

Negotiating Identity, Belonging, And Survival: A Phenomenological Study Of Domestic Abuse Among LGBTQ+ Survivors In Mindanao, Philippines

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Abstract

Domestic abuse remains a pervasive global concern, yet the lived experiences of lesbians, gays, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other sexual and gender minority (LGBTQ+) survivors continue to be underrepresented within domestic violence scholarship, particularly in the Philippine context. Existing research has largely emphasized the prevalence and correlates of abuse, leaving limited understanding of how LGBTQ+ survivors experience, negotiate, and ultimately transcend intimate partner violence within heteronormative social environments. This study employed a descriptive phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of eleven LGBTQ+ survivors of domestic abuse in Mindanao, Philippines. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling and interviewed using semi-structured, in-depth interviews. Data were analyzed following Colaizzi's phenomenological method to identify the essential structure of the lived experience. Phenomenological analysis disclosed that domestic abuse was experienced not merely as repeated acts of interpersonal violence but as a progressive erosion of identity, autonomy, and belonging within relationships initially perceived as spaces of emotional affirmation. Four interconnected constituents characterized this lived experience: (1) loving as a search for legitimacy within a heteronormative society, (2) violence as a progressive system of identity-based control, (3) enduring violence through negotiated survival, and (4) reclaiming agency through self-recognition and affirming social relationships. Collectively, these constituents suggest an integrated phenomenological description in which survivors continually negotiate identity, belonging, coercion, and agency throughout their experiences of abuse and recovery. The findings suggest that Gendered Pathways Theory may benefit from greater consideration of identity-based coercive control among LGBTQ+ populations. The study contributes a deeper phenomenological understanding of LGBTQ+ domestic abuse by shifting scholarly attention from isolated risk factors toward the experiential processes through which identity is contested, negotiated, and reconstructed. These findings underscore the importance of trauma-informed, identity-affirming interventions and culturally responsive policies that recognize recovery as both a process of ensuring safety and restoring dignity, belonging, and selfhood among LGBTQ+ survivors.

Keywords Descriptive phenomenology, Domestic abuse, LGBTQ+ survivors, Intimate partner violence.

1. Introduction

Domestic abuse remains one of the most pervasive violations of human rights worldwide, affecting individuals across cultures, socioeconomic backgrounds, and demographic groups. The World Health Organization estimates that nearly one in three women globally have experienced physical and/or sexual violence by an intimate partner during their lifetime, underscoring the enduring public health and social significance of intimate partner violence (WHO, 2021). Although domestic abuse has historically been conceptualized through heterosexual and gender-based frameworks, an expanding body of scholarship demonstrates that intimate partner violence also constitutes a critical concern among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and other sexual and gender minority (LGBTQ+) populations.

International evidence consistently indicates that LGBTQ+ individuals experience intimate partner violence at rates comparable to, and in some populations exceeding, those of their heterosexual counterparts. Studies report that

43.8% of lesbian women and 61.1% of bisexual women have experienced intimate partner violence, while approximately 26% of gay men and 37.3% of bisexual men report similar experiences (National Coalition Against Domestic Violence, 2023). Likewise, transgender individuals remain disproportionately vulnerable to emotional, physical, sexual, and psychological abuse within intimate relationships, often compounded by experiences of discrimination, minority stress, and limited access to culturally competent support services (VAWnet, 2023). These findings challenge conventional assumptions that domestic violence is exclusively a heterosexual or gender-specific phenomenon and highlight the necessity of understanding abuse within the broader contexts of sexuality, gender identity, and structural inequality.

Despite growing recognition of LGBTQ+ intimate partner violence, existing scholarship has predominantly focused on documenting prevalence, identifying risk factors, and examining barriers to help-seeking. Donovan and Hester (2014) argue that understanding domestic abuse within sexual minority relationships requires moving beyond heteronormative assumptions that have historically shaped domestic violence research, policy, and practice. Likewise, researchers have documented the reluctance of many LGBTQ+ survivors to seek formal assistance because of fears of discrimination, involuntary disclosure of sexual orientation or gender identity, and inadequate institutional responses. While these studies have substantially advanced empirical knowledge regarding the epidemiology and correlates of domestic abuse, they offer comparatively limited understanding of how LGBTQ+ survivors themselves experience, interpret, negotiate, and ultimately transcend abusive relationships.

This limitation is particularly significant because domestic abuse is not merely a sequence of violent incidents but a lived phenomenon that reshapes survivors' perceptions of identity, belonging, autonomy, and interpersonal relationships. The meanings survivors attach to abuse, the ways they negotiate everyday life within coercive relationships, and the processes through which they reconstruct themselves following victimization remain insufficiently understood, particularly among LGBTQ+ populations whose experiences are situated within heteronormative social environments. Understanding these experiential dimensions is essential for developing interventions that extend beyond crisis response and legal protection toward approaches that acknowledge the relational, psychological, and identity-based consequences of abuse.

Within the Philippine context, research examining domestic abuse among LGBTQ+ populations remains notably scarce. Although the country has made important advances toward recognizing sexual and gender diversity, heteronormative norms, social stigma, and unequal legal protections continue to shape the everyday experiences of many LGBTQ+ individuals. Existing domestic violence policies and intervention programs have largely been developed within heteronormative frameworks that primarily address violence against women, often overlooking the unique vulnerabilities experienced by LGBTQ+ survivors. Consequently, little is known about how broader social structures influence the lived realities of abuse, survival, and recovery among LGBTQ+ individuals within Philippine communities.

Addressing this gap requires moving beyond identifying what causes domestic abuse toward understanding what it means to live through it. A phenomenological perspective provides an appropriate methodological lens because it seeks to uncover the essential structure of lived experience as described by those who have directly encountered the phenomenon. By privileging survivors' own narratives, phenomenology enables a deeper understanding of how abuse is experienced, how identity and belonging are negotiated within abusive relationships, and how survivors reconstruct agency following prolonged coercive control.

