

The Lived Experiences of Filipino Transfeminine Young Adults in Building Romantic Relationships with a Cisgender Man



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ABSTRACT: Limited studies are available about trans-cis romantic relationships in the Philippines, making it difficult to understand their dynamics. Therefore, this study explores the experiences of transfeminine young adults in building romantic relationships with cisgender men to understand their subjective experiences and provide support for these individuals. This qualitative phenomenological study involved conducting semi-structured interviews with 8 transfeminine young adults aged 18 to 25 years old who are involved in romantic relationships with cisgender men in the City of Cabuyao, Laguna. The participants were selected using both purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Thematic analysis was conducted to analyze and interpret the qualitative gathered data to look at the patterns of meaning of the participants' lived experiences. The findings revealed a diverse range of information about their lived experiences. Despite facing various obstacles and negative societal attitudes, the participants demonstrated remarkable resilience, independence, and empowerment. These individuals navigated their relationships with confidence and autonomy, defying stereotypes, societal resistance, and differing viewpoints, thereby challenging preconceived notions and societal expectations. Themes related to relationship challenges, the influence of social media, diverse experiences, social resistance, and self-determination emerged. The study highlighted the importance of societal acceptance, awareness, and efforts to break down stereotypes.

KEYWORDS: Transfeminine, Cisgender, LGBTQIA+, Young Adults, Gender Identity, Sexual Orientation, Romantic Relationship

I. INTRODUCTION

People are innately distinct in their views, emotions, behaviors, experiences, and physical characteristics. Inherent features and characteristics of men and women suddenly became concrete notions or constructs, such as gender and sexual orientation. In various cultures, men are often aggressive, competitive, and goal-oriented, whereas women are typically submissive, cooperative, and emotional. This distinction was frequently predicated on underlying fundamental variations between males' and females' qualities, characteristics, and demeanors back in the day. In this earlier setting, assessments of femininity or masculinity were frequently employed to identify issues with vital gender identification, such as feminine males or masculine females.

Then building a romantic relationship, prejudice, and stigma restrict transfeminine young adults' ability to establish fulfilling relationships with cisgender men despite the possibility of imposing laws and policies against their mistreatment and discrimination. Across countries and cultures, there are transfeminine—individuals born with the gender ascribed to men who present and identify as women. These people identify as transwomen in some societies. Many get medical procedures such as breast augmentation to make their bodies more feminine, but most do not get vaginoplasties. Therefore, they still have penises. Transfeminine are identified as non-binary genders (i.e., neither man nor woman) in many non-Western cultures. Many of these people do not have their bodies surgically enhanced.

The transgender community in the Philippines is often categorized as "tomboy" (lesbian) and "bakla" (gay), which are words that are used interchangeably regardless of the person's sexual orientation. Although much is written about lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender people (LGBT), there is a lack of research that dives into the experiences of trans-feminine individuals. Men from many cultures have acknowledged experiencing romantic and sexual attraction in female trans individuals. However, a review suggests that the majority of these men are also attracted to cisgender. They find cisgender women or cisgender people of both sexes to be sexually attractive. Also, they claim that their attraction to these people was driven by a desire for femininity

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or a blend of feminine and masculine traits (Patterson & Vasey, 2022). Besides, in this type of relationship, the cisgender partner consistently discredits his trans partner's gender identity.

In the Philippine context, transgender people who are in romantic relationships with cisgender partners still face a severe acceptance issue. These people struggle to achieve acceptance in their relationships because they are typically the targets of prejudice and contempt. There is no difference from other relationships involving people who are part of the LGBTQIA+ community in the country. This implies a more tolerant society than one that is accepting. Despite the fact that it can be difficult, some transgender people have found joy and happiness in cisgender relationships. These partnerships, however, are frequently mocked by society and might result in violence. Although the government has been hesitant to recognize and defend the rights of transgender people, along with other members of the LGBTQIA+, there are now an increasing number of movements and organizations working to uphold those rights and increase public understanding of the difficulties they face.

