
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Demystifying Veiled Narratives of Transactional Same-Sex Sexual Engagement Among Young Adults: Textural and Structural Dimensions

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ABSTRACT

A limited corpus of phenomenological studies has explicitly examined both the textural and structural dimensions of transactional same-sex sexual engagement among young adults. The absence of in-depth qualitative inquiry creates a gap in understanding the essence of participants' lived experiences, particularly in relation to the formation of meanings, internal processes, and contextual influences that shape their involvement. Thus, this study sought to address this gap by demystifying the veiled narratives surrounding transactional same-sex sexual engagement among young adults with the aim of uncovering the essential structures and textures of their lived experiences. Twenty five participants within the age of 18-24 from the southern part of Negros Island Region were selected through snowball for individual in-depth interview. Results and findings belied poverty as the initial force influencing young adults' engagement in same-sex sexual activities. Rather, participation in transactional same-sex sexual engagement was found to be developed as a gradual process initiated by a combination of epistemic curiosity and peer influence, which subsequently became internalized as a compulsive tendency for a financially motivated behavior rooted in transactional sexual interactions. Participants articulated cognitive dissonance or conflicting perceptions, recognizing both the benefits and the emotional or social costs associated with their involvement. These included feelings of internal tension, concealment, and occasional stigma, juxtaposed with the perceived autonomy and financial gain derived from such activities. However, feelings of guilt associated with engagement in sexual encounters were gradually diminished through continued participation and repeated exposure. Overall, the participants' transactional sex encounters reflected a complex interplay of necessity, adaptation, self-perception, and meaning-making within their lived experiences.

KEYWORDS

Transactional Same-Sex Sexual Engagement, young adults, phenomenology, Negros Island Region, Philippines

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1. Introduction

Young men are more of greater risk to engage in transactional sex compared to older ones (Chatterji et al., 2005). Transactional sex, defined as the non-commercial exchange of sexual services for money, goods, or other valuable items (Stoebenau et al., 2016), has been linked to negative health outcomes, including higher risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections (Sujan, 2024 ;). The World Health Organization (2025) reported that since the start of the HIV epidemic, about 91.4 million people have been already infected, and around 44.1 million have died from HIV-related causes. In the shortfall of funding, the UNAIDS (2025) predicted as many as six million more HIV infections and an additional four million AIDS-related deaths by 2029. According to UNAIDS and WHO (2025) the Philippines continues to record the fastest-rising HIV incidence in the Asia-Pacific region. In 2024, an average of at least 57 Filipinos were diagnosed with HIV each day, with new cases increasing by approximately 550%, from 4,400 reported cases in 2010 to 29,600 in 2024.

Transactional sex has long been examined within heterosexual contexts, often linked to economic deprivation, survival strategies, and gendered power relations (Mesko, 2025; Sujan, et al., 2024; Salazar, et al., 2022). However, limited scholarly attention has been

devoted to transactional same-sex sexual engagement, particularly among young adults. Existing literature tends to generalize motivations as primarily economic (Afolaranmi et al., 2025; Freedman et al., 2021), overlooking the nuanced interplay of psychosocial, cultural, and experiential factors.

Within the Philippine context, discussions surrounding same-sex sexual behavior remain shaped by conservative norms, stigma, and limited open discourse. This creates a gap in understanding the lived realities of individuals engaged in transactional same-sex encounters. More specifically, phenomenological dimensions such as meaning-making, internal conflicts, and experiential structures, remain underexplored.

This study addresses the aforementioned gap by employing a phenomenological approach to examine the lived experiences of young adults engaged in transactional same-sex sexual activities in the southern part of the Negros Island Region. It aimed to uncover both the textural (what is experienced) and structural (how it is experienced) dimensions of their engagement.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a transcendental phenomenological approach anchored in the tradition established by Edmund Husserl (1859–1938) (Creswell, 2007). The phenomenological method seeks to develop a deeper understanding of the meanings behind individuals' everyday experiences (Shosha, 2012; Polit & Beck, 2008) by focusing on how people consciously perceive and interpret a given phenomenon (Shosha, 2012; Polifroni & Welch, 1999). The approach required the use of bracketing, a process in which the researcher sets aside personal biases, assumptions, and prior experiences related to the phenomenon to enhance the study's validity (Chan et al., 2013). This practice enabled a more in-depth and unbiased understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007; Merleau-Ponty, 1956). By approaching participants' lived experiences with a sense of openness and "newness," the researcher was able to generate rich and detailed descriptions (Creswell, 2007).

