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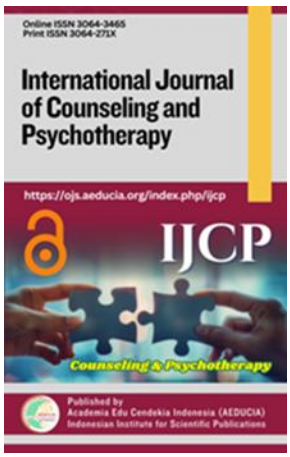

Barriers to Counseling: LGBTQ+ Students' Struggles in Accessing School Counseling Services in a Public School in Northwestern Philippines

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Barriers to Counseling: LGBTQ+ Students' Struggles in Accessing School Counseling Services in a Public School in Northwestern Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Background: Despite legislative mandates for safe educational environments, LGBTQ+ youth in rural Southeast Asia face persistent minority stress and institutional barriers that deter formal help-seeking, representing an urgent population and practical knowledge gap in current school counseling literature. **Objective:** This study aimed to critically explore the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ students in accessing school counseling services within a rural Philippine public secondary school. **Methods:** Employing a qualitative narrative inquiry design, semi-structured interviews were conducted remotely via Google Meet with ten purposively sampled LGBTQ+ senior high school students (Grades 11–12, aged 16–17) and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework. **Results:** Findings revealed that fears of confidentiality breaches, anticipated teacher bias, misgendering, and rigid uniform and haircut mandates severely diminished institutional trust, compelling marginalized learners to rely on peer alliances and digital subcultures as alternative coping mechanisms. **Conclusion:** Physical counseling offices do not guarantee emotional safety; guidance spaces remain precarious environments requiring a paradigm shift toward proactive, advocacy-based counseling models. **Originality/Value:** This study contributes to Guidance and Counseling and School Psychology by providing an empirically grounded framework on minority stress dynamics within an underrepresented provincial Southeast Asian context. The findings enrich existing empirical evidence and serve as a strategic benchmark for educational policymakers and school administrators to mandate practitioner cultural competence training, revise binary disciplinary codes, and institutionalize genderaffirming curriculum.

1. INTRODUCTION

School mental health support has emerged as a crucial global imperative, yet systemic inequities continue to marginalize vulnerable learners across diverse educational landscapes (An & Hai, 2024). LGBTQ+ youth face disproportionate vulnerabilities worldwide, as evidenced by Sharma & Subramanyam (2020) and Freire & Hurd (2023) who established that these students are significantly more susceptible to pervasive discrimination, social isolation, and chronic minority stress that severely impair both mental well-being and academic attainment. In Southeast Asian educational environments, particularly within provincial and rural communities in the Philippines, institutional silence and entrenched socio-cultural norms further exacerbate the vulnerability of sexual and gender minority learners (Pollachom et al., 2026). Addressing these pervasive disparities is essential, as the absence of inclusive school support systems compromises educational equity, psychological safety, and student development across international and national jurisdictions.

Professional counseling frameworks and national education mandates establish that school counseling servi-

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ces must function as equitable, confidential, and affirming sanctuaries for all students regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation (Guest et al., 2024; Luke et al., 2011). Guidance programs are professionally designed to uphold comprehensive ethical codes that guarantee unconditional positive regard, cultural responsiveness, and proactive advocacy against systemic injustice (Fleitas et al., 2022; Phan et al., 2013). According to Pinto & Blueford (2022), comprehensive counseling practices should systematically integrate diverse gender identities and sexual orientations into everyday educational processes to foster an empowering academic climate. In parallel, statutory frameworks such as the Anti-Bullying Act and the Safe Spaces Act in the Philippines mandate educational institutions to enforce proactive safeguards, ensuring that counselors and administrators cultivate an affirming, zero-tolerance atmosphere against prejudice and institutional discrimination.

Empirical realities in educational settings demonstrate a profound disconnect between statutory protections and the lived experiences of sexual minority learners. The 2024 Philippines National Survey on the Mental Health of LGBTQ+ Young People, conducted by The Trevor Project and the Psychological Association of the Philippines (Reyes & PAP LGBT Psychology SIG, 2024), revealed alarming rates of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation among LGBTQ+ youth, accompanied by widespread distrust regarding confidentiality and institutional stigma that actively deters them from seeking mental health assistance. Babaylanes further corroborate this systemic breakdown, and Save the Children Philippines (2025), who documented persistent obstacles in the localized implementation of gender responsive school policies, leaving students exposed to recurring harassment and marginalization. Qualitative findings by Abesamis (2023) demonstrated that systemic institutional discrimination and SOGIE-based harassment systematically erode student trust in school support mechanisms, highlighting an acute operational failure within academic guidance systems.

