SEXUAL ORIENTATION, STRESS, AND INTERPERSONAL COMPETENCE AMONG LGBTQ+ in BPO COMPANIES: BASIS FOR AN ACTION PLAN

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ABSTRACT

This study analyzed the relationship between sexual orientation, stress, and interpersonal competence among LGBTQ+ in BPO companies. The study structured an operational model aligned to the Social Identity Theory by Tajfel & Turner (1979), Meyer's (2003) Minority Stress Model, and Miller's (1986) Relational-Cultural Theory. Results showed that there was no significant difference in the respondents' level of stress and interpersonal competence when grouped according to sexual orientation. Further, it was found that there was no significant relationship between the level of stress and interpersonal competence of the respondents. Overall, LGBTQ+ individuals experienced stress due to discrimination and harassment. Acceptance of society and support system have an immense influence on how they deal with stress. Regardless of their sexual orientation, they experienced the same level of stress and had the same interpersonal competence with heterosexuals.

Keywords: Discrimination, Interpersonal Competence, LGBTQ+, Sexual Orientation, Stress, Stress Management

INTRODUCTION

In the article released by the Psychological Association of the Philippines (2020), Philippine society, lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) Filipinos continue to face stigma, prejudice, and discrimination. This stigma can be seen when LGBT children and adolescents are subjected to bullying, teasing, and harassment in families, schools, and communities. LGBT people are portrayed in the media as frivolous, untrustworthy, and even dangerous or preying on others; preventing Filipino transgender people from entering commercial establishments; limiting the roles and careers of LGBT Filipinos to a very specific set of circumstances; or restricting their access to political participation.

Stress, in a multitude of forms, has a negative effect on people's physical health (Frost et al., 2015). Each individual encounters different kinds of stressors. Members in a stigmatized social category experience "minority stress" (Reyes et al. 2019). Minority group such as LGBTQ (Sanders and Chalk, 2016; Frost et al. 2015; Gamarel et al. 2016)

are more prone to experience may either be physical, psychological, and sexual, harassment, and stigma (Mozumder, 2017; Mustanski et al., 2016; Sanders & Chalk, 2016; Frost et al. 2015; Eliason et al. 2017; Gamarel et al. 2018; Quinn, 2015; Sutter & Perrin, 2018).

Most studies on the developmental continuity of attachment have utilized heterosexual samples. Lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, questioning, and people who love their same sex face unique obstacles to the development of interpersonal expectations that are consistent with secure attachment. They are more likely to anticipate and experience parental rejection due to their sexual orientation, particularly in the early stages of the coming out process. Youth who identify as sexual minorities are also frequently subjected to rejection from peers (Starks et al. 2015).

International Law Organization (2019) states that numerous LGBT workers frequently conceal their sexual orientation out of fear of violence and discrimination. Respondents who identified as lesbian or gay said that they either avoided discussing their

private lives or changed their partners' names during workplace conversations. This can cause a lot of stress and make them less productive (ILO, 2019).

Protection from discrimination and violence is now being discussed in the senate and new laws have begun to take form. In the 1987 Philippine Constitution, it was stated that every person has the right and equal protection of the law. This was deepened by proposing a bill that strongly protects LGBTQ+ individuals. During the 18th Congress, the reading of the Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Expression (SOGIE) Bill aims to provide these diverse groups full protection against discrimination in any form (senate.gov.ph). Still, the bill has a long way to run when it comes to implementation.

LGBTQ+ issues in the workplace are one of the serious matters currently faced. The LGBTQ+ community has a long way to go in terms of society's norms but in recent times they were gradually accepted in different countries. This issue was timely and socially relevant. Even though there are companies that accept them, still, there are some who refuse to consider these people as part of their organization. Discrimination is still evident in many ways. Factors affecting the way LGBTQ+ individuals perform their work and tasks include bullying in the forms of verbal and physical harassment and work-related stress.