2.2 Research Participants

The study involved twenty-five (25) participants who were young adults engaged in or with lived experiences related to transactional same-sex sexual engagement. Young adults in this study, were those males aging 18 to 24. Participants were drawn from various areas across the cities and municipalities of the southern part of Negros Island Region, ensuring a broad representation of both urban and rural contexts. This distribution allowed the study to capture diverse perspectives shaped by differing social, cultural, and economic environments within the region. Taking into cognizance that the participants are part of a sensitive population that may not be easily identified through conventional sampling methods, the researcher utilized snowball technique in the selection.

2.3 Research Instrument

A semi-structured interview guide was used to gather data. This guide underwent review and validation by the research and ethics committee to ensure the instrument's reliability. To encourage participants to share more detailed, nuanced, and context-rich responses, open-ended questions were employed. This approach allowed the researcher to remain flexible and, when necessary, develop follow-up questions during the interview process. Additionally, interviews were conducted using the participants' mother tongue (*Bisaya/Cebuano/Ilonggo*) or a combination of local dialect and English, enabling them to express their thoughts more clearly and comprehensively, which contributed to the collection of higher-quality data.

2.4 Data Gathering Procedure

Following the validation and approval of the interview guide by the Ethics Committee, and before the start of data collection, the researcher sent formal request letters to the identified local chief executives where the study participants were residing. These letters outlined the purpose of the research, the procedures for data collection, and its significance. An informed consent form was also attached, clearly stating the required participants' volition. Subsequently, rather than sending formal invitation letters, the researcher directly approached the participants and extended a verbal invitation to take part in the in-depth interview. This method is deemed necessary to maintain anonymity of participants which might be compromised with formal hard-copy letters.

After the participants agreed, they were given the freedom to select their preferred date, time, and venue for the interview. Prior to the conduct of the face-to-face in-depth interviews, each informant was required to sign the informed consent form. The duration of each interviews varied dependent on the participants' willingness to share information. Follow-up or probing questions were used to clarify responses and encourage participants to elaborate on their experiences, allowing for richer and more detailed narratives. All interviews were audio-recorded, and the files were securely stored in a Google Drive account accessible only by the researcher. To ensure confidentiality and protect participants' identities, the researcher personally handled the transcription of all recordings. Transcriptions were done using headphones in a private setting to prevent others from overhearing the content.

Additionally, all transcripts excluded any identifying information, with codes, aliases, and pseudonyms used in place of real names. The audio recordings and transcripts of interviews were deleted thereafter.

2.5 Data Analysis

To analyze the data, the study employed Colaizzi's (1978) method. The process began with horizontalization, wherein the researcher carefully reviewed all transcripts and identified significant statements that addressed the main research questions concerning the lived experiences related to the implementation of the peace and order program. Next, meanings were formulated from each of the extracted statements. These were restated in the third person to provide interpretive insights into the participants' responses. In the third stage, themes were developed from the formulated meanings. Subsequently, the researcher described the overall components of the lived experiences under investigation. This was followed by the development of a composite description that captured the essence of the participants' lived experiences regarding the implementation of the peace and order program. Throughout the analysis, the researcher also referred to field notes to support and enrich the interpretation of the data. Furthermore, the findings were shared with the participants to ensure accuracy and to further validate the results of the study.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

Throughout all phases of the study, the researcher adhered to the core ethical principles of beneficence, non-maleficence, justice, and autonomy. In terms of beneficence, the researcher ensured the protection of participants' rights, particularly their right to be free from discomfort and from any form of exploitation (Johansen et al., 2008). Moreover, the study was designed to contribute meaningful and evidence-based insights that could inform potential improvements in the peace and order program. To uphold the principle of non-maleficence, the researcher exercised utmost care to prevent any form of harm, whether physical, emotional, or psychological, and avoided any actions that could lead to the degradation of participants. In addition, the principle of justice was observed by ensuring equitable and unbiased treatment of all participants, regardless of their affiliations or backgrounds. Finally, the researcher consistently upheld the principle of autonomy by providing participants with comprehensive informed consent forms that clearly outlined all relevant details of the study, enabling them to make well-informed decisions regarding their participation. Participants' rights to decline or withdraw from the study were fully respected without any form of coercion or consequence.