The evolving state of the art in counseling scholarship underscores the critical role of counselor competence, structural resources, and systemic barriers in shaping support outcomes. Early foundational research by Gonzalez (2016) highlighted how excessive caseloads, limited institutional resources, and administrative constraints severely restrict the capacity of counselors to deliver specialized individual care. Building upon systemic barriers, Springer (2024) applied the minority stress model to demonstrate how deeply rooted cultural biases and personal prejudices among practitioners perpetuate unequal treatment within therapeutic spaces. Concurrently, recent international findings by Silvestria et al. (2026) revealed that counselors with higher cultural competence provide substantially more affirming and supportive interventions, emphasizing the need for targeted practitioner education. Furthermore, Guest et al. (2024) observed that many counselors continue to report profound discomfort and uncertainty when navigating LGBTQ+ concerns, illustrating that without sustained professional training, counseling departments inadvertently reinforce the very marginalization they are tasked to alleviate.

The majority of existing studies regarding LGBTQ+ inclusive counseling, such as those conducted by Johns et al. (2019), Mann et al. (2023) and Zhange & Mohangi (2024), have predominantly focused on urban populations in Western educational jurisdictions where institutional infrastructure, specialized practitioner training, and legal protections are relatively well developed, while empirical attention toward LGBTQ+ students in rural and provincial public school settings remains severely limited. Given that LGBTQ+ students in provincial Philippine public schools encounter distinctive challenges shaped by localized socio-religious norms, rigid uniform mandates, scarce mental health infrastructure, and unique community dynamics, this study investigates whether the theoretical mechanisms of minority stress and institutional support operate differently within this specific, underrepresented demographic.

Addressing this population gap is urgent because the continued omission of rural Philippine school dynamics leaves vulnerable youth without contextually relevant psychological interventions, thereby perpetuating high psychological distress and institutional attrition. To address this deficiency, this study offers an innovative conceptual approach by integrating queer psychology and critical theory through the thematic analysis framework developed by Braun & Clarke (2006) to analyze the unvarnished lived experiences of rural learners. The novelty of this study lies in moving beyond abstract Western-centric formulations, providing empirically grounded insights into how localized disciplinary codes, misgendering, and practitioner readiness intersect in daily academic life. Consequently, this inquiry provides significant practical and theoretical contributions that can inform culturally responsive counselor training, bridge policy implementation deficits, and transform school guidance offices into genuinely equitable spaces of empowerment.

This study aims to critically explore and understand the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ students in accessing school counseling services within a rural Philippine public school setting. Specifically, this research examines how institutional school policies, rigid uniform regulations, social stigma, and counselor preparedness influence students' willingness to seek mental health assistance. Additionally, it investigates the coping mechanisms and peer networks that students rely on when navigating institutional barriers, while identifying actionable advocacy strategies to create a culturally affirming, responsive, and socially just school counseling environment.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Research Design

This study used a qualitative research design, combining narrative inquiry with thematic analysis. This approach was chosen because it allows for a closer and more detailed understanding of the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ students, particularly how identity, discrimination, and institutional barriers shape their access to school counseling services. Through narrative inquiry, participants were given the space to share their experiences in their own words and in a way that reflects how they personally make sense of what they have gone through. The data were then examined using thematic analysis, following Braun & Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework, which helped organize and identify common patterns and themes across their accounts. This design was considered appropriate for the study since the goal was not to measure or quantify experiences, but to understand their depth and complexity better. In doing so, it ensures that the voices of LGBTQ+ students are represented in a way that is both meaningful and grounded in their own lived realities.

2.2 Participant

The study was carried out in a public secondary school in Northwestern Philippines. This setting was chosen because it reflects a typical provincial school environment where cultural expectations and everyday school practices can strongly shape how counseling services are accessed and experienced. Data gathering was done during a school break, when students were more available and less pressed by academic requirements. This made it easier to arrange interviews and also gave participants more space to speak freely without the immediate pressures of classes or schoolwork. Both the setting and timing played an important role in shaping the study, as they provided a more natural picture of how LGBTQ+ students navigate counseling services in a real school context, particularly in a provincial public-school environment.

The study focused on LGBTQ+ students enrolled in a public high school in Northwestern Philippines. From this group, ten self-identified LGBTQ+ students were selected through purposive sampling, primarily based on their availability during the school break period. This approach was chosen because the study required participants who had direct experiences with school counseling and could meaningfully reflect on the barriers and opportunities they encountered. Rather than aiming for a large sample size, the study prioritized a smaller group capable of providing detailed and nuanced accounts, which is consistent with qualitative research standards. To ensure accessibility and trust, the participants were individuals personally known to the researcher, which facilitated rapport and openness during the interviews. All respondents were senior high school students in Grades 11 and 12, aged 16–17 years old, and residing in the same town where the public school is located. Their willingness to participate and ability to articulate their experiences made them suitable informants for exploring the complexities of counseling access in a provincial school setting.

