic females, then Filipino males (Wolf, 1997). Beyond Filipinos in America, LGBT+ Filipinos in the Philippines experience the highest rates of significant depression (92.0%), anxiety (93.8%), and stress (81.3%) (Alibudbud, 2022). Despite these high statistics, many Filipinos fail to seek the proper help they need, which stems from the cultural stigma that exists in many Filipino households. This creates a lack of conversations surrounding mental health, and ultimately may push away those who need the help to seek it.

However, when Filipino Americans do seek help, there is often the issue of cultural competency in therapy. Much of psychotherapy is deeply rooted in Western European culture. The reinforcement of diagnosis and treatment for mental health came from the West's emphasis on separating the physical from the psychological, resulting in the various kinds of practices to treat mental health such as psychiatry and talk therapy. The definition of normal and abnormal under Western structure influences the development of psychotherapy models, and in turn, makes those of other non-white "ethnic" cultures simply because they do not fit the standard model. Despite the widespread acceptance of the Western model for psychotherapy, it is the lack of understanding of cultural differences that causes barriers in (Koç & Kafa, 2018).

Religion in Filipino Cultures

Filipino Americans have a rich culture, with many factors that influence it. From Filipinos migrating to the United States from the motherland to the Spanish and American colonization of the Philippines, there is an extensive history that creates the complex layers in Filipino American identity today. Much of the culture in the Philippines is rooted in religion

since Spaniard colonization and the imposition of the Roman Catholic religion, which is carried over for many Filipinos who immigrated to the United States. Pew Research Center's (2023) survey on Asian American adults' religion revealed that approximately three-quarters (74%) of the Filipino-American population identify as Christian, with a majority being Catholic. With that, much of Filipino identity and culture is deeply rooted in religion, especially Christianity and Catholicism. Ocampo (2016) examines the relationship between ethnicity and religion, in which it was inseparable as much of Filipino upbringing involves Catholic activities such as attending Sunday mass and praying the rosary. Religion's deep roots within Filipino culture informs Filipinos beliefs and ideologies, notably their thoughts towards gender and sexuality. Whether through biblical interpretations or through upholding heteronormative gender norms, some Christians believe queerness to be a sin and tend to hold homophobic and sexist ideologies (Ochoa et al., 2016). This can manifest in more extreme ways such as conversion therapy. Conversion therapy is a dangerous practice that targets LGBTQ+ young adults in order to change their gender or sexuality. Research done at Williams Institute at UCLA School of Law (2018) reveals that approximately 698,000 LGBT adults in the US have received conversion therapy, with 350,000 of those who received it as adolescents. Despite the push for cisheteronormativity (the societal belief that everyone is cisgender and heterosexual) conversion therapy, it has been disproven numerous times and causes more harm on those who receive as research has shown that conversion therapy has little effect in altering sexual orientation and is associated with negative outcomes such as depression, relationship dysfunction and increased homonegativity (Dehlin et al., 2015; Przeworski et al., 2021).

The seeming dichotomy between being queer and being religious is intricate as previous research examines the relationship between queerness and religion for queer Filipinos, primarily

gay Filipino men (Cornelio and Dagle, 2022; Manalansan, 2003; Chiongbian et al., 2023, Ocampo, 2022). For queer Filipinos, the hardships they face such as self-rejection and conflict surrounding their queer and religious identities. In his book, *Brown and Gay In LA: The Lives of Immigrant Sons*, Ocampo (2022) explores the complex relationship of religion and sexuality for gay Filipino sons of immigrants growing up in the United States, in which homophobic ideologies being preached in mass place strain on familial relationships and Filipino identity. Regardless of this turmoil surrounding the two conflicting identities, many queer Filipinos in the Philippines continue to turn to religion as a source of support and comfort (Cornelio and Dagle, 2022; Chiongbian et al., 2023). For queer Filipinos in the United States, Manalansan (2003) identifies in his book, *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora*, the central role religion plays in queer Filipino American societies as religion and attending mass is often a familiar activity and a source of comfort.