Misconceptions about romantic relationships between transwomen and men are a big issue. In an email, interview, and article written by Lunas (2020) of *manilastandard.net*, Amanda Valentine Dela Cruz - a Filipino transwoman, dating coach, and writer - shared that discrimination exists not only in education, the workforce, and healthcare but also in the dating scene. She mentioned that it is also seen in the dating world, notably in the interactions between trans women and men who are trans-oriented or attracted to transgender people. She claimed, "Most people think that men who get involved with women like us are only after our money, have sick fetishes, pseudo straight, and more. Nevertheless, that is far from reality." She also added that many stereotypes target trans-oriented men negatively, discrediting the existence of women like them.

Limited studies have been done on the topic of trans-cis romantic relationships in the context of the Philippines. Most of the research about the LGBTQIA+ community revolves around the issues of homosexuality (gay and lesbian individuals). On this note, the researchers decided to conduct a study focusing on the aspects and facets of romantic relationships between a transfeminine young adult and a cisgender man and contribute to promoting different studies about gender and well-being.

This study aims to explore the depth and meaning of the experiences of transfeminine young adults in building romantic relationships with cisgender men. It intends to delve into how the society or social environment influences their thoughts, feelings, and behavior in pursuing trans-cis romantic relationships and describe the barriers or challenges that go their way. Moreover, the researchers also want to enlighten society's misconceptions about unique individuals and forms of relationships. The researchers chose this study to show transgender and cisgender relationships as one of the least-studied aspects of LGBTQ psychology in the Philippine context. The researchers are caught in three concerns: first, the issue between gender identity and relationship building; second, the issue of prejudice and stigma by society towards unique people and relationships; and third, how the participants reconcile these issues. The study's results will provide a detailed account of the participants' experiences and how they shaped those experiences.

Additionally, this will give an understanding of the emotional and physiological challenges and benefits related to having romantic relationships among the Filipino transgender community and their cisgender partners in a way for society to have an inclusive awareness towards this sector of LGBTQIA+ and address identified issues. This will also contribute to the generation of studies and add to existing literature about the lived experience of trans women with regard to having romantic relationships with cisgender men, which can be beneficial to LGBTQIA+ psychology.

II. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

The research design was qualitative research. According to Bhandari (2023), this research design involved gathering and analyzing non-numerical data, such as text, video, or audio, to comprehend ideas, viewpoints, or experiences. It was used to get a better understanding of a situation or come up with innovative research concepts.

In addition, this study utilized a phenomenological approach – a qualitative research approach that aimed to understand and define the fundamental nature of a phenomenon. In this approach, human experiences were examined while suspending the researchers' preconceived notions about the phenomenon being investigated (Ho & Limpaecher, 2022c), which in the case of this study was the participants' experiences in building a romantic relationship with a cisgender man. A qualitative research design was required to explore the participants' subjective experiences, perceptions, and meanings. Phenomenology as a qualitative research approach was particularly relevant because this research aimed to comprehend the essence of a phenomenon as experienced by the participants, untouched by preconceived notions. With the use of this methodology, the researchers could gather detailed and complex data that gave insights into the opportunities and challenges presented in this type of relationship. A qualitative research design combined with phenomenology was an appropriate and practical approach to understanding the participants' experiences and the phenomenon being studied in depth and with nuance.

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B. Research Locale

The study was conducted in the City of Cabuyao. This city was one of the places in the Laguna province with a general population of the LGBTQIA+ community, transgender people specifically. Under their permission, the respondents were interviewed face-to-face in their houses or at any comfortable place they chose.

The chosen city was from the province of Laguna and was located in the Calabarzon region of the Philippines. It had a rich history dating back to the pre-colonial era and had seen significant changes. Historically, the Philippines had been known for its relatively tolerant attitudes towards LGBTQ+ individuals, with evidence of same-sex relationships and gender non-conformity existing before Spanish colonization. However, with the introduction of Catholicism and Spanish colonial rule, attitudes towards homosexuality became more restrictive.