Interpersonal competence or relational skill has verifiably associated with upsetting life occasions, especially in the workplace. Access to their rights as citizens, LGBTQ+ people limit their social recognition not just to individuals who identify themselves as heterosexuals. The intolerance, discrimination, harassment, and threat of violence are experienced by homosexual individuals. The theme of this study is one of the major problems LGBTQ+ people face across the world − stress, and the way they interact with people around them. The focus is homosexual individuals who work in Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) companies. In addition, these people are working already to protect their rights as persons who can spontaneously live like a straight individual.

LGBT people may experience discrimination in a variety of settings, including employment, education, and health care, as well as in meaningful interpersonal relationships. Numerous studies strongly suggest that LGBT people are more likely to suffer from mental distress when they are subjected to discrimination and stigma (Moleiro & Pinto, 2015).

This study aimed to provide awareness of the underlying stress experiences of LGBTQ+ and its connection to their relational skills towards people around them since studies on these two variables within the diverse group are limited. In view of the above statement, the researcher aimed to find out the relationship between sexual orientation, stress, and interpersonal competence among LGBTQ+ in Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) companies.

Based on the different studies reviewed and the various inputs imparted by selected authors of related literature, the following gaps were identified: there was no study yet conducted on interpersonal competence among LGBTQ+ in the workplace in our local setting; and there were only a few who studied stress in relation to sexual orientation in the workplace in a local setting. In view of the identified gap, the study determined the impact of sexual orientation on stress and interpersonal competence among LGBTQ+ in Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) companies.

The study tested the following hypotheses: there is no significant difference in the respondents' level of stress when grouped according to sexual orientation; there is no significant difference in the respondents' level of interpersonal competence when grouped according to sexual orientation; and there is no significant relationship between the respondents' level of stress and their level of interpersonal competence. The study assumed that sexual orientation describes one's individuality, stress varies among the members of LGBTQ+ community, and interpersonal competence is an essential soft skill among LGBTQ+.
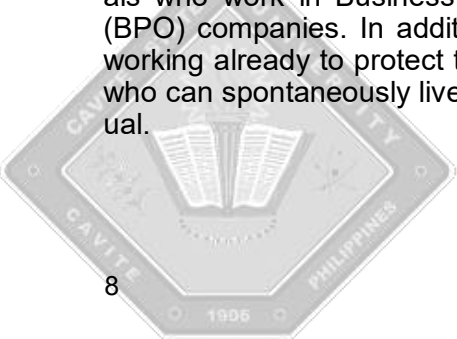
Theoretical Framework

The study was anchored on the Social Identity Theory by Tajfel and Turner (Bautista & Villaverde, 2019) which refers to the ways that people's self-concepts are based on their membership in social groups and addresses the ways that social identities affect people's attitudes and behaviors regarding their ingroup and the outgroup (Leaper & Robnett, 2011). Social identity theory is then offered in an attempt to explain some of the identities which homosexuals have developed in reaction to being members of an oppressed group (Bautista & Villaverde, 2019).

Meyer's Minority Stress Model (Frost et al. 2015) views stigma, prejudice, and discrimination as producing a hostile and stressful social environment that leads to poor mental health, and eventually, physical health. The LGBTQ+ were confronted with the additional stress that goes beyond the stress other people may experience in their work life (Steffens et al. 2016).

Interpersonal competence was anchored to Relational-Cultural Theory by Miller in 1986, it was developed to understand how people move and grow through relationships (Richardson et al., 2018). The theory suggests that people grow through and toward relationships throughout their life span. Interpersonal connections built on mutual empathy contribute to zest, clarity, worth, creativity, and a desire for more connection (Jordan, 2017). In the counselling practice, Singh and Moss (2016) RCT was applied and works with them. Individuals were born to build relationships with people around them. LGBTQ+ was no exemption. They were expected to socialize with people around them; family, friends, peers, and coworkers.

METHODOLOGY

Respondents

The respondents were college graduates aged 25-35 years. The study was limited to seventy-nine (79) LGBTQ+ employees who responded to the survey. These include the operational manager, team leader, customer service representative, and other employees with BPO-related work. The survey was conducted in 2019 at Makati, Muntinlupa, and Mandaluyong.