Guided by this perspective, the present study explored the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ survivors of domestic abuse in one locality in Mindanao, Philippines. Rather than examining domestic abuse solely as a behavioral or legal problem, the study sought to understand its experiential structure by illuminating how survivors navigated relationships that simultaneously embodied affection, coercion, marginalization, endurance, and recovery. Through this inquiry, the study contributes to the growing scholarship on LGBTQ+ intimate partner violence by providing a richer phenomenological understanding of the processes through which identity, belonging, and agency are continually negotiated throughout survivors' experiences of domestic abuse.

2. Materials and Methods

This study employed a qualitative research approach using a descriptive phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ survivors of domestic abuse. Phenomenology seeks to understand the essence and meaning individuals ascribe to a shared phenomenon by describing their experiences from their own perspectives

while suspending preconceived assumptions (Colaizzi, 1978; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed not merely to identify categories of abuse but to understand how domestic violence was experienced, interpreted, and navigated by LGBTQ+ survivors within their personal and social contexts. The study involved eleven (11) self-identifying LGBTQ+ individuals who had previously experienced domestic abuse and had already separated from their abusive partners at the time of data collection. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling, a strategy considered appropriate for accessing populations whose experiences often remain hidden because of stigma, discrimination, and concerns regarding confidentiality. Two participants were personally known to the researcher, while the remaining participants were referred through existing community networks. Eligibility was not restricted by age, educational attainment, or socioeconomic status, provided that participants had directly experienced domestic abuse within an intimate relationship and voluntarily consented to participate. The sample was considered phenomenologically adequate once additional interviews no longer expanded the essential structure of the lived phenomenon, suggesting that data saturation was reached.

To enhance the richness and transferability of the findings, participants represented diverse backgrounds across age, sexual orientation, gender identity, occupation, socioeconomic circumstances, and relationship histories. The sample included individuals identifying as gay men, lesbian women, and transgender women whose ages ranged from early adulthood to older adulthood. Participants came from varied occupational and educational backgrounds, including service workers, self-employed individuals, and wage earners, reflecting differing socioeconomic conditions. The duration of abusive relationships likewise varied substantially, ranging from relatively short-term relationships to partnerships spanning several decades. This variation enabled the study to capture diverse manifestations of domestic abuse and recovery while preserving the shared experiential essence central to phenomenological inquiry.

Data were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews guided by an interview protocol designed to elicit participants' lived experiences before, during, and after domestic abuse. Rather than focusing solely on incidents of violence, the interview encouraged participants to narrate how they experienced abuse, interpreted their circumstances, coped with adversity, and perceived the support available to them. Follow-up probing questions were employed to obtain rich and detailed descriptions while allowing participants to recount their experiences freely.

All interviews were conducted individually in locations chosen by the participants to ensure privacy, comfort, and psychological safety. With participants' permission, interviews were audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The interview transcripts were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological method. First, each transcript was read repeatedly to gain a holistic understanding of participants' lived experiences. Significant statements directly related to the phenomenon of domestic abuse were then identified and extracted. From these statements, formulated meanings were developed while remaining faithful to participants' original narratives.

The formulated meanings were subsequently clustered into thematic categories that reflected common structures of experience across participants. These thematic clusters were integrated into an exhaustive description of the phenomenon, capturing the complexity of surviving domestic abuse as an LGBTQ+ individual. Finally, the exhaustive description was synthesized into the fundamental structure, or essence, of the lived experience. To enhance the credibility of the findings, participants were invited to review the researchers' interpretations to determine whether the synthesized descriptions accurately reflected their experiences.

Consistent with the descriptive phenomenological tradition, reflexivity and bracketing (*epoché*) were practiced throughout the study to preserve the authenticity of participants' lived experiences while acknowledging the researcher's position within the research process. The researcher has a scholarly interest in gender studies, particularly LGBTQ+ issues, which motivated the study and informed awareness of the structural challenges experienced by sexual and gender minority communities. Although familiar with LGBTQ+ scholarship, the researcher did not share the participants' lived experiences of surviving domestic abuse and therefore occupied a partial insider-outsider position. This facilitated rapport during interviews while requiring continual awareness to avoid assuming shared meanings or allowing prior knowledge to shape participants' narratives.

Before data collection, the researcher engaged in reflexive journaling to identify personal assumptions regarding minority stress, heteronormativity, and intimate partner violence. During the interviews, open-ended questions, active listening, and phenomenological probing were employed to encourage participants to describe their

experiences freely, while leading questions and theoretical explanations were intentionally avoided. Throughout data analysis, bracketing was operationalized through reflexive memoranda documenting emerging interpretations, methodological decisions, and potential researcher assumptions. Interpretations were repeatedly verified against the verbatim transcripts to ensure that themes remained grounded in participants' accounts rather than the researcher's prior understanding. Peer debriefing with qualitative research colleagues was likewise undertaken to critically examine the developing interpretations, while an audit trail documenting analytical decisions enhanced the transparency and dependability of the study.

Recognizing that complete suspension of prior knowledge is neither possible nor desirable, reflexivity was understood as a continuous process of disciplined self-awareness rather than the elimination of researcher influence. This iterative practice strengthened the credibility, confirmability, and phenomenological integrity of the study by ensuring that the findings remained firmly grounded in the participants' lived experiences.

The trustworthiness of the study was established following Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria. Credibility was enhanced through prolonged engagement with the interview transcripts, member checking, and the extensive use of verbatim quotations to support interpretations. Dependability was maintained through an audit trail documenting methodological decisions and analytical procedures throughout the study. Confirmability was strengthened through reflexive memo-writing during data analysis to minimize researcher bias, while transferability was supported by providing rich, thick descriptions of participants, research context, and findings to enable readers to determine the applicability of the results to similar contexts. Ethical principles governing research involving human participants were strictly observed throughout the study. Participants received detailed information regarding the purpose of the research, the voluntary nature of participation, their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty, and the intended use of the findings. Written informed consent was obtained prior to each interview. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of pseudonyms and the removal of identifying information from interview transcripts. All collected data were securely stored and handled in accordance with the provisions of the Philippine Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173). The study likewise adhered to institutional ethical standards governing research involving human participants.