There were also efforts by LGBTQ+ individuals and organizations in Laguna to increase visibility and awareness. For example, the annual participation in Laguna Pride March, which began in 2016, drew attention to the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals in the province and advocated for greater acceptance and recognition.

C. Population and Sampling

This study used purposive sampling - a non-probability sampling method - in selecting Filipino transfeminine young adults who have experience in building romantic relationships with cisgender men. Purposive sampling is a non-probability technique used in research to choose individuals or groups of individuals who meet specific criteria relevant to the research question or objective and as specified by the researchers. It is also known as judgmental or selective sampling. It is frequently employed when the group being investigated needs to be bigger, easier to access, and more heterogeneous to be studied using probability sample methods (Hassan, 2023).

Snowball sampling or chain-referral sampling - another kind of non-probability sampling method - was also used to recruit participants, which involves discovering potential individuals through recommendations from existing participants (Bhat, 2023). Social media platforms, online support groups, and local LGBTQ+ organizations will be used to recruit participants.

All interviews were performed face-to-face with observance of ethical research guidelines to protect participant safety and privacy. The assigned researchers conducted the interviews, lasting 45 to 60 minutes. The open-ended interview questions explored participants' experiences building romantic relationships with cisgender men as Filipino transfeminine young adults.

D. Research Participants

The research participants were qualified with the following criteria: (a) individuals who identify as transfeminine, specifically assigned male at birth but identify with femininity, (b) aged between 18 and 25 years, (c) have had or are currently in a romantic relationship with a cisgender man, (d) willing to share their experiences and perspectives, and (e) able to provide informed consent for participation in the study. The researchers started from a sample size of 5 participants and scale up to achieve data saturation. A total number of 8 participants were interviewed in this study.

E. Research Instrumentation

This study used semi-structured interviews as the primary method of gathering data. Semi-structured interviews are often utilized in qualitative research. This method typically entails a conversation between the researcher and the participant using a flexible interview protocol and additional follow-up questions, probes, and comments (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). The interviews were conducted face-to-face at the participants' houses, or any other convenient location preferred and chosen by the participants. The semi-structured interviews allowed the researchers to gather rich, comprehensive, open-ended data to explore the participant's ideas, feelings, and views on pursuing and developing a cis-trans romantic relationship.

The researchers created an interview guide based on the research objectives and questions. The questions explored the participants' experiences building a romantic relationship with a cisgender man, the challenges and opportunities they encountered in the relationship, and society's influence on their experiences.

The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure that the researchers captured all the details and nuances of participants' responses. The transcription of the responses underwent analysis.

In addition, the researchers also documented their observations throughout the interviews using field notes. The participant's body language and emotions during the interview and other relevant details on the field notes were used to contextualize their responses. Any non-verbal cues the participants may have used, for example, sighs or pauses, were taken down in the field notes as they could contribute to the richness of the data.

A thorough validation was done to ensure the credibility of the research instrument. The research instrument passed through the hands of the three licensed psychology professionals, all of them having a minimum requirement of master's degree in psychology and as registered psychometricians. These professionals played an integral part in evaluating and validating the

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interview questions. Their expertise brings significant basis to the content validity of the instruments as they ensure the questions captures the nuanced aspects of the participant's experiences in building romantic relationships with cisgender men. Multiple revisions considering and applying the feedback, corrections, and suggestions of the instrument validators were also performed. This iterative approach not only addressed potential biases but also strengthened the reliability and relevance of the instrument.

In addition, the research adviser, who has a strong foundation in the field of psychology and research, actively engaged in the formulation and revision process of the research instrument. This established the alignment of the research instrument with the research objectives and questions which strengthen the instrument validity.

Furthermore, the researchers conducted a rehearsal of the conduct of the interview. This rehearsal addressed the clear and smooth delivery of every question to the participants so as to guarantee consistency and reliability in gathering of data. By applying a systematic, planned and organized, approach with the interviews, potential variations were minimized which then adds to the overall strength of the instrument in getting the necessary information the research aims to discuss.