Research Design

Descriptive-correlational design was used to describe the relationship between the variables, sexual orientation, stress, and interpersonal competence. Correlational research involves assessing the degree of association between two or more variables or characteristics of interest that occur naturally (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Purposive sampling in selected workplace was preferred due to limited access to this diverse group. The following criteria were set by the researcher: the respondents are in their early adulthood from 25-35 years old; four-year degree holders and professionals, and self-proclaimed part of the LGBTQ+ community.

Research Instruments

The researcher used three instruments that had been introduced, affirmed, and approved by the experts, the psychometrician, statistician, and research experts. The first questionnaire was a demographic survey questionnaire which focused on identifying their sexual orientation, personal information (e.g., educational attainment), and the criteria set.

The second questionnaire was the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) by Sheldon Cohen, the most widely used psychological instrument for measuring the perception of stress (Cohen et al., 2012) and used in different studies related to stress. PSS demonstrated acceptable internal consistency where Cronbach's alpha was 0.703 from 46 different LGBTQ+ individuals (sample respondents were from the educational field). As explained by Cohen et al. (1983), the PSS scores were obtained by reversing responses (e.g., 0=4, 1=3, 2=2, 3=1, and 4=0) to the four positively stated items (items 4, 5, 7, and 8) and then summing across all scale items. A short 4-item scale can be made from questions 2, 4, 5, and 10 of the PSS 10-item scale. The third was the Interpersonal

Competence Questionnaire (ICQ: Buhrmester et al., 1988 as cited by Giromini et al. 2015). Assessed on a 5-point Likert scale and blend of item scores produces five scale scores covering various areas, namely: initiation, negative assertion, disclosure, emotional support, and conflict management (Giromini et al. 2015). ICQ demonstrated excellent internal consistency where Cronbach's alpha was 0.909 from 46 different LGBTQ+ individuals (sample respondents were from the educational field). The Interpersonal Competence Questionnaire, as explained by Buhrmester et al. (1988), as cited by Giromini et al. (2015) scores were interpreted using 5-point rating scale to indicate their level of competence.

Data Gathering Procedure

An actual visit to the research locale was made possible for the personal administration of the questionnaire and ensured full retrieval of the accomplished online questionnaires. Detailed instruction on how to answer the questionnaire was given. The respondents ensured the confidentiality of the results. Questionnaires were then recovered, and information was assembled, counted, arranged, and broken down - utilizing the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and exposed to factual treatment utilizing the necessary statistical tools.

Statistical Treatment of Data

Statistical analysis like weighted means was used to determine the level of stress and level of interpersonal competence in terms of its five domains: initiation, negative assertion, disclosure, emotional support, and conflict management. The analysis of variance was used to determine the level of stress and interpersonal competence according to sexual orientation. Lastly, Pearson r was used to determine the relationship between the respondent's level of stress and their level of interpersonal competence.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic Profile

As shown in Table 1, out of 79 respondents, 32.91 percent were Gay; 24.05 percent were Bisexual; 22.78 were Lesbian; 12.66 percent were Others or + sign (asexual, intersex, and demisexual) and Transgender and Queer/Questioning accounted for 3.80 percent each. In Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) companies, more respondents were gay. According to the human resource personnel in the different BPOs as study locale, they received numerous gay applicants and were mostly hired because of their humor and dedication to the job given to them.

Stress

Data in Table 2 reveal that the respondents experienced stress once in a while with an average of 42.2 percent. This means that under any circumstances, LGBTQ+ individuals experienced stress in their daily living which can either be in the workplace, with family members, or within the community.