To enhance methodological transparency, Table 2 illustrates the analytical progression from significant statements to formulated meanings, thematic clusters, and the essential phenomenological constituents that collectively informed the synthesis of the lived experience.

Table 2.

Significant Statement	Formulated Meaning	Theme Cluster	Essential Constituent
"He told me that no other man would be with me because I am gay."	The participant internalized identity-based rejection, making the relationship appear irreplaceable despite the abuse.	Identity-based invalidation; fear of abandonment	Loving as a Search for Legitimacy within a Heteronormative Society
"I gave him everything he wanted because I loved him."	Financial sacrifice became an expression of emotional commitment rather than merely economic support.	Emotional investment and economic exploitation	Violence as a Progressive System of Identity-Based Control
"If he hit me, I fought back even if I got more bruises."	Resistance represented an immediate strategy for survival rather than escape from abuse.	Adaptive survival strategies	Enduring Violence through Negotiated Survival
"I looked at my bruises and realized I would die if I stayed."	Recognition of self-worth initiated the process of reclaiming agency.	Self-recognition and liberation	Reclaiming Agency through Self-Recognition and Affirming Social Relationships

3. Results

The Essential Structure of the Lived Experience

Phenomenological analysis illuminates that domestic abuse among LGBTQ+ survivors was experienced not simply as repeated acts of physical or psychological violence, but as a gradual erosion of identity, autonomy, and belonging within relationships that were initially perceived as spaces of acceptance and emotional security. Across participants' narratives, abuse unfolded as an evolving relational process in which affection and violence became inseparably intertwined, compelling survivors to negotiate love, fear, dependence, and self-preservation simultaneously. Rather than describing isolated incidents of victimization, participants recounted a lived reality in which violence became normalized through cycles of emotional attachment, manipulation, and social marginalization, making departure from the abusive relationship a psychologically complex and deeply existential decision.

The participants' accounts present that abusive relationships carried meanings extending far beyond intimate partnership. For many, these relationships represented rare spaces in which their sexual orientation or gender identity appeared accepted within a broader social environment where heteronormative expectations and persistent stigma often limited opportunities for affirmation and belonging. Consequently, the emotional significance attached to these relationships frequently exceeded that observed in conventional understandings of intimate partner violence. The fear of losing a partner was often experienced simultaneously as the fear of losing one's emotional refuge, social legitimacy, and affirmation of identity.

As survivors narrated their experiences, violence emerged not as a singular event but as a progressive system of domination that infiltrated multiple dimensions of everyday life. Physical assaults, verbal degradation, economic dependence, emotional manipulation, and identity-based humiliation collectively transformed intimate relationships into environments where survivors continuously negotiated their own safety while striving to preserve emotional attachment. Participants disclosed remaining in abusive relationships not because they failed to recognize the violence, but because leaving required confronting emotional uncertainty, social isolation, financial insecurity, and the internalized belief that future acceptance and love might no longer be attainable.

Donovan and Hester (2014) similarly argue that survivors' decisions to remain in abusive relationships cannot be reduced to dependency or passivity. Rather, leaving involves negotiating emotional attachment, social expectations, identity, and practical realities simultaneously. Participants in the present study likewise described survival as a continual negotiation among competing emotional, relational, and structural demands rather than a simple choice between staying and leaving.

Several narratives further illustrated how perpetrators exploited the participants' identities as LGBTQ+ individuals to reinforce control. Statements such as, "no other man would be with me because I am gay," exemplified how broader societal prejudice was appropriated within intimate relationships to cultivate self-doubt, emotional dependency, and resignation. Participants often experienced violence not only through physical injury but through the systematic manipulation of identity itself, whereby external discrimination became internalized and reproduced within the private sphere of intimate partnership.

Constituent I: Experiencing Love as a Search for Legitimacy within a Heteronormative Society

The first constituent of the lived experience illuminate that participants did not simply enter intimate relationships in pursuit of romantic companionship. Rather, these relationships represented deeply meaningful spaces where they experienced acceptance, affirmation, and recognition of identities that had frequently been questioned or marginalized within the broader social environment. For many participants, loving another person was simultaneously an affirmation of their own legitimacy as LGBTQ+ individuals. Consequently, the emotional significance attached to these relationships extended beyond affection alone, becoming intertwined with identity, belonging, and social validation.

This interpretation resonates strongly with Donovan and Hester's (2014) concept of the "practices of love," which argues that domestic abuse cannot be fully understood without recognizing that abusive relationships often originate in genuine affection, commitment, and aspirations for intimacy. Rather than viewing love as contradictory to abuse, they suggest that survivors' emotional investments frequently coexist with coercive control, complicating decisions to leave abusive relationships. The present findings provide phenomenological insight into this perspective by demonstrating that, for LGBTQ+ survivors in the Philippine context, love also functioned as a search for social legitimacy and identity affirmation within a predominantly heteronormative society. As one of the participants mentioned:

"I grew up with the fantasy of having a family of my own. I wanted what my sister had, a boyfriend, a partner, to be loved by a man. That's why I transitioned, and became a trans. I felt free. And when

he came to me, it was like a fantasy, because I felt like, now I am a girl, like a barbie I used to play when I was a kid."

Another participant also noted:

"I have been single for too long. In fact, I thought that someone like me who's gay would not really find someone for me. But when we started chatting, and he asked me out to date, I felt like my hair is too long, I felt like this is it, and finally someone saw me, interested, it was Cinderella moment. I mean, who doesn't like that? So, I immediately said yes."