3. Results and Discussions

3.1 Textural Description of the Experience

Textural description refers to a rich, detailed account of what the young adults (18-24 years old) experienced in relation to same-sex sexual engagement. This involves describing the participants' actual lived realities, their actions, thoughts, emotions, and encounters. It captures their firsthand narratives, such as how they entered these engagements, the nature of their interactions, the motivations behind their involvement, and the feelings or meanings they associate with these experiences. It emphasizes depth and detail, illustrating the complexity of their lived situations within their social and personal contexts. Textural descriptions of the experience include synergy between peer influence and epistemic curiosity, incentive-driven participation, cognitive dissonance, and diminished emotional strains through recurrent experiences.

3.1.1 Synergy Between Peer Influence and Epistemic Curiosity

Synergy Between Peer Influence and Epistemic Curiosity refers to the combined and mutually reinforcing contribution of social relationships (peer influence) and desire to explore or understand new experiences (epistemic curiosity) in shaping behavior. In this study, the findings revealed that engagement on transactional same-sex sexual activities were not primarily born out of economic factor but rather sprouted from the interplay between the social pressure, encouragement, or modeling provided by friends or acquaintances that can introduce an individual to new behaviors or normalize certain actions, and the participants' intrinsic motivation to seek out new knowledge, experiences, or sensations to reduce uncertainty and gain understanding. For instance, Participant 1, who belonged to a middle-class family and was enrolled in a private tertiary institution, disclosed,

(Well, we are not wealthy sir, but we are also not poor. We are doing fine sir... My parents were able to support my college education. It's just that I did it for fun, like an adventure with my barkadas. It all started when my friends talked about it. Most of my friends were doing it. They have contact with gays. I got curious because they seemed very happy talking about it and everyone in the group seemed open about it also, so I wanted to know what it feels like too. My friends kept telling me to do it. At first, I was hesitant until my curiosity kicked in. That's it. I was still young during that time). (Participant 1)

In addition, Participant 5 who was also enrolled in college, confessed,

(Poverty was not actually the reason sir. That's true.. I still remember that my friends introduced me to a certain gay while we were in a disco. He promised to give me a pair of basketball shoes if I agreed to have sexual activity with him. Because of my inexperience, I

initially refused as I could not accept it. However, my friends kept pushing me, telling me it was a test of whether I was a 'real man.' I just laughed it off until they arranged a meeting place for me and the gay. Out of curiosity, I eventually gave in. It started as something done for fun, but later it became a habit). (Participant 5)

Likewise, Participant 11 also believed that curiosity and peer pressure were the fundamental factors that caused him to engage into transactional sexual activity with the same gender. He shared,

(I was just treating it as an experiment. It was just something we were doing for fun with the group of friends. Yes... We actually enjoyed it because most gays gave us 500 to 1,000 pesos after the sexual activity. Then we used it to buy snacks and to have a little drinking session. It was really just for fun. One positive aspect is that, when we get older, we'd already have an idea of what it felt like.) (Participant 11)

Peer influence and epistemic curiosity were also mentioned in the responses of other participants. Participants 2, 3, 15, and 16 dubbed transactional same-sex sexual engagement as "*resulta sa binarkada*" (result of peer influence) while Participants 9, 10, 14, and 24 called it "*pang experience lang*" (just to have experience). Moreover, in this study it was unveiled that when these two forces interact (curiosity and peer pressure), they do not actually operate independently. Instead, they strengthen one another. Peer influence can trigger curiosity by exposing individuals to unfamiliar behaviors, while curiosity can make individuals more receptive to peer suggestions and experimentation. For example, Participant 8 stated,

(I had sexual engagement with gays because of my friends. It would have been fine. At first, I did not do it. But with the continued encouragement of my friends, I ended up getting curious. So I eventually went for it and did it too.) (Participant 8)

On the other hand, this is also true with Participant 13. He confessed, "*I got curious, and with my mischievous friends around, it only made things worse. I ended up getting tempted at that time*". Furthermore, other participants (4, 9, 20, 24, 25) who were also influenced by peers, labelled transactional sexual encounters as "*para dili ma-ignorante*" (just not to be ignorant).

Empirical studies blamed economic factor as the primary driver of transactional sex (Afolaranmi et al., 2025; Causevic et al., 2022 ; Freedman et al., 2021 ; Ogunbajo et al., 2021). However, the findings of this study challenge the commonly held assumption that economic hardship is the first driver of transactional sex specifically among young adults. Contrary to expectations, economic factors did not emerge as the initial force in participants' involvement in transactional sexual relationships. This suggests that financial need alone may not sufficiently explain engagement in such behaviors, pointing instead to the influence of other underlying factors. A closer examination of the data indicates that psychosocial and contextual influences such as peer pressure and curiosity play a more significant role than direct economic necessity. Participants' narratives often reflected decisions shaped by social dynamics and personal exploration rather than pure financial desperation. This implies that transactional sex, in this context, may be more complex and multidimensional than a simple economic exchange.