2.3 Instruments and Data Collection

The main tool used to gather data in this study was a researcher-made interview guide composed of ten (10) open-ended questions. These questions were carefully developed based on findings from both local and international literature about the experiences of LGBTQ+ students in relation to school counseling services. The interview guide aimed to encourage participants to openly share their personal experiences, thoughts, and perspectives regarding their identity, access to counseling, experiences of discrimination, support systems, safe spaces, systemic barriers, advocacy needs, peer influence, coping strategies, and recommendations for future counseling services. To ensure clarity and relevance, the questions were organized into specific themes, with each question focusing on a particular aspect of the study, such as identity, access to services, discrimination, support, and systemic challenges. This thematic structure provided direction during the interviews while still allowing participants the freedom to express their experiences in their own words. It also helped ensure that the collected responses could be analyzed effectively and aligned with the study's objectives and evaluation criteria. By grounding the interview guide in existing research and arranging it around key themes, the study was able to collect meaningful, relevant, and rich data that accurately reflected the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ students.

In addition, the researcher also sent a parental consent form to the parents of the respondents to ensure ethical compliance and to secure permission for the participation of minors in the study.

The interviews were conducted through Google Meet, allowing participants to join in a manner that was convenient and accessible for them. Each interview lasted between 20 and 35 minutes, giving participants enough time to share and discuss their experiences in detail comfortably. Before the interviews began, informed consent was obtained from all participants. With their permission, the conversations were audio-recorded to ensure that their responses were accurately documented. These recordings were later transcribed word for word to preserve the authenticity, depth, and meaning of their shared experiences.

To ensure that the interview questions were appropriate and effective, the interview guide was reviewed by experts in the field. Their feedback helped confirm that the questions were clear, culturally sensitive, and aligned with the objectives of the study. The review process also ensu-

red that the instrument respected the diverse identities and lived experiences of the participants. By validating the interview guide, the researchers sought to create a safe, welcoming, and inclusive environment where participants felt comfortable expressing their thoughts and experiences openly and honestly.

2.4 Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the six-phase framework developed by Braun & Clarke (2006). The process began with the researcher immersing herself in the data by reading and rereading the interview transcripts to gain a deeper understanding of the participants' experiences and perspectives. During this stage, notes and initial observations were recorded to capture meaningful insights emerging from the narratives.

After becoming familiar with the data, the researcher identified and coded significant statements, ideas, and experiences shared by the participants. These initial codes were then carefully examined and grouped into broader patterns, leading to the development of potential themes. The themes were continuously reviewed and refined to ensure that they accurately represented the participants' accounts and reflected consistency across the different interviews.

Once the themes were finalized, they were clearly defined and named according to the central ideas they conveyed. The researcher then organized and presented the findings by highlighting recurring patterns as well as unique experiences across participants. Through this process, key themes emerged, including negotiating visibility, barriers to access, counseling bias and exclusion, inclusive support systems, and imagining inclusive counseling.

Manual coding was utilized throughout the analysis to allow the researcher to remain closely engaged with the data. This hands-on approach encouraged continuous reflection and helped preserve the depth, context, and authenticity of the participants' stories while ensuring a thoughtful interpretation of their lived experiences.

2.5 Research Procedures

The study followed a carefully planned research process to ensure that the data gathered were credible, trustworthy, and ethically obtained. Before any data collection took place, ethical clearance was secured, and informed consent was obtained from all participants. The participants were fully informed about the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation, and the measures taken to protect their confidentiality and anonymity throughout the research process.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, focusing on LGBTQ+ students who met the study's criteria and were accessible during the school break period. To ensure feasibility and ease of access, the respondents were individuals personally known to the researcher, which facilitated trust and openness in the interview process. All participants were senior high school students enrolled in Grades 11 and 12, aged 16–17 years old, and residing within the same town where the public school is located. Once participants agreed to take part, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted remotely via Google Meet to accommodate their schedules during the school break. The researcher used the validated interview guide to facilitate meaningful conversations while allowing participants the freedom to share their experiences and perspectives openly.

Following each interview, the audio recordings were transcribed as soon as possible to ensure the accuracy and completeness of the data. The transcripts were then carefully reviewed, coded, and analyzed using thematic analysis. Through repeated engagement with the data, patterns and recurring ideas were identified and organized into themes that reflected the participants lived experiences and addressed the objectives of the study.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the researcher engaged in peer debriefing, allowing colleagues to review and discuss the emerging interpretations and themes. In addition, the findings were compared and supported with existing literature to provide context and strengthen their credibility. By following these procedures, the study maintained high ethical standards and methodological rigor while ensuring that the authentic voices and experiences of LGBTQ+ students were meaningfully represented.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Results

The interviews with ten LGBTQ+ senior high school students from Grades 11 to 12 revealed several common themes that came up across their experiences. These included issues related to identity, access to counseling services, experiences of discrimination, the presence (or absence) of safe spaces, as well as broader systemic barriers within the school. Students also talked about the influence of their peers, the coping strategies they rely on, and the kind of support or advocacy they feel is still needed.