One participant also shared:

"Who doesn't want to be loved by someone like him? I was the talk of the town because he chose me among other gays. They were all asking what I did for him to choose me."

One participant reflected:

"At the beginning, he constantly hurt me. But I stayed with him for so long because I believed him when he told me that no other man would be with me because I am gay."

Another participant also shared:

"It did not start like it though. We were happy at first, then he would hurt me whenever I cannot provide for his requests. I endured at first because I knew I loved him."

From a phenomenological perspective, this statement illuminates a reality extending far beyond emotional manipulation. The partner's assertion functioned as an act of identity invalidation, appropriating existing societal prejudice against sexual minorities and transforming it into a mechanism of interpersonal control. Participants described these experiences as undermining their perceived worthiness of being loved. Participants experienced the perpetrator's statements as drawing upon broader heteronormative stigma, thereby reinforcing emotional dependence.

The significance of this experience lies not simply in the presence of emotional abuse but in the source from which its power was derived. Participants described fearing not only the loss of a partner but also the possible loss of affirmation and belonging. Rather, it emerged from the possibility that the perpetrator's statement might be true, that societal rejection had rendered future intimacy unattainable. Consequently, remaining in the relationship represented more than preserving emotional attachment; it became an attempt to preserve the possibility of relational legitimacy itself.

This interpretation both supports and is consistent existing LGBTQ+ intimate partner violence scholarship. Previous studies have shown that minority stress, internalized homophobia, and expectations of rejection can heighten vulnerability to unhealthy relationship dynamics by diminishing perceived alternatives to intimate relationships (Meyer, 2003; Carvalho et al., 2011; Reyes et al., 2022).

Other participants similarly described the uncertainty that gradually came to characterize the relationship:

"Sometimes, it seemed like I did not understand our relationship since it was full of fights, and then he would hurt me."

Another participant mentioned:

"I accepted what he did though. Almost the relationships of my friends are like that, so I thought it was part of the relationship."

Several participants also disclosed how economic roles further reinforced these dynamics. One participant explained:

"He is into gambling and vices. That's when I nag him because I am working and, since I am gay, I am supposed to support him, and all my income given to him was just wasted on his vices and gambling issues."

Another participant also shared:

"I have provided for him, for everything he asked me. Whenever I cannot because I came short from my earnings in the beautyshop, I would start to worry."

At first glance, financial exploitation appears comparable to patterns commonly documented among heterosexual couples. However, closer phenomenological interpretation suggests an important distinction. The participant's statement, "since I am gay, I am supposed to support him", and "I have provided for him, for everything he asked me", disclosed the internalization of relational expectations rooted not in traditional marital obligations but in gendered assumptions imposed upon LGBTQ+ relationships. Participants often described financial provision as a way

of demonstrating devotion, loyalty, and relational worth, making economic sacrifice an extension of emotional commitment rather than merely a household responsibility.

These narratives resonate with Gendered Pathways Theory (Morash, 1999), which argues that experiences of victimization are shaped by broader gendered social structures rather than individual choices alone. The present findings suggest this perspective by demonstrating that pathways into domestic abuse among LGBTQ+ individuals are mediated not only by gender but also by the continual negotiation of socially marginalized identities. The participants' search for intimacy occurred within a heteronormative environment where acceptance was neither guaranteed nor equally accessible. As a result, intimate relationships acquired heightened emotional significance because they represented spaces where participants believed their identities were recognized and validated.

Constituent II: Living Within Identity-Based Control

As participants reflected upon their relationships, violence was rarely remembered as a singular incident that abruptly transformed a healthy partnership into an abusive one. Instead, they described a gradual progression through which abusive behaviors became increasingly embedded within everyday life until violence itself was normalized as part of the relationship. What initially appeared as isolated episodes of anger slowly evolved into an enduring system of domination that extended beyond physical assault to regulate participants' emotions, economic resources, identities, and perceptions of self. Consequently, abuse was experienced less as discrete acts of violence than as a continuous restructuring of everyday existence in which fear, affection, uncertainty, and dependency became inseparably intertwined.

Several participants associated episodes of physical violence with alcohol intoxication or gambling losses. One participant narrated:

"Whenever he is drunk, he cannot control his behavior. Since I am only a transgender, it is up to me to take care of him still even when he beats me."

Another participant similarly shared:

"If he hit me, I would fight back, even if I got more bruises in return. Whenever he is drunk, that is always the scenario."

Likewise, another survivor recalled:

"It starts when he is drunk... He would box me and slap me and there was a time he attempted to stab me with a knife. There was a time I held the knife with my bare hands, and I bled."

Another participant shared:

"It became normal for us. He was always almost drinking with his friends, sometimes even at our boarding house. I would really get scared if I don't have any costumer in the beautyshop, because that would mean I cannot give him money if he ask."

Viewed descriptively, these narratives appear to support the well-established association between abuse and intimate partner violence. However, the phenomenological significance of these experiences extends beyond intoxication itself. While numerous studies have identified alcohol misuse as a significant correlate of intimate partner violence (Huecker et al., 2022), the present findings suggest a more nuanced interpretation. Participants rarely perceived intoxication as the origin of abuse. Rather, alcohol functioned as a situational catalyst through which already existing patterns of domination became increasingly uninhibited. This observation aligns with Johnson's conceptualization of coercive control, in which violence reflects enduring power relations rather than isolated behavioral episodes, while simultaneously extending this understanding to LGBTQ+ relationships where identity-based marginalization further intensifies these dynamics.

More importantly, participants rarely described anticipating change following these violent episodes. Instead, abuse gradually became integrated into the ordinary rhythm of daily life. The predictability of violence paradoxically produced familiarity, and familiarity contributed to normalization. Survivors learned to anticipate emotional outbursts, modify their own behaviors to avoid conflict, and continuously assess their partners' moods in an effort to minimize harm. Their everyday lives became organized around managing the perpetrator's emotional volatility rather than exercising personal autonomy.