Based on the above findings, the synergy between peer influence and epistemic curiosity created a pathway where individuals are more likely to explore and eventually engage in new or unconventional experiences. The combination of social validation from peers and epistemic curiosity reduces hesitation and increases openness to participation (Avenido et al., 2017). Over time, repeated exposure within this social-cognitive dynamic may contribute to normalization of the behavior, as curiosity is gradually satisfied and peer reinforcement continues to validate the experience (Geraghty, 2023). Curiosity drives people to look for useful information and clear up uncertainty (Finegold & Bereby-Meyer, 2025). At the same time, it can also encourage sensation-seeking, the desire to pursue new and stimulating experiences (Zuckerman, 1994). On the other hand, peer pressure can be positive or negative. The circle of friends play a significant role in shaping young adults sexual behavior and choice of partners, often becoming deeply involved in their romantic relationships in ways that can have both beneficial and harmful effects (Lou, 2023). Theoretically, sexual behavioral risks is more likely to be prevalent in a setting where peers are deviants rather than those in a group of morally inclined (Folawumi, 2023 ; Gichane, 2020 ; Patton et al. 2014).

3.1.2 From Peer Pressure and Curiosity to Incentive-Driven Participation

Over time, the initial exposure of participants towards transactional same-sex sexual engagements shifted. What starts as experimentation or social influence developed into continued involvement that was shaped by incentives, such as money, gifts, or other material benefits. At this stage, participation was no longer mainly driven by epistemic curiosity or peer influence but by perceived rewards or gains. After initial involvement, repeated exposure to the phenomenon begun to reshape participants' perceptions. The experience was reported to be normalized within the participants' personal understanding. For instance, Participant 8 admitted,

(At first, it was just out of curiosity. But imagine, sir, I was given 5,000 pesos by that gay individual the first time we had sex. He was rich sir... I somehow got tempted to continue because the amount was quite big. My parents were puzzled where I got the money. But I did not tell them. I used the money for betting when I played basketbal. That gay was also kind because he gave gifts to me during holidays, and he would often buy me clothes.) (Participant 8)

Participant 17 after being asked about his repeated engagements with transactional same-sex sexual activities, replied,

(The gay was rich. Most of his siblings were in abroad...he was also a retiree. What was supposed to be just an experience eventually became something I was also pressured into continuing because he bought me a motorcycle. Before that gay passed away, since he was a retired government employee, he actually bought me two motorcycles. But he died due to illness.) (Participant 17)

On the other hand, Participant 20 who was also in the same situation, mentioned,

(I noticed that during his dayoff, he would asked me to go out with him. Then he would request that we go to a place where no one could see us, and he would give me money afterward. Many times sir.. I eventually agreed because it was money. But we didn't have a relationship. It was just for fun.) (Participant 20)

All other remaining participants pointed incentives as a factor for the repeated transactional same-sex sexual engagements. This results confirmed existing literatures (Bilali & Santos, 2025 ; Folawumi, 2023 ; Duby et al., 2021 ; UNAIDS, 2018). Incentives were seen not just occasional motivators but played a significant role in sustaining the sexual behavior over time. This aligns with Skinner`s (1937) Reinforcement Theory, where repeated exposure to rewards strengthens the likelihood of repeating the behavior. This means that actions that lead to rewarding or favorable results tend to be repeated, whereas actions that result in unfavorable or adverse consequences are less likely to occur again (Skinner, 1937). When individuals perceive transactional sex as a viable means of accessing desired goods, the behavior may shift from being situational or experimental to patterned and habitual. For instance, in the study of Bilali and Santos (2025), they found out that financial rewards, including support for college tuition, strongly influenced individuals' willingness to participate in more explicit activities, such as intimate physical contact or sexual relations with a partner. This is also true in the investigation of Folawumi (2023), Gichane (2020), Choudhry (2014), and others.

In addition, beyond immediate economic relief, incentives also contribute to the psychological and social framing of transactional sex as a mutualism relationship rather than a purely sexual act. Over time, repeated exchanges can create expectations of reciprocity, dependency, or routine provision of benefits, which further sustains engagement (Duby et al., 2021). Thus, monetary and incentive-based exchanges did not initiate participation but structurally embed individuals within repeated cycles of transactional sex by linking consumption desires, and relational dynamics into a repeated pattern of exchange (Stoebenau, 2011).