F. Data Gathering Procedure

This study used purposive sampling in selecting participants and semi-structured interviews in data collection. The researchers secured a consent letter authorized by their research adviser. Researchers discussed the risks and benefits of the study, the objectives of the study, and the participant's right to withdraw. The participants were asked for consent to record the interview. After that, the actual interview will take place. Participants answered a predetermined set of open-ended questions directly asked by the interviewer, which may be followed by probing questions to explore the participants' responses further and effectively answer the topic of interest.

A cell phone or other recording devices were used to gather data during interviews. Taking field notes were also employed to document other relevant information, such as the participants' gestures and other non-verbal cues. The participant's responses were transcribed in the study; therefore, the researchers were careful in recording or took notes to make sure to get all the essential information.

In analyzing qualitative data gathered through the interviews, this study utilized thematic analysis as data collection method. Thematic analysis is a type of data analysis in qualitative research that looks at the patterns of meaning in a data set. In this study, the data set will come from the transcripts of interviews made by the researchers through verbatim transcription of the interview recordings. Since interviews -as used in qualitative research - offer extensive data to be gathered, grouping them according to their similarities or "themes" helped the researchers interpret the content and derive meaning from it. Dividing and categorizing a large amount of data according to their commonalities made it easier for the researcher to digest the information. Once the information is grouped, answering the research questions are more accessible, straightforward, and organized.

In application, the researcher made sense of the participants' answers to each question by connecting, supporting, and relating them. From this, the researcher had a collective point of view of the participant's experiences. Answers that present similarities were grouped, and the themes were extracted from there. The themes that arise from the qualitative data analysis were interpreted and discussed to present what the study found about lived experiences of the participants.

G. Ethical Consideration

To ensure the rights, dignity, and privacy of the members, researchers need to protect the members, develop trust, promote the integrity of research and guard against misconduct and impropriety. All the members' personal and identifying information and their answers to the questionnaire were given the utmost importance. Ethical consideration was also applied in disclosing any identifying information.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This chapter presents the data analysis and findings from exploring the lived experiences of Filipino Transfeminine Young Adults in Building Romantic Relationships with A cisgender man. The primary objective of this study is to explore the lived experience of Filipino transfeminine young adults living in the City of Cabuyao, Laguna with their romantic relationship building with cisgender men in the social and cultural context of the Philippines.

The researchers identified several themes that emerged as they delved deeper into the experiences of Filipino transfeminine young adults in building romantic relationships with cisgender men. These themes are: (1) Challenges in Building Romantic Relationships, (2) Influential Role of Social Media, (3) Diverse Perspective in Romantic Relationships, (4) Societal Resistance, and (5) Personal Choices, Autonomy, and Resilience.

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Table 1: Societal Impact on Trans- Cis Romantic Relationships

THEMES	SUBTHEMES
Challenges in Building Romantic Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Societal Expectations and Norms in Trans-Cis Relationships ● Struggle Against Stereotypes for Inclusivity ● Conflating Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity ● Influence of Religion and Family Values

The first major theme of Challenges in building Romantic Relationships summarizes the various difficulties experienced by Filipino transfeminine young adults in building romantic relationships with cisgender men. The following subthemes supported by the corresponding responses of the participants give an understanding of the varied nature of these challenges.

Societal Expectations and Norms in Trans-Cis Relationships:

The impact of societal expectations and norms on the romantic pursuits of transfeminine individuals is evident. The participants highlighted how rooted gender roles influence their relationship with cisgender men.

Struggle Against Stereotypes for Inclusivity:

The participants conveyed the impact of stereotypes on inhibiting inclusivity in society.

Conflating Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity:

The conflation of sexual orientation and gender identity emerged as a significant challenge, leading to misunderstandings and misconceptions. Participants expressed concerns about being automatically labeled or judged based on their choice of partners, with stereotypes and societal expectations clouding the understanding of the nature of their relationships.

Influence of Religion and Family Values

Religion and family values played a substantial role in shaping the challenges faced by the participants. As Participants 1 and 2 mentioned, deeply ingrained cultural and religious beliefs contributed to the resistance against nontraditional relationships.