LGBTQ Filipino Americans and the Role of Gender in Filipino Communities

Much research on LGBTQ Filipinos, especially for LGBTQ Filipino Americans, is limited and focused on the gay male experience. When it comes to understanding gay Filipino American men's lived experiences, Ocampo (2022) and Manalansan (2003) bring to light their experiences navigating the intersections of their American identity, their Filipino identity, their queerness, and their masculinity. Masculinity and respectability were key points in understanding how gay Filipino men navigate their identities, especially when it comes to coming out to others (Ocampo, 2022). Race plays a significant role in gay Filipino men's lived experiences as they face racialization in mainstream communities and gay communities that are often White dominated and Westernized (Manalansan, 2003). On the struggles gay Filipino men face, past studies have explored the conflict they experience with gender roles and the psychological

distress that comes with navigating that conflict (Rubio and Green, 2009). Additionally, being gay or bisexual was often a predictor of elevated suicide risk for young, queer Filipino men (Manalastas, 2013). However, as these focus on roles surrounding hegemonic masculinity and the experiences queer men face, there is a lack talking about experiences that women and nonbinary people face. Women, nonbinary, genderqueer, agender, and the overall non-male experience is often not emphasized, and thus the systems of racism, sexism, misogyny, homophobia, and more that come with those experiences are not further explored.

Within the United States, there are terms commonly used such as “lesbian,” “gay,” “bisexual,” and so on. However, the language within the Philippines and in some Filipino American communities is limited to “bakla” and “tomboy.” *Bakla* is the Tagalog word used for feminine gay men while *tomboy* is not a Tagalog word, but is interchangeably used to describe a lesbian that often dresses masculine. The language makes it so that two things are synonymous when they are meant to be separate, such as gender roles and sexual orientation where the assumption is that a gay man is meant to be feminine while a lesbian woman is meant to be masculine (Nadal, 2020). With limited language and the confusion between norms and identities, the vast identities within the LGBTQ community are not wholly understood. When it comes to attitudes towards queerness, research suggests that Filipinos are generally biased against lesbians and gays, with Filipino heterosexual men having more bias against them (Reyes et al., 2021). Additionally, religion is often a strong predictor of negative attitudes towards queerness as research has found all religious groups (including Catholics, Born Again Christians, Muslims, and other religious perspectives) viewing homosexuality as negative (Reyes et al., 2021).

Regarding Filipina Americans, they often face numerous gender norms and expectations set upon by their culture. Prior to colonization, the pre-colonial Philippines was a gender-neutral

society, which drastically differs from the binary society heavily influenced by Spanish colonization that emphasizes gender role differences between male and female. As *machismo* (male-dominant) culture became prominent in the Philippines following Spanish colonization, dismantling the egalitarian system of the indigenous Filipino population. The counterpart of *machismo* is *marianismo* (female submissiveness), leading to gender role inequalities that placed expectations on women to be selfless and prioritize the family above oneself (Nadal, 2020). Previous research has showcased these expectations set from Spanish colonization continue to last today, as Filipinas often are expected to take care of family and focus on home obligations (Maramba, 2008). Compared to their male counterparts, adolescent Filipinas often face stricter supervision from the family and expected to be more involved within their families while adolescent Filipino boys are often under less supervision and expected less in family involvement (Heras, 2007).

Spanish and American colonization had also brought about beauty standards centered around whiteness, in which the “perfect Filipina” are often fair-skinned—known as *maputi* in the Tagalog (Illo, 1996). Colorism, which is a form of systemic oppression against those with darker skin tones, is prevalent within Filipino beauty standards, in which skin bleaching products are common in the Philippines to look *maputi*. For Filipina Americans, their internalized skin color images are often shaped by comments made by their older adult Filipino relatives, showcasing the impact Filipino families have in maintaining colonial beauty standards (Benavidez-Walsh et al., 2025). Additionally, Benavidez and colleagues (2025) explored the mixed messages on skin color that Filipina Americans faced as their Filipino community prefers light skin yet their White Americans peers would want to be tan. This leaves Filipina Americans faced with various expectations surrounding beauty standards at the intersections of their racialized gender.

Methods

The current study seeks to answer the questions, “What are the hardships queer Filipinas have experienced in their relationships (platonic, romantic, and familial) amongst their communities? How has navigating their identity shaped their experience working through their mental health?” Based on previous research, it is hypothesized that one’s expression of their queer identity along with their gender identity will rely on their Filipino background - whether it is one being brought up in a religious household or being held to conservative gender norms from the culture. Additionally, their Filipino identity will be impacted because of their queer identity and gender identity due to tensions between sexuality and Filipinos’ cultural religion (Cornelio and Dagle, 2022; Aguilar, 1989). Queer identity refers to one’s sexuality while gender identity refers to one’s gender (being a woman or nonbinary specifically in this study’s case) and how they express it. The current study uses an intersectional lens as inspired by the theory of intersectionality, which looks at how multiple social identities interact (Crenshaw, 1989).