3.1.3 Cognitive Dissonance

In this study, participants articulated cognitive dissonance or conflicting perceptions, recognizing both the benefits and the emotional or social costs associated with their involvement. These included feelings of internal tension, concealment, and occasional stigma, juxtaposed with the perceived autonomy and financial gain derived from such activities. For example, coming from a religious school, Participant 7 believed that transactional same-sex sexual interactions were morally questionable, yet still engage in it to align himself with the peers.

(At first, I got a lot of discomforts. I kept thinking about it.. What if my family knows about it?...Well, this is just something I got into with my group of friends. There's no law in the Philippines that makes this illegal... Right sir? I know it's wrong, but it's really just for fun with my friends. It's not like I did it every day.) (Participant 7)

Likewise, Participant 8 admitted to have experienced internal tensions towards transactional same-sex sexual engagements. He mentioned,

(There was a time when I really did not want to have sex with the gay who was a professional person. My brain tells me that it is wrong. We are in the same Barangay... But he offered me one thousand pesos, so I eventually agreed because it would have been a waste to turn down the money.) (Participant 8)

On the other hand, Participant 17 who was given two units of motorcycles, recounted,

(I did feel guilty about it. But I would feel more bad if I ignore that gay person who already had given me two units of motorcycles, not including the money he gave to me during December.) (Participant 17)

Furthermore, the findings revealed that many young adults deliberately concealed their involvement in transactional same-sex sexual engagements with gays from their families due to fear of rejection, shame, discrimination, and possible damage to family relationships. Participants described using secrecy as a coping mechanism to protect both their personal identity and their family's perception of them, especially within conservative social environments where same-sex relations are heavily stigmatized. Some respondents avoided discussing their sources of money and employed fabricated stories to explain gifts and financial support received from gay partners. The concealment process, however, resulted in emotional distress and constant fear of being discovered, showing how stigma and family expectations strongly influenced their decisions to hide their experiences. Participant 14 shared,

(I was really nervous, sir. It's not easy... At school, I always keep it as a secret...I got used to making up stories just to get away with it and to keep my parents from finding out. I would pretend that I earned money from winning cockfights, but in reality, the money was given to me by a gay person.) (Participant 14)

In addition, Participant 20 admitted,

(That's true sir... My friends would keep saying that I was into gays. They would constantly tease and joke about me. Sometimes, my father could overhear them and asked if it was true. I would always deny it because I did not want to get scolded. My father told me not to bring shame to the family.) (Participant 20)

Moreover, Participant 19 stated,

(My father was kind sir.. But my mother was the strict one. Yes sir.. I was more afraid of my mother than my father. My mother was also very active in the church, which is why I kept denying it.) (Participant 19)

Other participants such as 1, 2, 13, 15, 16, 23, and 25, made "personal savings" as an alibi to conceal the act, while participants 4, 7, 18, 24, and 25 pointed "income from informal jobs." On the other hand, other participants who were caught resorted to promises of disengagement especially within familial context. Denial and avoidance were seen to be the most common strategies to cope up with the social stigmatization. Although participants engaged in sexual activities with gay individuals in exchange for money, gifts, financial assistance, or material support, all of them continued to identify themselves as heterosexual and denied emotional or romantic attraction toward their same-sex partners.

Cognitive dissonance is a psychological concept that refers to the mental discomfort a person experiences when they hold two or more conflicting beliefs, values, or attitudes, or when their behavior does not align with their beliefs (Festinger, 1959). This tension creates a sense of unease, which individuals are motivated to reduce in order to restore internal consistency (Varlaro, 2025). To cope with this discomfort, people may adjust their beliefs, justify their actions, or downplay the inconsistency. This qualitative findings support existing literatures. Although majority of empirical studies focused on transactional opposite-sex sexual activities (Ayodele et al., 2026 ; Greer et al., 2025 ; Konlan & Ganle, 2025 ; Hansen & Johansson, 2022), the result of this investigation which concentrated on same-sex participants, was found to be in congruent with other international studies. The duality created a fragmented self-perception, where individuals viewed their actions as both justified and unacceptable at the same time. This contradiction is deemed to be the genesis of their emotional distress. Filipino families are known to be closely knit (Cueno & Cueno, 2025), thus, how a member exhibit his behavior is presumed to affect the overall reputation of the family (Avenido, 2017). This culture buffers against deviances and created a subconscious awareness as to how one defines an act as moral or immoral. As a result, Filipino family values, especially if strong, and religious influences often shape how young individuals judge behaviors, including sexuality and transactional relationships, leading them to experience guilt, fear, or secrecy when engaging in acts that conflict with cultural expectations (Avenido, 2017). When cognitive dissonance occurs out from the performance of a culturally defined wrongful act, Festinger (1959) argued that it is counteracted by highlighting the benefits of the option while minimizing drawbacks. In addition, men's perceptions of whether transactional sex is acceptable are influenced more by their overall attitudes toward sexual behavior compared to women (Hansen & Johansson, 2022 ; Pulerwitz et al., 2022).