For several participants, control also extended into economic dependence and exploitation. One participant explained:

"He is into gambling and vices. That's when I nag him because I am working... all my income given to him was just wasted on his vices and gambling issues. Then he will get mad and hit me."

Another participants shared:

"I was afraid that if I did not give him what he ask, he would leave me. So, I give everytime he asked because he's not always like that, sometimes he's very loving, and that what mattered for me."

Perhaps the most distinctive feature of participants' experiences, however, was the manner in which perpetrators weaponized LGBTQ+ identities to reinforce domination. One participant recounted:

"He told me that no other man would be with me because I am gay. As someone who has spent most of my childhood wanting to be loved by others, it felt so good. I thought it was it."

Donovan and Hester (2014) describe such experiences as identity abuse, whereby perpetrators weaponize sexuality or gender identity to undermine victims' confidence, reinforce dependence, and intensify coercive control. Consistent with this observation, participants in the present study described attacks on their LGBTQ+ identities not merely as verbal insults but as profound assaults on their sense of self and future possibilities for intimacy. The present findings provide additional phenomenological insight into this understanding by demonstrating how identity abuse progressively reshaped survivors' lived experience of belonging, worth, and relational security.

Another participant also said:

"I believed when he said that I should support for him, because he chose me among many other. Many of my gay friends were interested in me, the same with me. But he chose me so I was so happy with that."

The present finding is consistent with previous research demonstrating that LGBTQ+ perpetrators frequently exploit minority-specific vulnerabilities, including threats of outing, internalized homophobia, and fears of social rejection, as mechanisms of coercive control (Donovan & Barnes, 2019; McConnell et al., 2018). However, participants in the present study described these experiences not simply as psychological tactics but as profound assaults on their sense of personhood. Phenomenologically, identity emerged as one important avenue through which coercive control was exercised, suggesting that identity invalidation appears to represent an experiential dimension that has received comparatively less attention in previous coercive control scholarship.

These findings support Donovan and Hester's (2014) conclusion that same-sex and heterosexual domestic abuse share many common characteristics, including coercive control, emotional manipulation, and physical violence, while differing in the ways sexuality and gender identity become incorporated into abusive dynamics. Their work challenges the assumption that LGBTQ+ domestic abuse represents an entirely separate phenomenon, instead emphasizing both commonalities and minority-specific forms of victimization.

Viewed through the lens of Gendered Pathways Theory (Morash, 1999), these findings show that pathways into prolonged victimization cannot be understood exclusively through gendered inequalities. Rather, participants' experiences illuminate that sexual orientation and gender identity intersect with gender to create distinct pathways of coercion. The social devaluation of LGBTQ+ identities did not merely exist as an external context surrounding domestic abuse; it became an active resource through which perpetrators exercised power and sustained survivors' dependence.

Constituent III: Negotiating Survival

As participants continued recounting their experiences, it became evident that surviving domestic abuse was not characterized by passive endurance nor by immediate resistance. Instead, survivors described a continuous process of negotiating survival within relationships that simultaneously inflicted profound harm while remaining emotionally significant. Their decisions to remain, to leave temporarily, to seek assistance, or to persevere independently were neither irrational nor contradictory. Rather, these decisions reflected ongoing attempts to preserve physical safety, emotional attachment, personal dignity, and future possibilities under conditions where every available choice involved considerable loss.

Contrary to conventional portrayals of domestic violence survivors as remaining because of helplessness or dependency alone, participants articulate considerable agency even while living within abusive relationships. Their narratives disclose that agency was not always expressed through immediate departure but through countless daily decisions intended to reduce harm, protect emotional stability, and maintain hope that circumstances might eventually improve.

One participant explained:

"If he hit me, I would fight back, even if I got more bruises in return because I thought if I would just let him punch me, he may kill me and I was afraid of that. I fought back just to make sure that I can stand for myself."

Another participant said:

"It became normal for us to fight. We box. Our friends often intervened. It was normal. I had to fight back, or else I would really be battered."

Another participant mentioned:

"My friends who's trans also fight with her boyfriend. She would fight back. So I learned it from her. We did not breakup after the fight though. He just apologized. I apologized too. Then, everything returns to normal."

Another participant shared:

"It is not that he wanted to do it intentionally. If he's drunk, and he asks for money, I would not give him because it's just wasted, then he would punch me. I would fight back, because it may gets worse if I don't."

This statement illustrates that resistance did not necessarily signify liberation from abuse. Fighting back represented an immediate strategy for survival rather than an escape from violence itself. Participants understood that resisting physical aggression often carried additional risks, yet remaining completely passive also threatened their personal safety.

Other participants adopted markedly different strategies. One participant shared:

"I never asked for help from other people, even from the government I did not receive any help. It was my perseverance to continue."

Another participant shared:

"I never went to my family for help. They would say this is my fault for choosing him. So why go to them? I don't think they would help me even because I tried to reach out once only to be told that I deserve this because I chose him."

Another similarly reflected:

"I would not receive any help from my family because they are dead already. I have no one else to go to but myself. When I turned fifty, I persevered to leave him and then I went to the city."

At first reading, these narratives appear to reflect independence and resilience. However, phenomenological interpretation suggests a more complex reality. Participants were not necessarily choosing self-reliance because they preferred isolation. Rather, independence frequently emerged after survivors perceived formal institutions, communities, or even family members as unavailable, inaccessible, or incapable of providing meaningful protection. Self-reliance therefore became less an expression of personal preference than an adaptive response to structural absence.

This finding illuminates an important dimension of the lived experience. Participants often described surviving through the gradual reconstruction of everyday routines rather than dramatic acts of resistance. Securing employment, relocating to another community, avoiding unnecessary confrontation, remaining emotionally composed during episodes of violence, and carefully managing financial resources all became strategies through which survivors incrementally expanded their capacity to regain control over their own lives.