Participants

The study utilizes qualitative research through the in-depth, structured interviews that have been conducted with 9 queer Filipina women and queer nonbinary Filipinas living in the United States, with most participants living in California. Eligibility requires all participants to be of 18+ years old, of Filipino descent, self-identifying as a woman or nonbinary, self-identifying within the LGBTQ+ community, and currently live in the United States. All participants were recruited online through a flyer sent out to various organizations, such as the Search to Involve Pilipino Americans (SIPA) in Los Angeles.

Table 1

Table of Participants

Name	Age	Pronouns	Sexuality	Gender Identity
Robyn	21	She/Her	Lesbian	Woman
Alex	20	They/Them	Lesbian	Nonbinary
Gabby	22	She/They	Pansexual	Agender
Eleanor	38	She/Her	Lesbian	Queer
Jessica	29	She/Her	Queer	Woman
Matilda	29	She/Her	Bisexual	Woman
Vivian	18	She/Her	Lesbian	Woman
Liza	18	She/Her	Aromantic & Asexual	Trans Woman
Quinn	20	Any Pronouns	Aromantic & Asexual	Agender

Procedure

Interviews were conducted digitally via Zoom in order to record audio for transcriptions and for accuracy, with each interview lasting around 3 hours. Participants received study procedures prior to the interview and gave informed consent prior to the interview. All participants received a pseudonym and information has been deidentified to ensure anonymity.

Based on previous research done on Filipino culture and queerness such as Filipinos' negative attitudes towards queerness (Ochoa et al., 2016), the measures used in the study were created to further build off of past research. However, they are newly implemented to help understand how this context develops further for queer Filipina women and queer nonbinary Filipinas. Questions included: Has your relationship with your Filipino family changed as you've navigated through your gender and sexual identity? Has being Filipina and/or queer negatively impacted your mental health in any way? How do you describe your gender identity, and what does it mean to you?

There are 10 categories of questions that all participants were asked in order to have an in-depth understanding of each participant and their experiences. First is their general background, asking general demographic questions such as their pronouns, sexual identity, age, and so on. Second is their queer background, asking questions about how they discovered they were queer, how they have navigated being queer, and how their “coming out” was (or their lack of it). Building off of this second portion of the interview, understanding why participants may have come out or not is essential to understand the social support they may or may not have received for their queer identity. This is because queer people tend to face barriers when it comes to support, such as a lack of tailored support programs and complex relationship history (Ketcher et al., 2022). This translates to queer Filipinas as they may struggle to seek social support because of the lack of targeted support for them as well as complex relationship histories with their Filipino community. Third is their gender identity, asking questions about gender expression and any gendered expectations or norms they’ve faced. Fourth is their Filipino background, asking questions about their heritage and how connected they are to their culture. Fifth is their Filipino family, asking questions about their family, household life, and their relationship with their family members. Sixth is their spirituality, asking questions about their relationship to religion and if they grew up in a religious household. Seventh is their mental health, asking about their challenges with it and how they overcame it. Eighth is their relationships, asking about their dating life and their partner (if they’re currently seeing someone). Ninth delves into intersectionality, and looks at how they believe their Filipino identity affects their queer identity and vice versa. Lastly, the final set of questions delve into their current connections (such as friends, family members, the found family they have) and their goals moving forward.

Results

The findings of this study are broken down into three major themes. The first theme is cultural stigma surrounding mental health. The second theme is religious background impacting sexuality expression. The third theme is conservative, cultural norms impacting gender expression.

Cultural Stigma on Mental Health

As mentioned earlier, Filipinos are an “invisible minority” in regards to mental health. Many Filipinos face a lack of mental health accessibility and conversations within their household and community, primarily due to the stigma that reinforces the fact that mental health is “taboo.” Alex, a 20-year-old nonbinary Filipina lesbian, recalled a specific instance where opening up about their mental health had strained their familial relationship,

“It was weird. I felt like I couldn’t really tell them (parents) stuff. Because I never felt like I could for a long time...I remember vividly when I was in elementary school, I was having a really bad panic attack, and I was feeling really depressed and really low. And my mom got mad at me for crashing out, basically. She’s like, ‘Oh, you think you have depression? I have depression. You don’t know what it’s like.’ They were very oddly comparative about how they felt, which was what kind of strained my relationship with them too, because obviously family’s really important within our culture...It’s family or nothing kind of deal. But also it’s like... How can I believe that when my family isn’t there for me when I need that? Especially because the rare occasions I would express it to them, it wasn’t really validated. They were just like, ‘Just pray on it.’”