Some of the responses were originally shared in Tagalog and were later translated into English to make them easier to present and understand in the context of this study.

3.1.1 Identity Expression

Students varied in openness:

Alona described herself as openly expressive: *"I am open to everyone and I don't hide who I am… I was just able to express who I really am."*

Carl similarly identified as "showy": *"I think it looks expressive in school-like being friendly, strong, and outgoing."*

In contrast, Kyle admitted: *"Most of the time, it's low-key… especially with my hair."*

Princess noted her masculine expression often drew questions: *"People tend to ask me if I'm straight or not. But I don't deny it, because first of all, you need to accept yourself."*

Ella, introverted, avoided visibility due to gossip fears, while Mika struggled with uniform policies and misgendering. Jay, confident in his bisexual identity, emphasized the need for awareness campaigns.

The findings confirm that LGBTQ+ students in the locale of the study navigate identity expression with varying degrees of openness, shaped by cultural norms and peer dynamics. Alona's openness contrasts with Kyle's concealment, illustrating the tension between visibility and safety. This aligns with Efremov (2026); Bailey & Pila (2026) and Adeyeba et al. (2025), who found that affirming environments reduce anxiety, yet the absence of explicit policies perpetuates minority stress.

3.1.1 Counseling Accessibility

Accessibility issues were common.

Alona feared breaches of confidentiality: *"Sometimes it's hard to trust right away… I might feel like they won't be able to keep things confidential."*

Axel echoed this, saying: *"Sometimes I feel shy about approaching the counselor… I'm afraid of being judged by others."*

Carlo noted availability problems: *"Sometimes they're not in their office."*

Eric, however, reported positive experiences: *"Our school guidance office has been really accepting… they really cared about me."*

Ella avoided counseling altogether, relying instead on online peer groups. Mika anticipated misgendering, while Jay stressed the need for proactive awareness programs.

Confidentiality and trust emerged as central barriers. Alona's fear and Axel's hesitation highlight the fragility of counseling relationships. Gonzalez (2016) similarly noted that institutional neglect undermines trust. Eric's positive account demonstrates the potential of responsive counseling to mitigate harm, echoing Guest et al. (2024).

3.1.2 Discrimination

Experiences of discrimination were reported by several participants.

Axel shared: *"I've experienced it many times… I feel like our situation as part of the LGBTQ community isn't really understood."*

Eric recounted: *"When I was discriminated against by a teacher, I started to look down on myself… but there were also teachers who helped lift me up."*

Kyle described a humiliating incident: *"During the defense… we were told to stand in an 'Adonis-like' way… I felt embarrassed and like we were being disrespected."*

Princess highlighted generational bias: *"Especially older people… they're very set in their beliefs… you get judged right away."*

Alona and Mika feared discrimination even if not directly experienced.

Discrimination experiences, such as Kyle's humiliation and Princess's generational bias, confirm Springer's (2024) argument that entrenched cultural norms sustain systemic inequality.

Safe spaces were conditional, with Eric feeling secure (*"I felt safe because I could really feel that they cared."*) while Axel bluntly stated: *"No, it's not safe. Because sometimes we get judged."*

3.1.3 Safe Spaces

Perceptions of safety were mixed.

Alona explained: *"Sometimes there are students… they can be judgmental… especially the older ones."*

Axel said bluntly: *""Once… it didn't feel safe. Because sometimes we get judged.""*

Eric, however, felt supported: *"When I went to the guidance office, I felt safe because I could really feel that they cared about me."*

Princess acknowledged, *"You really feel safe when you go to the counseling office. But it can be a bit unsettling because there's always that fear that maybe... they might be the ones who end up telling others."*

Kyle noted conditional safety depending on who was present.

3.1.4 Systemic Barriers

Uniform and hairstyle rules were repeatedly cited.

Alona explained: *""Sometimes there are students… they can be judgmental… especially the older ones."*

Axel said bluntly: *""Once… it didn't feel safe. Because sometimes we get judged.""*

Eric, however, felt supported: *"When I went to the guidance office, I felt safe because I could really feel that they cared about me."*

Princess acknowledged, *"You really feel safe when you go to the counseling office. But it can be a bit unsettling because there's always that fear that maybe... they might be the ones who end up telling others."*

Kyle noted conditional safety depending on who was present.

3.1.5 Peer Influence

Peers played a protective role.

Alona shared: *"My friends play a big role in my life because they encourage me to seek help whenever I'm dealing with serious problems."*

Axel agreed: *"My friends have a big impact on me because they are my source of motivation."*

Carl noted mixed influence: *"Some people are supportive, but others might judge you or scold you, so you end up feeling afraid to seek counseling."*

Jay envisioned peer-led support groups as a formalized extension of this influence.