Table 2: The Influence of Social Media on Romantic Relationships between Trans-Cis Relationships

THEMES	SUBTHEMES
Influential Role of Social Media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Positive Influence of Social Media ● Negative Influence of Social Media

In examining the lived experiences of transfeminine young adults in building romantic relationships with cisgender men, the theme of the influential role of social media emerges as a significant factor shaping their experiences. This theme is further explained through two subthemes: Positive Influence of Social Media and Negative Influence of Social Media.

Positive Influence of Social Media:

The participants highlighted the positive impact of social media on their lives and relationships. Participant 1 expressed the potential of social media as a tool for education, not only within the LGBTQ+ community but also for a broader audience.

Negative Influence of Social Media:

While participants acknowledged the positive aspects of social media, they also highlighted its negative impact. Participant 1 sees social media as a platform where discrimination and prejudice could thrive, with some individuals exploiting it to discriminate against non-heteronormative relationships.

Table 3: Dynamic Perspectives and Dynamic Romantic Relationships

THEMES	SUBTHEMES
Diverse Perspectives in Romantic Relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● <i>Affection in Diverse Relation</i> ● <i>Exploring Unconventional Relationship Structures</i> ● <i>Mutual Understanding and Effort with Partners</i>

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This study revolves around individuals who identify as transfeminine and their diverse and complex experiences in navigating relationships with cisgender men. It presents a narrative that breaks away from expectations, showcasing a range of experiences that challenge traditional norms and redeeming the notion of love. The participants in this research contribute to a spectrum of experiences reflecting the intricate nature of their search for connections.

Affection in Diverse Relation:

The participants articulate a unique manifestation of love that goes beyond conventional limits. Their viewpoints question the presumption that the affection experienced between a transgender woman and a cisgender man is inherently distinct. Instead, they underscore the shared qualities that form the foundation of their love, emphasizing shared values and emotional subtleties that bind them together. By acknowledging these similarities and recognizing the sensitivity present in both genders, they demonstrate a nuanced comprehension of love that challenges preconceived notions.

Exploring Unconventional Relationship Structures:

Exploring different types of relationships brings to light a society where individuals do not conform to societal norms. Participants 4 and 6 share experiences where they are approached by others purely for experimentation, shedding light on the challenges they face in dealing with stereotypes.

Mutual Understanding and Effort with Partners

Based on the feedback from the participants, it is evident that mutual understanding and collaborative efforts are crucial in addressing societal challenges. The participants emphasize the significance of sharing belief systems and overcoming obstacles together. Their stories highlight a deliberate choice to focus on the positive elements of developing relationships, demonstrating resilience beyond societal negativity. Emphasizing happiness and rejecting societal expectations when pursuing love signifies a commitment to fostering mutual understanding and emotional well-being.

Table 4: Societal Impact on Psychological Well-being in Trans- Cis Relationships

THEMES	SUBTHEMES
Societal Resistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Challenging Social Expectations Exploring Unconventional Relationship Structures Mutual Understanding and Effort with Partners

The concept of societal resistance encompasses the difficulties and obstacles that individuals encounter in their romantic relationships with cisgender men as a result of societal expectations and norms. Participant 7 and Participant 8 both provided insights into the importance of disregarding societal expectations in order to foster a genuine and nourishing relationship. They emphasized the significance of not allowing external judgments to influence their connection and, instead, focusing on genuinely getting to know one another on a personal level.

Challenging Social Expectations

Participant 2 emphasized the significance of societal expectations, noting the difficulties they encounter due to predetermined roles and standards. The battle against these expectations was portrayed as a considerable burden, with participants deeming it crucial to question and oppose societal norms. The disparity between their self-identified gender and societal expectations became a notable obstacle, underscoring the necessity to confront and tackle these matters in order to foster authentic connections.