Additionally, Matilda, a 29-year-old female bisexual Filipina, elaborates further on mental health in her household and said,

“It didn’t exist in my household. It felt like nobody talked to each other and so nobody knew how to open up about their issues...”

Building off the conversation on mental health being a “taboo” subject, she adds,

“It pisses me off, first of all. Because it’s like, you have these expectations, but while having these expectations, you know life is gonna throw some shit at us, and what do you expect me to do when shit is hitting the fan? You want me to stay quiet? No, that’s crazy... You’re putting me at risk for more health issues. Anytime I found myself struggling...The automatic response from my mom and dad would be like, ‘Get over it...What you’re feeling does not exist. So just keep quiet, you don’t need to cry, stop crying. Why are you doing that?’“

Matilda’s own experiences with mental health and the lack of care accessibility earlier in her life ultimately inspired her to pursue graduate school in the mental health field. Through her experience in graduate school, she recounts,

“I chose to be in the mental health field...because I’m like, wow, I didn’t have the voice, now I want to be the voice for somebody, because this is so unfair... And then, being in my grad program, there’s not a lot of mental health professionals who are people of color, who are Filipino who know about this stuff. And so, in my grad program, that’s when things were coming out. I was able to share my story. I finally utilized my resources, saw a therapist on campus, and took advantage of that... That’s when I was really getting to move onto things, developing my relationship with mental health, while also training to be a mental health professional.”

Beyond the stigma, there also is the lack of cultural competency within therapy practices that can further push away Filipinos from seeking the proper help. Jessica, a 29-year-old queer

Filipina woman, mentions her parents' experiences with therapy and their distrust of the system. She said,

“I think that kind of shows their attitude of counseling or receiving help, that they didn't trust it. They didn't wanna partake in that... They did try the western counseling, and they didn't like it. They did marriage counseling, but it did not work because it was a western approach, and they (the counselor) didn't understand the nuances of our culture.”

Robyn, a 21-year-old Filipina lesbian, had mentioned how “because of family and how I was raised” had impacted her mental health. In regards to how she was raised that impacted her mental health, she said,

“It's the whole idea of... Your parents give their all, so you have to give it to them back. Just having that idea of having to give back and do your best so you can even do that, just that pressure to succeed because they push so much to succeed for you is really big in the culture.”

Participants expressed frustration that this silence only deepened their distress, making it harder to seek help. These testimonies highlight a cultural expectation of endurance and resilience in the face of mental health struggles. This need to express their feelings often coincides with religion and gender norms' impact on gender and sexuality identity development, as participants struggle with their mental health due to the lack of acceptance from their families because of their identities or because of religious upbringing.

Liza, a 18-year-old aromantic asexual (aroace) half-Filipina trans woman, mentioned how it was “more the reaction of others (family)” that caused her to struggle with her identity and mental health. In regards to some of those reactions, she states,

“My mom has some beliefs on trans people and puts lots of experiences under...’Oh, you’re trans, it must mean this.’ So, when I first came out as trans, she just went silent and left the room. Later, I asked her what that was about, and she was like, ‘So you’re trans, that must mean you hurt yourself.’ It just spiraled because I do struggle with mental health stuff and just her conflating my identity...It was really hard, it strained the relationship a lot.”

When it comes to mental health in her household, she’s faced similar experiences to previous participants, stating how mental health, “feels like something that it’s hard to talk about...It just isn’t talked about at all.” From cultural stigma to expectations, the Filipino household shapes the lack of conversations on mental health. Especially for queer Filipinas, it is vital to understand the key role cultural background plays on mental health.

Religion on Sexuality Expression

There is often a clash between one’s queer identity and their identity that is rooted in religious upbringing. Especially for Filipinos, a vast majority are predominantly raised into Christianity. Gabby, a 22-year-old pansexual agender half-Filipina, mentions how her religious background resulted in her questioning her identity, both her queer identity and her identity as a Christian woman. She states,

“Because I was raised religious, it was frowned upon to be seen as gay. So then, being gay caused this anxiety. Because I am failing in this expectation as an ideal Christian woman...There was a lot of, like, ‘something is wrong with me’ in that sense.”