For other participants, however, survival was inseparable from relationships beyond the abusive partnership. Several participants experienced family members as the first individuals who affirmed the legitimacy of their experiences and encouraged them to imagine lives beyond violence.

One participant simply stated:

"It was my family. I am fortunate with that. Because I know many gay and transwoman who are not welcomed, not supported by their own family. But I do not have that problem."

Another elaborated:

"My family is the only one I can approach that time since they really felt sorry with my situation. Even if they're too traditional, and that they really have not accepted our relationship, they are still open in giving me advice and helping me whenever I needed."

Similarly, another participant shared:

"The support of my family is the only one I can count on always."

These narratives suggest that family support functioned not merely as practical assistance but as an important process of identity restoration. Whereas abusive relationships systematically undermined participants' confidence and self-worth, supportive family members revalidated survivors' experiences, challenged the normalization of abuse, and reminded them that they deserved safety and dignity. The significance of these relationships therefore extended beyond emotional comfort; they represented alternative social spaces where participants' identities were affirmed without coercion.

Community institutions occupied a more ambiguous position within participants' lived experiences. Some survivors sought assistance from barangay officials, yet the assistance they received was frequently perceived as temporary or ineffective.

One participant recounted:

"When things get heated up, that's the time I confide in the barangay officials, but they just give me advice. There was one time when one of the officials told me to resolve our problem at home. I never went back after that, I just learned to fight back."

Another similarly explained:

"Yes, I tapped the barangay at that time... but when he was at the barangay, he was so good that's why we would get back. He would stay good for some time, then the same thing would return, and he would punch me, it's like going into circle for us."

Another participant also shared:

"It came to a point where I could no longer endure his attitude. So, I had to ask for the tanods for help. They came to help me. We had to be settled in the barangay. We became okay for a time after that, then his attitude of hurting me, or punching me returned."

These narratives illuminate that institutional intervention often addressed visible conflicts without disrupting the deeper relational dynamics sustaining abuse. Participants experienced temporary mediation rather than sustained protection, resulting in repeated returns to relationships where the underlying structures of domination remained unchanged. The limited effectiveness of community interventions described by participants contrasts with policy expectations that local mechanisms such as Barangay Violence Against Women (VAW) Desks provide accessible frontline responses to domestic violence. Although Philippine policies emphasize community-based protection, participants frequently experienced these interventions as temporary conflict mediation rather than sustained responses to coercive control. This divergence suggests that existing community mechanisms may be better equipped to address episodic interpersonal disputes than the identity-based dynamics characterizing LGBTQ+ intimate partner violence. Consequently, institutional responses frequently became incorporated into survivors' broader strategies of negotiated survival rather than functioning as definitive pathways toward safety.

The limited confidence participants expressed toward formal intervention mirrors Donovan and Hester's (2014) concept of the "gap of trust," which describes the reluctance of LGBTQ+ survivors to seek assistance from mainstream agencies because of anticipated discrimination, misunderstanding, or heteronormative assumptions. While participants in the present study occasionally approached community institutions, these encounters were often perceived as addressing immediate conflicts rather than the deeper identity-based dynamics sustaining coercive control.

Across participants' narratives, remaining in abusive relationships cannot be interpreted simply as reluctance to leave. Viewed through Gendered Pathways Theory (Morash, 1999), these findings suggest that pathways through victimization are not static trajectories but ongoing negotiations shaped by intersecting structural constraints. While the theory emphasizes how gendered inequalities influence women's experiences of victimization, the present findings articulate that LGBTQ+ survivors simultaneously negotiate additional forms of marginalization rooted in heteronormativity, identity-based discrimination, and limited access to affirming social institutions. Their pathways are therefore characterized not simply by gendered disadvantage but by the continual reconciliation of multiple structural vulnerabilities operating simultaneously.

This constituent presents that within this study, domestic abuse was experienced as negotiated survival. Rather than existing as passive recipients of violence, survivors continually interpreted, adapted to, and resisted their circumstances within the limits imposed by abusive relationships and broader heteronormative social structures. Their endurance reflects not resignation but an ongoing struggle to preserve selfhood until conditions made liberation conceivable.

Constituent IV: Reclaiming Selfhood

The final constituent of the lived experience illuminates that liberation from domestic abuse was not experienced as a single decisive event marked by the termination of an abusive relationship. Rather, participants disclosed recovery as a gradual reconstruction of identity through which they slowly reclaimed the capacity to define themselves independently of the meanings imposed by their perpetrators. Leaving the relationship represented an important transition, but participants consistently portrayed genuine recovery as beginning only when they no longer interpreted themselves through the devaluing narratives that had sustained the abuse.

Across the participants' accounts, agency did not suddenly emerge after violence ceased. Instead, it developed incrementally through a series of personal realizations, supportive relationships, and everyday decisions that restored survivors' confidence in their own worth. Recovery therefore unfolded less as a return to a previous self than as the creation of a renewed sense of identity capable of existing beyond the abusive relationship.

One participant reflected:

"I persevered because I did not have a choice."

Although initially appearing to express resignation, this statement carries deeper phenomenological significance. Perseverance was not merely the continuation of suffering; it represented an active refusal to surrender one's capacity to survive despite circumstances that appeared overwhelming. Survival itself became an assertion of existence against conditions that continually attempted to diminish the participant's sense of self. As one participant described a decisive turning point:

"I was staring at the bruises he gave me, and thought to myself I will die if I stay. So I left in the middle of the night while he was sleeping."

Another participant shared:

"When I turned fifty, I persevered to leave him and then I went to the city."

One participant also shared:

"We're going back and forth to the barangay, but he still continue his attitude of punching me. I just realized he's never going to love me the way I love him. So I left and did not tell him. I heard he was asking from my friends where I went, but I had already told them not to tell him."