3.1.6 Coping Strategies

Students coped through trusted peers, hobbies, and online outlets.

Alona explained: *"If that happens, I go to people I can trust-my friends-because they would never judge me."*

Carl said: *"Mostly, I deal with it on my own… I listen to music… but when I can't handle it anymore, I open up to my closest friend."*

Kyle shared: *"I just talk to my friends… play online games… that's where I let out my frustration."*

Princess relied on online distraction: *"Just watch happy videos… or make a dump account."*

Ella similarly used online peer groups and dump accounts. Mika often avoided counseling altogether.

Coping strategies reveal resilience but also systemic inadequacy. Carl relied on music, while Princess turned to online distractions. These strategies reflect Springer's minority stress framework, where external stigma forces marginalized youth to seek alternative support.

3.1.7 Advocacy Needs

Students consistently called for reforms.

Alona demanded: *"Confidential and flexible access to counseling… policies that protect all genders."*

Axel suggested: *"Counselors need meetings or training about LGBTQ awareness."*

Eric proposed: *"Hold a symposium for all students so they can be informed about how serious it really is."*

Kyle advocated: *"Let us be what we want… just let us be… especially with what we wear."*

Princess recommended: *"Focus on adding GMRC… really orient students to respect LGBTQ people."*

Mika called for explicit anti-discrimination rules, while Jay envisioned symposiums and peer-led support groups.

Advocacy demands underscore the transformative potential of inclusive counseling. Alona's call for confidentiality, Axel's push for training, and Eric's proposal for symposiums resonate with global literature advocating systemic change. Princess's suggestion to integrate GMRC with gender equality modules reflects a culturally resonant intervention, while Mika's demand for explicit anti-discrimination rules highlights structural reform.

Table 1. Profile of LGBTQ+ Student Participants

Participant	Identity	Grade Level	Counseling Access	Discrimination	Safe Space Perception	Peer Support	Coping	Advocacy Needs
Alona	Lesbian, open identity	11	Confidentiality fears	Anticipated	50-50 (office safe, school mixed)	Strong friends	Trusted peers	Inclusive Policies, Confidential Access
Axel	Bisexual, cautious	12	Hesitant, lacks info	Experienced teacher bias	Unsafe office	Motivating friends	Family, Friends	Counselor Training
Carl	Gay, showy	12	Hesitant to open up	None yet	SSLG supportive	Mixed peer influence	Music, Friends	More Info, Accessibility
Carlo	Bisexual, flexible	12	Availability issues	None yet	Safe space	Neutral peers	Self-reflection	Freedom of Expression
Eric	Gay, showy	11	Accessible, supportive	Teacher discrimination, bullying	Safe office	Student org friends	School Clubs, Counselors	Gender Programs, Symposiums
Kyle	Gay/bi, low-key	11	Open counselors, peer fear	Teacher discrimination	Mixed	Supportive peers	Online Games, Friends	Hairstyle freedom
Princess	Bisexual, masculine expression	12	Introvert challenges	Teacher discrimination	Safe office but gossip fears	Friends encourage disclosure	Online distraction	GMRC/Gender Education
Mika	Transgender female	11	Misgendering fears	Anticipated	Unsafe school	Limited peer support	Avoidance	Explicit anti-discrimination rules

Participant	Identity	Grade Level	Counseling Access	Discrimination	Safe Space Perception	Peer Support	Coping	Advocacy Needs
Ella	Lesbian, introverted	11	Avoids counseling	Gossip fears	Unsafe	Online peer groups	Social Media dump accounts	Confidential counseling (One on one)
Jay	Bisexual male, confident	12	Wants awareness campaigns	None yet	Safe office	Peer-led support	Friends	Symposiums, Peer groups

The profile table reflects the wide range of identities and lived experiences among LGBTQ+ students in the study area. It shows that their experiences with counseling and school support systems are far from uniform. Some participants, such as Alona and Eric, shared that they were open to seeking help and had at least some positive encounters with counseling services. In contrast, others like Ella and Mika expressed hesitation or avoidance, mainly due to concerns about confidentiality and existing barriers within the system.

Experiences of discrimination were more frequently associated with teachers rather than counselors. Participants such as Axel, Eric, Kyle, and Princess described situations where they felt judged or discouraged, which ultimately affected their confidence and trust in school personnel.

Perceptions of safety within school spaces were also mixed. Eric and Carlo described the guidance office as a place where they felt relatively safe and comfortable, while Axel and Ella viewed it as an environment where they did not feel secure. This contrast highlights how the sense of safety in schools is not guaranteed and often depends on the attitudes of staff and the overall school climate.

Across all participants, peer support emerged as one of the strongest sources of comfort and encouragement. Friends played an important role in motivating students like Alona and Axel to consider counseling. In contrast, others, such as Ella and Jay, relied on their peers as alternative outlets for emotional support.