3.1.4 Diminished Emotional Strains Through Recurrent Experiences

The findings of the study indicate that diminished emotional strains of transactional same-sex sexual engagement among young adults occurs gradually through recurrent experiences. Repeated involvement in such exchanges appears to reduce psychological resistance and emotional discomfort over time, allowing participants to perceive the behavior as a manageable aspect of their lived experience rather than an extraordinary or morally conflicting act. This process is shaped by continuous exposure, familiarity with transactional arrangements, and the growing predictability of outcomes associated with each encounter.

Initially, participant 1 often described feelings of hesitation or guilt during his first engagement. However, as participation became more frequent, these emotional responses tended to mitigate, suggesting a gradual adaptation to the behavior. He shared,

(At first, I was very nervous sir because it was my first time. I hesitated... I was also afraid that I might be stigmatized later on. But there is a saying that if a mistake is done repeatedly, it eventually becomes normal.) (Participant 1)

On the other hand, Participant 6 mentioned,
(It was okay, sir... it just felt strange at first...That`s normal. We are humans. I agree, it seemed okay because others are doing it) (Participant 6)

Furthermore, Participant 25 also shared,

(At first, I kept refusing because I was afraid of being humiliated. The gay individual even knew my cousin, and they were close at that time. Then it happened that my friends kept pressuring me to try it, so I was really scared at first. But as time went on, it became different. Even though I still felt some guilt, it was no longer like before when I couldn't even go outside the house because I was so afraid.) (Participant 25)

All participants described repeated same-sex sexual encounters as contributing to its gradual reduction over time. However, normalization is not complete, as underlying feelings of guilt or fear of social judgment persisted, particularly in relation to family expectations and cultural or religious values. This shift reflects how repeated exposure can alter perception, making previously distressing or morally ambiguous actions appear more acceptable or less emotionally significant. In this context, transactional same-sex sexual engagement transitions from being perceived as deviant or highly controversial to being understood as a pragmatic or routine coping strategy for financial or material needs. On the other hand, the normalization process was also seen to be reinforced by cognitive adjustments. Participants tend to rationalize their continued involvement by emphasizing material wants, monetary benefits, or peer influence, which helped reduce internal tension and justify ongoing behavior. For instance Participant 17 (referring to the vehicle given to him) stated, *"I don't care what they say to me..at least I have motorcycles"*. In addition, Participant 18 mentioned, *"I'm not the only one who are doing it"*. While, Participant 20 stated, *"It is better than being involve with theft"*. Over time, this repeated justification contributes to the integration of the experience into the participants' behavioral routine, thereby weakening initial feelings of shame or discomfort.

Overall, the findings highlight that normalization through recurrent experiences is not merely a behavioral pattern but a psychological adaptation process (Geraghty, 2023). It reflects how repeated engagement can reshape attitudes, reduce emotional discomfort, and influence self-perception among young adults involved in transactional same-sex sexual activities. This underscores the importance of considering both the frequency of exposure and the socio-economic context when examining behavioral normalization in vulnerable populations (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2017). Furthermore, the study suggests that social and environmental factors play a significant role in reinforcing the process of emotional strain mitigation. Peer networks, financial dependency, and limited alternative opportunities contribute to the continuity of engagement, making repetition more likely and sustained (Folawumi, 2023 ; Gichane, 2020). At the contrary, social stereotyping hinders complete normalization of behavior (Goffman, 1963). As these experiences accumulate, they reshape how individuals interpret their actions, shifting from moral evaluation to practical reasoning. The study underscores the importance of examining not only the behavioral dimensions of transactional same-sex sexual engagement but also the evolving emotional responses and coping mechanisms that accompany sustained involvement among Filipino young adults.

3.2 Structural Description of the Experience

This emergent theme focuses on the contextual conditions and underlying structures that shape how transactional same-sex sexual engagements were experienced by the participants. In this study, it was found out that transactional same-sex sexual engagements among young adults emerged within contexts of nocturnal social lifestyle and relative deprivation.