Eleanor, a 38-year-old lesbian queer Filipina, shared a similar sentiment growing up within Catholicism as she states,

“It was a sin to be gay. It was totally a questioning period (grade school years) because then I felt like, ‘Why am I gay if I’m not supposed to be gay?’ That’s what it felt like to the core. And then with more study, it was like...the Bible was written a long time ago. These stories were interpreted and have probably been watered down over the years.”

Robyn was raised in a Catholic household and recounts her early days after coming out to her religious parents. She said,

“The only way to describe what I went through was conversion therapy... Both of my parents used to be missionaries, so they have a lot of connections in the church, one of them is a priest. They basically went to him about me and he gave them ideas about what to talk to me about to change my mind... There would be one-on-one sessions where my parents would just drop me off at the church with this priest and he would tell me all the ways I would go to hell.”

The interconnectedness of Catholicism and Filipino culture runs deep, and ultimately how religion has impacted Filipinos’ ideologies, as Jessica states,

“When I was young, I thought being Catholic and being Filipino were the same thing, or they went hand in hand. My parents and grandma were very devoted, strict Catholics, but also very punitive in a way. Like, ‘Oh, you’re doing this wrong, he’s gonna punish you,’ and stuff like that. I think that was more their doing, they weaponized the religion. I think it was definitely another factor of the distance I’ve had with the culture, and also they could be homophobic in their speech and a little racist.”

As being Filipino and being religious are “hand-in-hand,” the line between Filipino culture and religion blurs. With religion influencing much of the hateful ideologies surrounding queer

identities, the clash between one's Filipino identity, one's religious identity, and one's queer identity results in disconnection and fear.

Cultural Gender Norms and Expectations Enforced

Some conservative ideologies within a culture can continue to enforce cisheteronormativity, especially for those who try to express their identities beyond the gender binary. Quinn, a 20-year-old aromantic asexual (aroace) agender Filipina, mentions their lived experiences being agender within their Filipino family. They recount,

“I guess my parents, I don't think they would ever understand my gender identity as an agender person... If they heard me go by any pronouns or just pronouns other than she/her. Because, yeah, being trans or like identifying under the trans umbrella is very taboo towards them because they're like, ‘No, you are a girl.’ I was like, okay, okay. And then the same thing from, I guess, all of my Filipino family.”

Additionally, Alex mentions their experience being non-binary and how their family forced gender expectations onto them, which impacted how they wish to express themselves. They said,

“Definitely with the males in my family, they were like, ‘You’re the girl, you’re supposed to act this way, do this stuff.’ It puts a lot of pressure on you to kind of act perfect, I guess... I've gotten a lot of people, like my dad and other males, predominantly males, don't know why that is... Who are like, ‘You know you'll always be a woman, you'll always have a vagina and you look like a girl, you can’t really change that.’ It kind of just discouraged me from expressing myself.”

When it comes to expressing themselves, Alex states their gender expression “fluctuates” and is moment to moment for them, from either dressing masculine through “wearing a binder, tying

their hair up, or wearing baggy clothes” to dressing feminine through “wearing skirts.” However, there are cultural expectations placed upon daughters, especially the eldest daughters. Alex expands on this and how it has changed over time, stating,

“I’m also the oldest daughter, so it’s like because you’re the oldest daughter, you have to set an example and be very feminine. So growing up, I hated that. But as I’ve gotten older, that kind of standard isn’t really set on me anymore where, ‘Oh, you still have to be hyper-feminine. You still have to be this. Now I’m not getting that pressure, I feel free to express myself as I see fit.”

There are certain standards and expectations set for Filipina women, from gender roles in the household to the beauty standards living in the United States. Vivian, an 18-year-old Filipina lesbian woman, expressed the pressures of American and Filipino beauty standards. She states,

“In America and in Filipino culture, there’s this ideal to be... ‘white is the prettiest’ and you have to have straight hair, you have to be pale, you have to have a thin nose and all that stuff. Growing up with that as a beauty standard, it was hard for me to accept a lot of my features. I have curly hair and my cousin was not the nicest about that. And I would always get comments from my aunts, every Filipino aunt and uncle will say this, but it’s like, ‘Oh my god, you got so tan.’ And I grew up with my mom, which, bless her heart, I love my mom, but she’d be like, ‘When you watch TV, pinch your nose,’ so it’s thinner and stuff.”