Coping strategies varied widely among participants. Some turned to personal hobbies, like Carl and Kyle, while others, such as Princess and Ella, used online platforms as a way to release stress and emotions. While these strategies show resilience, they also suggest that formal counseling services are not always meeting the full range of students' emotional needs.

When it comes to advocacy, participants consistently expressed clear and thoughtful suggestions for improvement. These included calls for stronger confidentiality policies in counseling (Alona), better training for counselors on LGBTQ+ issues (Axel), inclusive gender-awareness programs (Eric), greater freedom in self-expression regarding uniforms and hairstyles (Carlo and Kyle), and the implementation of explicit anti-discrimination policies (Mika).

The profiles suggest that while peer networks provide essential emotional support, significant gaps remain within institutional systems-particularly in areas of confidentiality, inclusivity, and policy enforcement. These findings highlight the need for more responsive, inclusive, and culturally sensitive counseling practices that not only align with broader best practices. However, they are also grounded in the specific realities of the local context.

3.2. Discussion

The findings reveal that LGBTQ+ students face substantial structural and interpersonal barriers when attempting to access guidance and counseling services in a provincial public high school. These impediments are primarily rooted in profound concerns regarding confidentiality breaches, fear of teacher judgment, anticipated misgendering, and the rigid enforcement of binary uniform and haircut policies. The direct implication of these findings explains how the disconnect between the administrative presence of counseling services and students' emotional safety fosters a structural reluctance to seek professional psychological help within the institution. Counseling spaces, intended as neutral safe havens, are perceived by marginalized learners as conditional and unpredictable. Consequently, students systematically redirect their emotional processing and support-seeking behaviors toward informal avenues, relying on close peer networks, private online communities, secondary social media accounts, and individual creative outlets to sustain their psychological resilience.

An ongoing negotiation between internal emotional vulnerability and school power dynamics drives the emergence of student hesitation and resistance to counseling services. Internalized fears of social stigma and exposure are actively triggered when learners observe or experience discriminatory comments and rigid gender expectations from teachers and school authorities (Plıogou et al., 2025; Kagola & Notshulwana, 2022). When students anticipate that counseling staff might disclose sensitive identity details to other faculty members or peers, relational trust deteriorates rapidly. This protective mechanism leads learners to practice selective self-concealment and behavioral self-censorship across school spaces. In doing so, students evaluate the immediate risk of opening up to school personnel as far more dangerous to their psychological safety and social standing than quietly enduring emotional distress on their own.

The findings of this study reinforce and refine the core assumptions of Minority Stress Theory, which posits that sexual and gender minority individuals endure chronic distal and proximal stressors, including overt discrimination, anticipated rejection, and perpetual vigilance within their social surroundings (Bouris & Hill, 2017; Chan, 2022; Wolf & Saunders, 2025). This conceptual framework aligns directly with the insights of Springer (2024), who emphasized that deeply ingrained cultural biases and personal prejudices among school professionals sustain systemic inequality and exclusion in therapeutic contexts. This theoretical lens demonstrates that student anxiety and reluctance to seek help are not individual pathologies, but rather adaptive psychological responses to an unsupportive educational climate (Lakind et al., 2023; Lazarus et al., 2021). From these theoretical assumptions, it becomes clear that students' psychological burdens are compounded by everyday institutional microaggressions, such as restrictive grooming codes, leading their adaptive coping mechanisms to manifest as avoidance of formal support and reliance on identity-affirming peer networks.

This study confirms the empirical patterns identified by Reyes and the PAP LGBT Psychology SIG (2024) as well as Babaylanes and Save the Children Philippines (2025), which documented that social stigma, fears surrounding confidentiality, and identity-based harassment remain major obstacles to implementing gender responsive educational practices across the Philippines (Alibudbud, 2024; Reyes, 2025). However, a notable divergence emerges regarding the specific relational climate inside the guidance office. While prior literature has broadly emphasized generalized peer bullying in classrooms or the operational burdens of high counselor caseloads (Gonzalez, 2016), this qualitative inquiry reveals a more paradoxical dynamic within the provincial counseling setting. Whereas certain learners experienced genuine empathy and acceptance, echoing the transformative potential highlighted by Cadano & Chavez (2026), Elago & Abulon (2026), and Silvestria et al. (2026), pervasive surveillance by classroom teachers and the complete absence of written institutional anti-discrimination policies destabilized that security. This difference stems from the distinctive sociocultural dynamics of rural public schools, where faculty members often enforce deeply conservative, traditional community norms.

The primary novelty of this study lies in its empirical grounding of queer psychology and critical theory within the lived daily realities of learners in a rural Philippine public secondary school, a demographic largely overlooked in mainstream counseling discourse. Through this focus, the research bridges a critical Population Gap and Practical Knowledge Gap in Southeast Asian school mental health literature. Prior investigations into affirming guidance practices have concentrated overwhelmingly on urban or Western educational jurisdictions equipped with established legal protections, specialized practitioner training, and adequate institutional resources. This inquiry provides unique evidence of how provincial uniform rules, grooming mandates, and intergenerational prejudices stifle identity expression, while offering actionable contextual insights regarding the integration of gender equality into the Good Moral and Right Conduct (GMRC) curriculum and the institutionalization of peer-led support mechanisms.