3.2.1 Nocturnal Social Lifestyle

The study revealed that nocturnal social activities (such as nightlife environments like bars, discos, and late-night gatherings) provided opportunities for interaction between male young adults and gay individuals who may offer money or material support in exchange for sexual activities. These settings often involve less supervision, more anonymity, and increased social interaction, which facilitate transactional encounters. Participant 3 admitted,

(I met the gay at a disco. I usually go whenever there's a disco. I go with my friends to have drinking sessions at night. Of course, it's hot during daytime that`s why we go at night.) (Participant 3)

On the other hand, Participant 8 when asked the setting of the transactional same-sex sexual encounters, replied,

(Night time sir...I usually go with my friends in a bar located at the city..when we were already drunk, gays went to us. Most of them offered us more drinks. Then the gays touched our private parts.) (Participant 8)

Similarly, Participant 11 mentioned,

(For me, maybe I can also blame my lifestyle of going around the city with my friends at night. Drinking session at night is much better compared to daytime.) (Participant 11)

Other participants such as 1, 2, 23, 10, 13, 15, and 25 considered nocturnal activities as “*ideal time to relax.*” Furthermore, night activities according to participant 19 offered better chance of anonymity. He stated, “*identity is not easily divulge if it is dark.*” This is also true with other participants of the study (6, 7, 8, 16, 17, 21, 24). Participants described discos and nightlife venues as spaces where they commonly met potential partners, often driven by curiosity, leisure, and the desire for social belonging. The relaxed and highly social atmosphere during nighttime activities were reported to reduce inhibitions. On the other hand, 16 participants admitted to have transactional same-sex engagements with either active or retired gay teachers at least once while the remaining 9 participants reported to have it with other professionals.

This result indicate that nocturnal social lifestyle functioned not only as a recreational pattern but also as a social setting that facilitated same-sex sexual encounters and influenced the continuation of such behaviors. However, this result is not surprising as this was already written in various literatures. For instance, Goldenberg et al. (2008) employed a mixed method to investigate how significant are venue-based HIV risks among male clients. In their study, they found out that nightlife venues were high-risk environments because of several broader factors, including social expectations that encourage excessive alcohol consumption, financial exploitation by business owners, and weak implementation of sex work regulations within these establishments. Similarly, Methewos et al. (2024) cited attendance to night clubs to be associated with transactional sex. Men with hazardous drinking behaviors showed a greater likelihood of engaging in transactional sex (Magni et al., 2020). In some cases, repeated participation of young adults in nocturnal activities normalized same-sex interactions and created social networks where such engagements became more accessible and accepted. Young men are more of greater risk to engage in transactional sex compared to older ones (Chatterji et al., 2005).

3.2.2 Relative Deprivation

In this study, relative deprivation was revealed as a determinant of transactional same-sex sexual engagements. The findings further revealed that engagement in transactional sex was not solely rooted in absolute poverty, but also in participants’ perceptions of social inequality and their desire to attain lifestyles, material possessions, and social experiences comparable to their peers. Participants commonly expressed feelings of insecurity, exclusion, and inferiority whenever they compared themselves with friends and acquaintances who possessed branded items, financial resources, or the capacity to participate in leisure activities. These feelings of disadvantage motivated some participants to engage in transactional same-sex sexual activities as a means of acquiring money, social acceptance, and symbolic status.

(Sir, if you do not have money to pay when going out, you feel out of place in the group. That is why I agreed, because I also wanted to belong) (Participant 7)

(I needed shoes for my basketball and the gay individual gave it to me for free..it was free so I took it) (Participant 8)

(I was not really that poor sir... The money from gays was what helped me buy things.) (Participant 11)

Furthermore, participants felt deprived not because they entirely lack necessities, but because they perceive themselves as having less than those around them. For instance, Participant 1 who was enrolled in a private school mentioned, “*the money I got was used to pay to buy trendy shirts.*” Likewise, Participant 2 stated, “*gays gave 500 pesos at least..I used it to buy parts of my motorcycle*” Moreover, participants described experiences of being left behind, out of place, or unable to belong within their peer groups due to limited financial capability. Transactional same-sex sexual engagements among young adults, therefore became a strategy for reducing the perceived gap between themselves and their more financially capable peers. Such perceptions intensified their desire to obtain material goods and participate in social activities associated with youth culture, including nightlife, drinking sessions, and leisure outings. Participant 12 labeled transactional same-sex sexual engagement as “*a test of being a real man*” while Participant 23 called it “*keeping up with friends.*”