These narratives illustrate that reclaiming agency was rarely impulsive. Rather, it emerged through the gradual accumulation of emotional readiness, practical opportunity, and renewed confidence. Relocating to another place symbolized more than physical separation from the perpetrator. It represented movement toward a social environment where participants could reconstruct their lives beyond the identities assigned to them within abusive relationships. Geographic relocation therefore became an existential movement from survival toward possibility.

Several participants similarly described moments of realization that fundamentally altered how they understood both themselves and the abuse they had endured. One participant explained:

"I just realized that he needs to be taught a lesson."

Another participant also shared:

"I thought to myself that this situation will never change. I thought he's just saw me as someone to provide for him."

Phenomenologically, this realization reflects a profound shift in consciousness. Earlier narratives positioned participants as continuously evaluating their own behaviors in relation to the perpetrator's expectations. Here, however, the direction of evaluation changes. Rather than questioning their own worthiness or responsibility, survivors began critically assessing the perpetrator's actions. This reversal signifies the gradual dismantling of internalized domination and the re-emergence of moral agency.

Family relationships frequently played a crucial role within this process of reconstruction. Participants repeatedly emphasized that family members became the first individuals to reaffirm their dignity after prolonged periods of psychological degradation. One participant shared:

"My family would be the only one I can approach."

Another stated:

"My family always checked on my situation."

The restorative role of family observed in the present study aligns with previous findings that supportive social relationships facilitate survivors' psychological recovery and resilience following intimate partner violence (Ogbe et al., 2020). However, unlike much of the existing literature that conceptualizes family primarily as a source of

emotional or practical assistance, participants in this study described family relationships as spaces where their identities were revalidated after prolonged experiences of identity-based degradation. Family therefore functioned not only as a support system but also as a relational context through which survivors reconstructed their sense of self.

Community institutions presented a markedly different experience. Participants acknowledged receiving advice from barangay officials and neighbors, yet these interventions were frequently experienced as limited in both scope and sustainability.

One participant recalled:

"They just give me advice."

Another reflected:

"He was called by the barangay, but when he was there, he was so good that's why we would get back."

These accounts present that institutional responses often focused on resolving visible interpersonal conflicts while overlooking the deeper psychological and identity-based dimensions of coercive control. Consequently, interventions frequently addressed the immediate incident without fundamentally transforming the relational conditions that enabled abuse to persist. Survivors therefore continued relying primarily upon personal resilience and trusted interpersonal relationships rather than institutional systems alone.

The narratives likewise disclose that recovery cannot be adequately measured by whether participants formally sought institutional assistance. Several participants reported receiving little or no intervention from government agencies, yet nevertheless succeeded in reconstructing meaningful lives through employment, relocation, family relationships, and renewed self-belief. Conversely, participants who encountered institutional support still described recovery as a deeply personal process that could not be delegated to external agencies. These findings suggest that formal intervention, while indispensable for ensuring immediate protection and legal accountability, cannot by itself restore the subjective dimensions of identity disrupted by prolonged abuse.

Viewed through Gendered Pathways Theory (Morash, 1999), these findings illuminate an important extension of the framework. The theory emphasizes that structural inequalities shape pathways into victimization; however, participants' narratives suggest that pathways out of victimization are equally shaped by access to affirming social relationships capable of restoring identity and agency. Participants described recovery not solely through the removal of structural barriers but through opportunities to reconstruct self-understanding within environments where LGBTQ+ identities are recognized, respected, and affirmed. Agency is thus relationally cultivated rather than merely individually exercised.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of participants' narratives is that they no longer defined themselves primarily as victims. Although the violence remained an indelible part of their life histories, it gradually ceased to function as the central lens through which they understood themselves. Phenomenologically, reclaiming agency therefore signifies far more than escaping an abusive partner. It represents the restoration of one's capacity to interpret, value, and direct one's own existence after prolonged experiences of coercive control. Participants did not merely leave violent relationships; they progressively reclaimed authorship over their own lives. These narratives suggest that reconstruction of selfhood represents the culmination of the lived experience described throughout this study and provides the interpretive foundation for understanding domestic abuse among LGBTQ+ survivors as a process that simultaneously threatens identity while also illuminating the extraordinary human capacity for resilience, self-recognition, and transformation.

Phenomenological Synthesis: The Essential Structure of Identity-Negotiated Survival

The phenomenological findings converge to reveal that domestic abuse among LGBTQ+ survivors is fundamentally experienced as a continual negotiation of identity, belonging, coercive control, survival, and recovery rather than as a series of isolated acts of interpersonal violence. Across participants' narratives, abusive relationships initially emerged as spaces of affirmation where emotional intimacy simultaneously represented acceptance of identities often marginalized within a heteronormative social environment. As violence gradually became embedded within everyday relational life, survivors described navigating not only physical and psychological harm but also threats to their sense of legitimacy, dignity, and relational belonging. Consequently, abuse was experienced as an identity-centered relational phenomenon in which affection, coercion, and marginalization became deeply intertwined.

The essential structure disclosed by the participants further illustrates that survival was not characterized by passivity but by the continual negotiation of constrained possibilities. Participants exercised agency through adaptive decisions that balanced emotional attachment, personal safety, financial realities, and available social support while living within relationships shaped by broader structural inequalities. Recovery likewise extended beyond leaving abusive partners. Rather, participants described gradually reconstructing their identities through self-recognition, affirming relationships, and renewed confidence in their own worth. Viewed as a whole, the lived experience represents an ongoing movement in which identity is continually challenged, negotiated, and reconstructed throughout the course of abuse and recovery.