Beyond the beauty standards, Robyn expresses her frustrations to the gendered expectations she’s faced, as someone who prefers to present more masculine. She states,

“I didn’t like being feminine growing up. Obviously, women already have a standard that we have to, unfortunately, live up to. It’s so stupid—the way we have to dress, the way we

have to be calm and all this stuff. And the stupid double standard of being a woman along with the fact that I don't act like a 'regular woman' is definitely a blow to the face.”

Matilda also adds on the gendered expectations she's experienced within her Filipino household, in which she states,

“You're expected to follow all the rules. That is insane to me! I gotta be perfect, I gotta get good grades, and then you expect me to be the best... While also having this expectation of me getting married at a certain age, because you, mom and dad, got married at a certain age. You're expecting me to make a certain amount of money to provide for who? Me, my family, and also y'all (parents) because you're aging... On top of that, you gotta do the cooking, you gotta do the cleaning, you gotta still work a full-time job. Why? Why are you putting this much pressure on me and my sister, but then when we look at brothers over here. You didn't yell at them that much, there weren't that many expectations.

These gender norms place participants in strict, rigid boxes of what being a woman is meant to look like. By doing so, the gender binary continues to be enforced, preventing participants from being able to express themselves wholly and authentically.

Quotes of Resilience

Despite the negative experiences, rejection, or stigma that queer Filipina women and queer nonbinary Filipinas experience, they continue to be resilient and remain true to who they are. To close the interview, the final question asked was, “Is there anything you wish you could tell your younger self or to other queer Filipina women / queer nonbinary Filipinas?” Alex had answered,

“In general, you aren't alone. There are probably other people who are going through something similar and who can tell you that things are gonna turn out okay, even though it doesn't really seem like it. Because I feel like I probably would have needed to hear that. You know, you're not alone in feeling... There's so many of us who feel like shit because we're in this community, but you just gotta keep on going. And you'll find those people.”

Matilda, reflecting on both her younger self and to the wider audience of queer Filipinos, stated,

“Be yourself, girl. If you feel a certain type of way, say it. You don't even have to say it, write it down. You don't have the words for it? Draw it out. Dance it out. You do whatever you need to do to express yourself. I just need you to let whatever it is out. I don't want you to hold anything in. And I'm talking about queer individuals, queer Filipinos, everybody. Let it out. Be authentic, whatever authentic means to you, do it, because you deserve the space.”

Through her lived experiences and navigating her identities, Liza said,

“Despite what some people may say about you, you always deserve the kindness and respect that you try to give others. Vocalize your feelings and not just bottle them within. Find a community of safe people. I feel like being a queer Filipina has allowed me to experience life much more fully and beautifully than I would have if I didn't, if I wasn't queer or Filipina.”

On representation and the existence of genderqueer people of color and Filipinos, Quinn said,

“It's okay to be loud, it's okay to be loud about who you are, who you want to be, your own identity. Genderqueer POC (people of color) exist, genderqueer Filipinos exist, it's just... we don't have that representation in media. Be proud in your own identity. Learn

about. your culture, learn about how Filipino culture informs how you think your own identity, how you move throughout the world, because that's important.”

In the face of the hardships they had shared and experienced, the participants had left words of hope, encouragement, and pride for their identities and for their community of queer Filipinas. In a world where representation for the community is lacking and queer voices are being censored, voices of resilience and hope for the community are essential in understanding that nobody is ever alone in their struggles.

Discussion

Through utilizing an intersectional framework, the results highlight the intersecting roles of race, gender, and sexuality and how they shape the distinct lived experiences of queer Filipinas. For all participants, their Filipino culture shaped their experiences when it came to mental health, their identities, and their relationships. In regards to the cultural stigma, the lack of mental health conversations and the idea that it “doesn’t exist” in households often results in further isolation in mental health struggles, leading to the inability to express these struggles to family. The testimonies from the participants reflect a larger issue in Filipino culture where mental health struggles are often minimized and/or spiritualized (e.g. telling someone to “pray on it” when they express struggles) rather than acknowledged. Cultural values, such as *utang na loob* (debt of the inner soul) and *hiya* (shame), also played a key role in impacting mental health. One participant stated how the pressure of *utang na loob* (“Your parents give their all, so you have to give it to them back.”) and being raised with those values placed much pressure on her and impacted her mental health. Similar to previous studies’ findings, *utang na loob* impacts mental health and well-being due to the indebtedness being internalized (Dizon et al., 2025). When it came to help-seeking for some participants and their families, they were often turned

away from the lack of cultural competency in therapy as it highlights a much more western approach to treatment (Koç & Kafa, 2018). As many Filipinos are often hesitant to seek treatment because of the stigma, being faced with even more barriers in help-seeking such as the lack of cultural competency can further push Filipinos away from getting the proper mental health care they need.