Table 1.Sexual orientation of the LGBTQ+ respondents in the study

SEXUAL ORIENTATION	F	%
Gay	26	32.91
Bisexual	19	24.05
Lesbian	18	22.78
Others or +	10	12.66
Transgender	3	3.80
Queer/Questioning	3	3.80
Total	**79**	**100%**

Table 2.Level of stress of LGBTQ+

INDICATORS	PERCENTAGE (%)
1. In the last month, how often have you been upset because something happened unexpectedly?	57.2
2. In the last months, how often have you felt that you were unable to control the important things in your life?	45.6
3. In the last month, how often have you felt nervous and "stressed"?	63.5
4. In the last month, how often have you felt confident about your ability to handle your personal problems?	24.6
5. In the last months, how often have you felt that things were going your way?	28.6
6. In the last months, how often have you found that you could not cope with all the things that you had to do?	38.5
7. In the last months, how often have you been able to control irritations in your life?	32.4
8. In the last months, how often have you felt that you were on top of things?	41.5
9. In the last months, how often have you been angered because of things that were outside of your control?	41.0
10. In the last months, how often have you felt difficulties were piling up so high that you could not overcome them?	49.1
Average	**42.2**

Based on the findings of Moya and Moya-Garófano (2019), LGBTQ workers reported experiencing a higher rate of discrimination in the workplace as a result of their sexual orientation. This, in turn, resulted in a higher rate of stress at work, mental health issues, and depression. The findings emphasize the need for interventions to reduce prejudice against LGBTQ people in the workplace and confirm that job discrimination against LGBTQ people is still prevalent, as well as some of its detrimental effects. On the other hand, to cope with stress, they practice healthy mechanisms, such as spending time with friends, family, and partners, forming connections, self-care, exercising, and the creative arts (music, writing, and dancing).

Interpersonal Competence

Table 3 shows the combination of the percentage of interpersonal competence in terms of five domains: Initiation, Negative Assertion, Disclosure, Emotional Support, and Conflict Management.

Table 3. Composite average weighted mean of interpersonal competence

INTERPERSONAL COMPETENCE	PERCENTAGE (%)
Initiation	59.8
Negative Assertion	67.0
Disclosure	65.8
Emotional Support	84.4
Conflict Management	75.8
General Weighted Mean	70.6

The first domain was initiation which resulted to 59.8 percent. The study of Costa and Bartholomew (2014) was contradictory to the results of this domain. In their study, people are bound to be inherently spurred and show indications of solid mental change when they can openly decide to really perform activities, bargain with ideally testing assignments, and feel upheld and acknowledged by individuals who are critical to them. Individuals who experience high levels of need satisfaction in their lives are also likely to demonstrate high levels of interpersonal competence because they can initiate interactions (autonomy), be skillful in disclosing information to others (competence), and can offer emotional support.

The second domain, negative assertion, indicates 67 percent were verbally interpreted as quite comfortable and able to handle these situations.

According to Finnigan and Maulding-Green (2018), it implies that any interaction takes time and effort. Individuals can only control their part of an interaction. How a person reacts to another person, in an emotional encounter, depends on his or her emotional intelligence.

The third domain was disclosure which gained 65.8 percent and verbally interpreted as somewhat uncomfortable and have some difficulty handling these situations. In the study of Saeki et al. (2015), specific interpersonal behaviors in response to interpersonal dilemmas were examined. During childhood, it is plausible that children's overall social skills develop throughout their elementary and middle school years, but their specific interpersonal responses to potentially conflict-provoking social situations developed prior to elementary age. Individuals were able to

adjust their socialization skills throughout their development thus the LGBTQ+.

The fourth domain was emotional support with 84.4 percent, which was verbally interpreted as very comfortable and could handle these situations very well. According to McConnell et al. (2015), combinations of sources of support LGBT youth receive were related to mental health. These can be connected that these young professionals already accepted their homosexuality by people around them. Another reason was job and financial stability that makes their socio-economic status established. They were more likely to receive support from family, peers, significant others, and other support groups.

Lastly, the fifth domain was conflict management with 75.8 percent, which was verbally interpreted as quite comfortable and able to handle these situations. It can be interpreted that LGBTQ+ could manage disagreements and conflicts with other people. In the study of Lev (2015), protective factors were developed within the LGBTQ communities, and evidence suggests that adapting to adversity and managing the stress of being a sexual minority might enhance certain coping strategies. These minority groups have some excellent skills in negotiating differences and tend to have egalitarian relationships where power differentials are minimized.