Accordingly, the concept of Identity-Negotiated Survival should be understood as a phenomenological articulation of this shared meaning structure rather than as a predictive framework or stage-based model. Derived inductively through Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method, the synthesis captures the integrated essence of participants' lived experiences by demonstrating how identity, belonging, coercive control, survival, and agency remained inseparable throughout their journeys of domestic abuse and recovery.

This phenomenological synthesis is visually represented in Figure 1 as the essential structure of identity-negotiated survival.

Figure 1. Essential Structure of Identity-Negotiated Survival

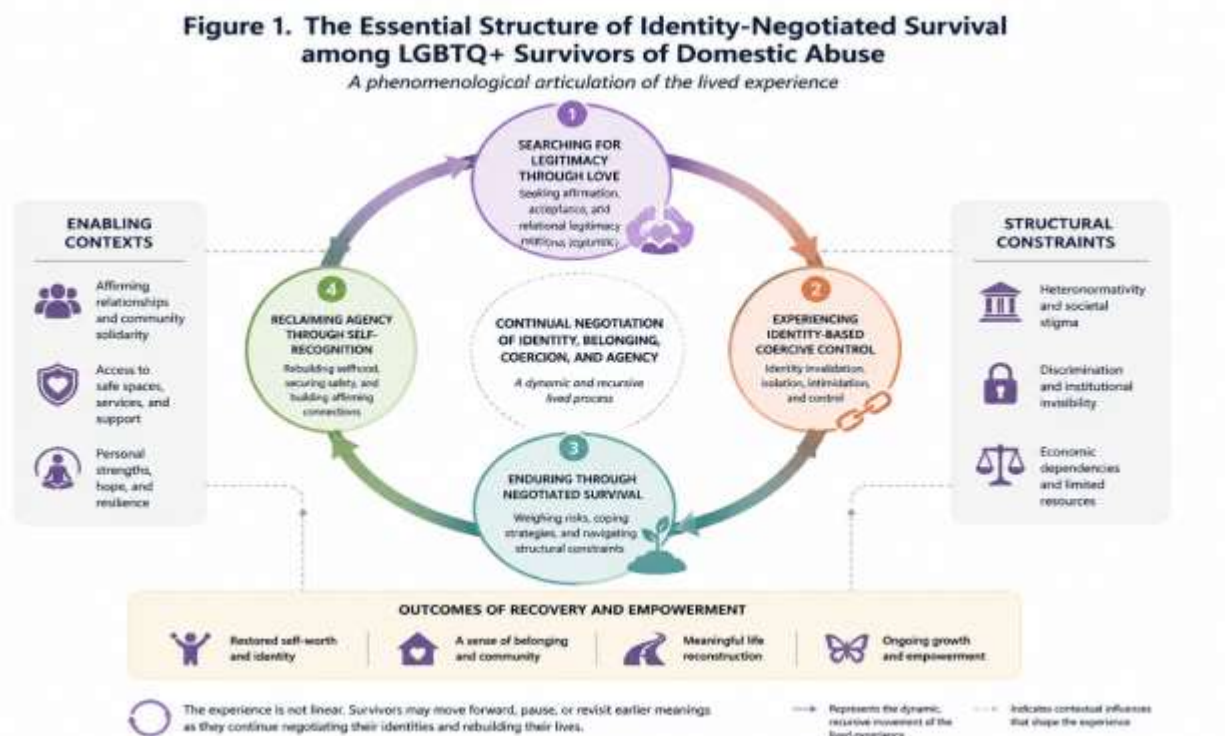


Figure 1 presents a conceptual illustration of the phenomenological essence identified in this study. Rather than depicting a fixed sequence of stages, the illustration represents the dynamic and recursive ways participants negotiated identity, belonging, coercive control, survival, and recovery throughout their lived experiences. The circular structure emphasizes that survivors often revisited earlier meanings as they interpreted their relationships and reconstructed their identities over time, while the surrounding contextual factors illustrate the structural conditions that simultaneously constrained and enabled these negotiations. Consistent with descriptive phenomenology, the figure is intended to summarize the integrated meaning structure derived from participants' narratives rather than to propose a formal explanatory model.

4. Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ survivors of domestic abuse in Mindanao, Philippines, through a descriptive phenomenological approach. Rather than experiencing domestic abuse as isolated episodes of physical or psychological violence, participants described it as a continual negotiation of identity, belonging, coercive control, survival, and recovery within intimate relationships situated in a heteronormative social context. The phenomenon was characterized by an evolving movement from relationships initially experienced as sources of affirmation, through identity-based coercive control and negotiated survival, toward the gradual reconstruction of agency through self-recognition and affirming social relationships.

The findings contribute to the growing literature on LGBTQ+ intimate partner violence by foregrounding the experiential meanings through which abuse is lived and interpreted, rather than focusing solely on prevalence, risk factors, or help-seeking behaviors. Participants' accounts suggest that domestic abuse disrupted not only physical safety but also their sense of identity, relational legitimacy, and belonging, highlighting dimensions of coercive control that are closely intertwined with broader experiences of heteronormative marginalization.

Rather than proposing a new explanatory theory, the study offers a phenomenological articulation of the shared meaning structure underlying participants' experiences. The concept of Identity-Negotiated Survival should therefore be understood as an interpretive description of this lived phenomenon rather than as a predictive model. In doing so, the findings provide phenomenological insights that may complement existing understandings of coercive control and Gendered Pathways Theory by drawing attention to the role of identity affirmation, minority stress, and belonging in shaping LGBTQ+ survivors' experiences of abuse and recovery.

Ultimately, this study suggests that the most enduring consequences of domestic abuse may extend beyond physical injury or psychological distress to the disruption of one's capacity to experience identity, dignity, and belonging. Equally, participants' narratives illustrate that recovery involves more than escaping violence; it entails gradually reclaiming the ability to define oneself independently of coercive relationships. Understanding domestic abuse through this phenomenological lens underscores the importance of interventions that protect survivors while also supporting the restoration of identity, relational affirmation, and human dignity.

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