Table 5: Exploring Psychological Well-being Amidst Challenges

THEME	SUBTHEMES
Personal Choices, Autonomy, and Resilience	Autonomous Relationship Choices <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Individuality in Relationship Beliefs Resilience in Defying Societal Expectations Coping Strategies

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The last theme that emerged from the data gathered discusses the participants' personal choices, autonomy, and resilience in terms of romantic relationships. The narratives emphasize the value of autonomy in decision making, the importance of individuality in relationship views, resilience regardless of societal expectations, and the use of coping strategies to deal with challenges.

Autonomous Relationship Choices

Participants strongly emphasized autonomy in relationship choices and commitment to decision-making according to their values and self-perception, ignoring external judgments.

Individuality in Relationship Beliefs

The exploration of individuality in relationship views reveals various methods of connecting. Participants discussed the significance of maintaining personal boundaries and privacy while avoiding judgment from society. The concept of "lowkey" relationships emerges, stressing an intentional attempt to keep certain parts of the relationship private. The participants also mentioned that the relationship depends on the two parties' beliefs.

Resilience in Defying Societal Expectations

Participants expressed confidence and resilience in resisting societal expectations. Those two rooted from their solid understanding of personal values and refusal to conform to societal norms that may affect their authenticity.

Coping Strategies

Participants stated the importance of prioritizing self-well-being. This serves as a mechanism for personal resilience and then becomes a pathway for extending care to others.

IV. DISCUSSION

The experiences told in this study represent a significant take from traditional norms, as participants emphasized their individuality and sought meaningful connections. The findings highlight the participants' ability to empower themselves by relying on their identities and choices. Contrary to unfavorable societal stereotypes, these individuals demonstrated deep resilience, allowing them to negotiate societal obstacles while remaining loyal to their self-identified gender and relationship preferences.

This study adds to our overall comprehension of real-life encounters in relationships between transgender and cisgender individuals. It highlights the importance of societal acceptance, awareness, and efforts that break down stereotypes. By recognizing and appreciating diverse personal stories, society can cultivate an environment that is more inclusive and compassionate. Doing so acknowledges the value that arises from embracing genuine connections that go beyond societal norms.

In this research, entitled "The Lived Experiences of Filipino Transfeminine Young Adults in Building Romantic Relationships with a Cisgender Man." The researchers have uncovered valuable insights into the difficulties faced by transfeminine individuals. Their suggestions cover a range of areas, urging the National Government to incorporate culturally sensitive healthcare services and implement protective legislation. We advocate for the establishment of Gender and Development Programs, stress the importance of Trans-Inclusive Policies in educational institutions, and call upon local authorities to establish support initiatives. Emphasizing the significance of familial acceptance and youth allyship, as well as the need for community-based research in future endeavors, these recommendations aim to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for transfeminine individuals within Filipino society.

National Government

Researchers suggest that there should be a plan for the integration of culturally competent healthcare services that address the unique healthcare needs of transfeminine individuals, including gender-affirming care and mental health support. Lastly, programs and campaigns foster understanding and acceptance of transfeminine identities and the creation of laws that will protect gender minorities, particularly members of the LGBTQIA+ community, against discrimination and violence.

Researchers

Researchers advocate for the establishment and enhancement of Gender and Development Programs emphasizing the teaching of understanding sexual orientation and gender identity and relevant legal provisions that protect gender minorities, which include transfeminine individuals. After conducting this study, the researchers discovered that there are not enough programs supporting Gender and Development. The national government and local governments must take action to promote a welcoming environment for LGBTQIA+ individuals.

Educational Institution

Researchers encourage institutions to conduct seminars on Gender and Development (GAD) for educational institutions focusing on the LGBTQ+ community, especially transgender individuals, which could be "Promoting Trans-Inclusive Policies and Practices in Schools." This topic would explore implementing policies and practices that foster a supportive and inclusive environment for

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transgender students. It covers curriculum inclusivity, faculty training on transgender issues, establishing gender-neutral facilities, and creating safe spaces. By concentrating on these aspects, educational institutions can ensure that transgender individuals feel acknowledged, respected, and fully included in the academic community, contributing to a more equitable and affirming learning environment for all.

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