The level of interpersonal competence, in general, got 70.6 percent which was verbally interpreted as quite comfortable and able to handle these situations. The study of Giromini et al. (2015) points out the importance of interpersonal competence in human well-being and mental health. It is how an individual successfully interacts with people around him/her. Compromised interpersonal competence influences the vulnerability of the person to confront stress and negative life events. According to the existing research, LGBTQ+ employees who work in environments that are LGBTQ+-friendly have higher levels of job commitment, better relationships in the workplace, higher levels of job satisfaction, and better health outcomes.

Significant Relationship Between the Respondents' Level of Stress and their Level of Interpersonal Competence

The relationship between the level of stress and interpersonal competence of the respondents obtained a p-value of 0.450 which was higher than the 0.05 level of significance showing no significant relationship. This means that no matter the sexual orientation of the respondents, their level of stress has no relation to their level of interpersonal competence. The higher or lower their stress has no effect on their interpersonal competence. This means that the respondents' level of stress has nothing to do with their level of interpersonal competence.

The level of Stress and the level of Inter-competence of the respondents	PEARSON R	P-VALUE	INTERPRETATION
	0.085	0.450	Not Significant

** Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level

In the study of Couillard and Higbee (2018), there are communities where LGBTQ+ can feel safe and accepted for their identities. In connection with this, family, like parental support and attachment, were vital for the healthy development of individuals, especially during the coming out process of the LGBTQ+ (Budhiswatya, 2017). Through this support, they are able to live in a psychologically healthy environment and improve their self-esteem and socialization skills.

LGBTQ+ employees experience stress in their workplace due to different reasons. BPO companies have long hours of work and usually take place in graveyard shifts. Aside from the time dif-ference in usual working hours, which is daytime, difficulty in dealing with clients adds to their stress as well. However, treatment by co-workers has an enormous effect on the way they perform their tasks. Harassment (physical and verbal) and discrimination are the topmost leading set-back for LGBTQ+ employees. Below is the matrix for the action plan designed for LGBTQ+ employees in Business Process Outsourcing companies.

Action Plan

The seminar-workshop helps them overcome and manage stress. LGBTQ+ gives the

Table 4. Proposed action plan for managing stress and Improving the interpersonal competence of LGBTQ+

| ACTIVITY	TASKS	DATE START/ END	PERSON IN-VOLVED	SOURCE OF FUNDS	MILESTONE
Conduct a meeting to plan a seminar/ work-shop	Brainstorming	Summer period of the year	Project Team	Employee's develop-ment fund	Minutes of the meeting
Prepare a proposal letter	Furnishing cop-ies of proposal letter		Secretary		Letter to the Manager
Inform the OM, TL and CSA	Campaign		Project Team		Announcement to LGBTQ+ per-sonnel
Distribute invitation	Explaining the objective		Project Team		Encouragement to the attendees

opportunity to vent out their experiences that causes them work-related stress. Table 4 shows the sample overview of the matrix of the Action Plan.

The seminar workshop helps them overcome and manage the stress. LGBTQ+ are given the opportunity to vent out their experiences that caus-es them work related stress. Role playing is one of the activities that can be used to analyze situa-tions. Feedback from the participants may be used as a medium to derive resolutions to the presented problem. Also, this is another way to deepen their socialization skills among co-workers.

The participants in the seminar workshop are ex-pected to manage their stress to eliminate physi-cal and mental health problems and improve their interpersonal competence among co-workers. A hundred percent accuracy is expected as output of the proposed activities for employees.