The dynamics within the narrative data demonstrate that safe spaces in educational settings are neither static nor automatically created by the physical presence of a guidance office. Instead, psychological safety functions as a highly conditional, fragile, and relational entity (Leung et al., 2022; McIntyre & Neuhaus, 2021). A distinct conceptual tension exists between structural service availability and actual emotional accessibility for marginalized youth. These findings signal a necessary conceptual shift from passive, traditional guidance models toward proactive, advocacy-based counseling that actively challenges institutional oppression. Furthermore, the data illustrate that LGBTQ+ students do not function merely as passive recipients of institutional marginalization. Rather, they actively negotiate their visibility, construct protective digital subcultures, and articulate specific institutional reforms, pointing toward an evolving framework of transformative resilience within under-resourced educational settings.

These findings reinforce the necessity of implementing culturally affirming counseling frameworks and comprehensive LGBTQ+ awareness training for school counselors as an evidence-based approach to dismantling help-seeking barriers and enhancing student well-being (Fleitas et al., 2022; Meadowes & Hinchey, 2024). The positive guidance experiences reported by select participants demonstrate that genuine empathy, respectful affirmation, and transparent confidentiality standards possess strong practical validity in restoring student trust in school support systems. Nevertheless, an objective interpretation of the data requires considering factors beyond the institutional variables analyzed, such as individual family acceptance dynamics at home, student exposure to independent digital gender literacy, and inherent personality differences between introverted and extroverted learners when navigating social pressure. Beyond the central focus on counselor student interactions, secondary influences like active participation in student organizations or supportive household environments may have contributed to the resilience observed in certain participants. This alternative perspective emphasizes the importance of designing holistic guidance interventions that simultaneously engage the school, family, and community ecosystems.

The discussion illustrates that the barriers preventing sexual and gender minority students from fully utilizing guidance services stem from systemic gaps in confidentiality assurance, rigid bodily discipline policies, and limited cultural competency among educational personnel.

Grounded in Minority Stress Theory and critical psychology (Salerno et al., 2023; Weinberg & Cooper, 2023), the findings demonstrate that student distress is sustained by unsupportive institutional structures, prompting youth to develop informal coping mechanisms through peer alliances and online spaces. Meaningful reform in school counseling must therefore extend beyond physical office accommodations. It necessitates systemic counselor professional development, explicit anti-discrimination policy enforcement, and a comprehensive cultural shift toward educational environments that honor and validate the dignity of all student identities.

4. IMPLICATIONS AND CONTRIBUTIONS

4.1 Research Implications

The findings of this study provide practical and managerial implications for the study of LGBTQ+ students' accessibility to school counseling services in public high schools, proving that institutional barriers-such as deep concerns over confidentiality breaches, fear of teacher judgment, rigid uniform and haircut policies, and the absence of explicit anti-discrimination policies-significantly erode student trust and foster reluctance to seek formal counseling, driving learners toward informal coping mechanisms like peer networks and online communities.

The findings of this study fill a Population Gap and Practical Knowledge Gap regarding the lived experiences and help-seeking dynamics of LGBTQ+ students in rural and provincial public high school settings in Southeast Asia (Northwestern Philippines), an underrepresented demographic shaped by localized socio-religious norms and limited mental health infrastructure that has been largely overlooked in Western- and urban-dominated counseling literature.

4.2 Research Contributions

The findings of this study contribute as a new source of knowledge in the field of School Counseling and Applied Psychology by providing an empirically grounded framework on culturally responsive, advocacy-based counseling integrating Minority Stress Theory and queer psychology within rural secondary school settings, which can be used to explain how psychological safety in schools is conditional and relational, design targeted practitioner training for counselors, revise restrictive disciplinary codes, and institutionalize gender equality within local school curriculum (such as GMRC) alongside peer-led support systems based on actual empirical evidence and field data.

5. LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

5.1 Research Limitations

Despite providing valuable qualitative insights into the lived experiences and help-seeking behaviors of sexual and gender minority youth, several methodological and institutional limitations must be noted:

a) Geographic and Contextual Specificity: The empirical scope was limited to a single public secondary school located in a provincial, rural area of Northwestern Philippines. The observed dynamics are deeply embedded in localized socio-cultural and religious norms, disciplinary codes, and rural infrastructural limitations, which may not represent conditions in urban centers, private schools, or institutions with established gender-affirming protocols.
b) Sample Size and Age Homogeneity: The study gathered narratives from a small cohort of ten (N = 10) purposively selected senior high school students aged 16–17 across Grades 11 and 12. This qualitative sample size excludes the distinct developmental and structural challenges faced by lower secondary learners (Grades 7–10) and does not fully encompass the broader intersectional spectrum of diverse SOGIESC identities.
c) Data Collection Modality: Semi-structured interviews were conducted remotely via Google Meet during a scheduled school break. Intermittent connectivity issues disrupted the interpersonal flow of the sessions, and the virtual interface may have placed constraints on participants' affective depth and full disclosure regarding sensitive, emotionally vulnerable topics.
d) Ethical Gatekeeping and Selection Bias: Mandatory parental consent protocols for minor participants created an inadvertent structural filter. This requirement likely excluded closeted students who feared identity exposure or domestic backlash, skewing the participant pool toward individuals who were relatively more open about their sexual orientation or gender identity.
e) Single-Informant Scope: The analytical framework concentrated exclusively on the lived experiences of students, omitting the perspectives, administrative workloads, cultural competencies, and operational constraints experienced by guidance counselors, teachers, and school administrators.

5.2 Recommendations for Future Research

To expand empirical scholarship on inclusive school mental health systems, future research should pursue the following avenues:

a) Multi-Site and Comparative Geographic Designs: Future studies should employ comparative multi-site frameworks across urban and rural educational contexts, as well as between public and private or sectarian school

systems, to evaluate how divergent institutional climates influence minority student access to counseling.

b) Methodological Triangulation (Mixed Methods): Researchers should integrate qualitative narrative inquiry with validated quantitative instruments, such as standardized minority stress inventories, institutional trust metrics, and academic resilience scales, to statistically evaluate the relationships between institutional barriers and psychological outcomes.
c) Multi-Stakeholder Perspectives: Subsequent investigations should incorporate school counselors, educators, and administrative leadership to evaluate practitioner cultural readiness, institutional training gaps, and practical challenges in enforcing statutory mandates like the Safe Spaces Act.
d) Longitudinal Impact Assessments: Longitudinal cohort tracking is recommended to determine the long-term mental health, developmental, and academic impacts of systemic school reforms, such as replacing binary dress codes, implementing inclusive curricula (e.g., GMRC modules), and establishing structured peer-support programs.
e) Ecosystemic Support Analyses: Further empirical inquiry should examine how external support ecosystems, particularly family acceptance dynamics, peer micro-networks, and online digital subcultures, moderate formal help-seeking behaviors and offset guidance office deficits.

6. CONCLUSION

This study investigated how LGBTQ+ senior high school students navigate and access school guidance services within a provincial secondary institution. The empirical evidence demonstrates that rather than functioning as unconditionally safe sanctuaries, guidance settings are perceived by these learners as highly precarious environments. Recurring fears of confidentiality breaches, anticipated teacher prejudice, and rigid gender-normative grooming policies significantly undermine trust, prompting students to bypass formal counseling in favor of informal peer alliances and digital subcultures. Consequently, these findings expose a critical disparity between the institutional availability of guidance facilities and their actual psychological accessibility for marginalized youth.

Transforming provincial school mental health requires transitioning from passive service provision toward proactive, advocacy-driven counseling frameworks. Fostering an affirming academic climate demands structural commitments, including mandatory counselor cultural competence training, the enforcement of explicit anti-discrimination safeguards, the modernization of restrictive dress codes, and the formalization of peer-support networks. Ultimately, dismantling these institutional barriers ensures that school counseling offices operate as genuinely equitable, safe, and empowering sanctuaries that sustain the well-being and dignity of all learners.

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Declaration of GenAI Usage in Scientific Writing

The author acknowledges the use of *Microsoft Copilot* as an AI tool during the preparation of this manuscript. Copilot (https://copilot.microsoft.com/) was employed to assist in refining academic language, improving clarity, and organizing ideas. All AI-assisted content was critically reviewed, revised, and aligned with the author's intended style and scholarly standards. The author affirms full responsibility for the intellectual content, interpretations, and conclusions presented in this manuscript. This declaration is made to ensure transparency in the use of AI technologies in scientific writing and to affirm that the final work reflects the author's original contributions, supported but not replaced by AI assistance. All instances of Generative AI usage in this article were conducted by the authors in accordance with the IJCP GenAI Tool Usage Policy, with the authors assuming full responsibility for the originality, accuracy, and integrity of the work.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article. This research has no competing political interests, financial sponsorship, or personal relationships that could have influenced the results reported herein.

The study was conducted independently, without external funding or institutional sponsorship that might create bias. All interpretations, analyses, and conclusions are the sole responsibility of the author.

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The authors declare that this study was conducted in accordance with study ethics, including obtaining approval from the relevant institution. This process respects the autonomy of participants, ensures the confidentiality of their data, and prioritizes their safety and well-being, in compliance with applicable study ethics guidelines. Written and verbal informed consent, or assent for minors, was obtained from all participants involved in the study.

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