Participants' mental health is often further impacted because of their gender and sexuality, as they experienced a disconnect between the religious identity many Filipinos are raised with and their queer identities they discover and navigate. Much of the Filipino identity is rooted in religion as three quarters of the Filipino American population are Christian (Pew Research, 2023). One participant mentioned how "being Catholic and being Filipino were the same thing, or they went hand in hand," showcasing the deep-seated role religion has on Filipino culture and in Filipino family life, similar to Ocampo's (2016) findings. Religion often influences hateful ideologies surrounding queerness, such as Ochoa and colleagues' (2016) findings on Filipinos' negative attitudes towards same sex marriage stemming from religious text. These hateful ideologies manifest in more extreme ways, such as conversion therapy, in which one participant elaborates their experience going through conversion therapy. Ultimately, the conversion therapy did not have an effect on the participant as conversion therapy has been disproven multiple times through the lack of change in sexual orientation and methodological limitations surrounding success claims (Dehlin et al., 2015, Przeworski et al., 2021). The impact religion has on sexuality and identity development ties back to mental health, with participants expressing their anxiety or confusion surrounding their identity.

On gender norms, Filipina Americans often face a double standard that scrutinizes their expression and behavior when it goes beyond what is deemed as a "regular woman." Most

participants were raised in households where they were often policed on gender expression, despite some participants identifying as nonbinary. These strict expectations on how participants could express themselves, such as eldest daughters being raised to be “hyper-feminine” and beauty standards that are rooted in Eurocentric white features, often lead to participants being unable to express themselves. Gender expression manifests itself in a variety of ways for participants, whether it is through changing their hair or changing the clothes they wear. Oftentimes, this change goes against much of society’s set norms when it comes to gender expression between men and women, as the norms are meant to further enforce a clear gender binary and difference between men and women (e.g. women are meant to wear dresses while men wear suits). On beauty standards, one participant emphasized how “white is the prettiest” in American and Filipino cultures, showcasing the deeprooted colorism in Filipino culture (Benavidez-Walsh et al., 2025). In addition to expression, participants expressed their frustration with behavioral, gendered expectations they are meant to fulfill, such as prioritizing and taking care of the family. As one participant mentioned having to worry about “getting married, following all the rules, getting good grades, and making a certain amount of money,” they also mentioned how their brother was rarely faced with similar pressing expectations. The lack of demands for the men in Filipino households ties back to the concepts of *machismo* and *marianismo*, showcasing the gender inequalities when it comes to the roles played at home and the burden placed on daughters to fulfill most of the household roles (Nadal, 2020., Maramba, 2008., Heras, 2007).

Although the present study is vital in shedding light on the lived experiences of queer Filipina women and queer nonbinary Filipinas, there are some limitations that must be identified. First, the sample is composed of a small number of participants ($N=9$) that vary in their age

ranges (18-38), thus the findings do not wholly encapsulate the generalizable lived experiences of queer Filipinas within the United States. Furthermore, there is a geographic limitation as most participants live within California, with one participant living in Oregon. Future directions for research can expand beyond the West Coast and sample a larger population. Despite the limitations, the present study's results contribute to the current body of knowledge on LGBTQ Filipinos in the United States.

Conclusion

As previous research on LGBTQ Filipinos highlights primarily the male experience and masculinity, the current study expands further to understand the intersectional factors that impact the lived experiences of queer Filipina women and queer nonbinary Filipinas. Queer Filipinas may face different systems of oppression and discrimination due to their racialized gender compared to their male or white counterparts. Results highlight these different systems experienced through the three major aspects of queer Filipinas' backgrounds: cultural stigma on mental health, religion on sexuality, and cultural gender norms. However, despite the hardships participants face in navigating religion, familial expectations, cultural norms, and more, queer Filipinas remain resilient in the face of those hardships and continue to remain true to their identities. In conclusion, it is vital to utilize an intersectional framework to understand the lived experiences of queer Filipinas as they face intersections of their race, gender, and sexuality.

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