CONCLUSIONS

LGBTQ+ employees are more committed to their jobs, have better relationships in the workplace, are more satisfied at work, have better health outcomes, and are more productive when there is less discrimination and more openness.
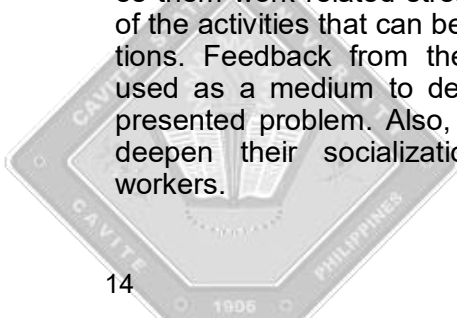
LGBTQ+ were a unified group of individuals sharing the same social goals. Despite their diversity, same as heterogeneous individuals, they share the same level of stress that they encounter on daily basis at their workplace in BPO companies. They also share the same interpersonal competence. This means that they are able to manage their feelings, communication, and relationship with their co-workers regardless of sexual orientation.

LGBTQ+ stress levels even resulted minimally, yet should be addressed by the company because this might cause irregularities in their performance. Hence, this stress does not affect their relationship in dealing with other employees. Everyone is prone to stress, especially in the workplace. This means that LGBTQ+ individuals can handle different stressors in the workplace without conflict with co-workers. The proposed action plan can help LGBTQ+ to increase their awareness and address different ways to eliminate stress, manage stress, and improve their interpersonal competence.

RECOMMENDATIONS

LGBTQ+ in BPO companies are widely accepted at present in society. Organizations and companies may implement a diverse selection of employees which recognize equality in terms of sexual orientation. Selection of applicants is based on the qualifications indicated in the job description and not on gender preference. Companies may use gender-diverse profiling. Mostly, companies implement rules and regulations for their employees which include an ethical relationship in dealing with co-workers. The human resource department is expected to be strict with its policy to avoid unnecessary incidents that may involve diverse groups such as LGBTQ+ individuals. Companies can create a mental health team that promotes and helps employees experiencing mental health issues, including stress.

Organizations and companies must adhere to Gender Equality which is the counterpart of Gender and Development Program (GAD) of the government. The objective of this is to give timely awareness to each employee of different individuals within its offices, specifically to different diverse groups. In this way, LGBTQ+ are able to express themselves wherein they can be understood by co-employee and accepts their gender preferences. Mental health programs may be implemented across all employees. BPO companies can create short briefing exercise that relieves the stress of their employee for at least five minutes a day and everyone is expected to participate.

In BPO companies, employees gather only during break time and mostly focus on individual tasks during working hours. Team leaders are a great source of open communication within the group. Discussions on improvement and positive aspects of each member, whatever gender they have, are important to enhance their interpersonal competence for personal and professional growth. It is important that LGBTQ+ individuals are able to recognize their stressors in the workplace so that superiors can immediately resolve or address them by means of company seminar-workshop, retreats, or meetings. The seminar workshop helps them overcome and manage the stress. LGBTQ+ gives the opportunity to vent out their experiences that cause them work related stress. Role playing is one of the activities that can be used to analyze situations. Feedback from the participants may be used as a medium to derive resolutions to the presented problem. Also, this is another way to deepen their socialization skills among co-workers. The participants in the seminar workshop are expected to manage their stress to eliminate physical and mental health problems and improve their interpersonal competence among co-workers. Companies may designate mental health team that aids employees to handle their stress. The implementation of a seminar workshop can help LGBTQ+ individuals find the cause and find ways to manage and eliminate the stress that hinders improving their socialization skills. This can be done at least every quarter of the year.

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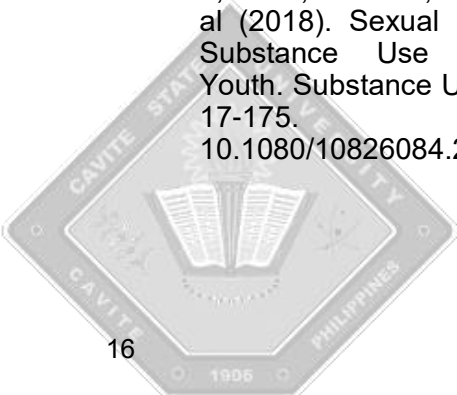
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