The findings also support criminological and sociological perspectives suggesting that relative deprivation may contribute to deviant or risky behaviors when individuals experience frustration, low self-worth, and pressure to achieve socially valued standards (Webber, 2022 ; Liu & Kaplan, 2000 ; Howard Greitemeyer & Sagioglou 2019 ; Brown, 2001). This further indicates that sexual-economic exchanges are often associated with aspirations for consumption, social mobility, and status acquisition rather than mere survival (Webber, 2022 ; Stoebenau et al., 2016). The participants' accounts reflected how consumer culture and peer comparison shaped their decisions to repeatedly engage in transactional same-sex sexual activities. While absolute deprivation, such as food insecurity and inadequate shelter, compels individuals to engage in transactional sex to meet basic survival needs (Afolaranmi et al., 2025; Causevic et al., 2022 ; Freedman et al., 2021 ; Ogunbajo et al., 2021), relative deprivation functions within contexts where individuals seek to enhance their social or economic standing (Liu & Kaplan, 2000). Although both forms of deprivation may simultaneously influence participation in transactional sex, relative deprivation emphasizes the role of perceived economic inequality and social comparison, rather than poverty alone, in motivating such engagements (Kyegombe et al., 2020). Relative deprivation means feeling disadvantaged when comparing oneself to others who appear to have better living conditions, resources, or opportunities (Smith & Huo, 2014). This perception can increase the desire to acquire money or material goods, which may influence decisions to engage in transactional sex. Material rewards such as branded clothing, gadgets, nightlife expenses, and financial assistance functioned as incentives that temporarily alleviated feelings of social disadvantage and exclusion. Therefore, young adults' participation in transactional sex is not always driven by extreme need or desperation but rather it may also stem from feelings of being deprived shaped by growing economic inequality and the increasing importance placed on material possessions and consumer lifestyles (Stoebenau et al., 2016). Hence, the findings suggest that transactional sexual engagements may be understood not only as economic acts, but also as socially driven responses to perceived inequality and unmet aspirations for social inclusion and status.

Although transactional same-sex sexual engagements are associated with Sexually Transmitted Disease (STD) and Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) (WHO, 2025 ; Sujun, 2024), only 4 participants admitted to have contracted with STD while the rest denied thereof. In addition, all participants reported using condoms inconsistently depending on its availability. The World Health Organization (2025) estimated that since the onset of the HIV epidemic, approximately 91.4 million individuals have acquired HIV, while around 44.1 million deaths have been attributed to HIV-related conditions. Amid ongoing funding shortages, UNAIDS (2025) projected that by 2029, an additional six million HIV infections and four million AIDS-related deaths could occur globally. Furthermore, reports from UNAIDS and the World Health Organization indicated that the Philippines remains the country with the fastest-growing HIV incidence in the Asia-Pacific region. In 2024 alone, at least 57 Filipinos were diagnosed with HIV daily on average, reflecting a 550% increase in new HIV cases, from 4,400 reported infections in 2010 to 29,600 in 2024.

5. Conclusion

Transactional same-sex sexual engagement among young adults was not initiated by poverty, but rather emerged through epistemic curiosity and peer influence, which later evolved into repeated financially motivated sexual interactions. As participants continued engaging in these encounters, the behavior became increasingly normalized and internalized within their everyday experiences. The study further highlighted the presence of cognitive dissonance among participants, as they simultaneously recognized the financial benefits and perceived sense of autonomy gained from transactional encounters while also experiencing emotional burdens such as guilt, concealment, and social stigma. Despite these internal conflicts, repeated participation appeared to reduce feelings of guilt over time, suggesting a process of adaptation and desensitization. Overall, transactional same-sex sexual engagement was understood as a multifaceted phenomenon shaped by social influence, economic motivations, personal meaning-making, and behavioral adaptation. The findings underscore the importance of examining transactional sexual practices beyond simplistic assumptions of poverty, recognizing instead the complex social and psychological processes that influence young adults' lived experiences and continued participation.

5. Study Limitations and Future Research

One limitation of this study is the relatively small number of participants, as the research only involved 25 young adults. Considering that the research design was qualitative in nature, the findings may not be generalizable to other populations or contexts. Furthermore, the study primarily relied on qualitative narratives, which focused on understanding the participants' lived experiences rather than establishing broader statistical relationships. Therefore, future quantitative studies involving Filipino young adults, with larger and more diverse samples are recommended to strengthen, validate, and further substantiate the findings of the present study.

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