



Fitting in or finding you? Students' gender expression and the social landscape

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ABSTRACT

Gender identity is an internal sense of being male, female, or another gender, which may not align with the sex assigned at birth and includes non-binary identities, while gender expression refers to the outward display of one's gender through attributes like clothing and behavior. Embracing and supporting the full spectrum of gender identities and expressions is essential for fostering a thriving and inclusive environment. Social acceptance significantly impacts quality of life, especially in academic settings where non-conforming expressions face stigma and discrimination. This study addresses the population gap by delving into students' lived experiences with diverse gender identities within academic settings. The study utilized a phenomenological research design to explore how students with diverse gender identities perceive and interpret their identities within their social environments. Respondent-driven sampling was used to select ten participants, ensuring a representative sample that includes various gender identities, thereby minimizing selection bias and enhancing validity. Data was gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews using a researcher-developed questionnaire and analyzed using thematic analysis to identify patterns and themes, with rigorous validation processes ensuring the accuracy and reliability of the findings. The study revealed that gender expression and identity are deeply tied to self-expression, encompassing clothing choices, behaviors, and language, which challenge traditional gender norms and advocate for broader recognition. Despite supportive social dynamics fostering inclusivity, participants face significant challenges within conservative communities and compounded discrimination, amplifying difficulties in achieving acceptance and authenticity. The findings highlight the persistent systemic biases and societal norms restricting authentic expressions, underscoring the need for continued efforts to create inclusive environments.

Keywords: gender expression, gender identity, societal perception, social landscape

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INTRODUCTION

Gender identity is the innermost sense of being male, female, or something in between, which may not necessarily correspond to the sex assigned at birth and encompasses non-binary genders (Pryzgodna & Chrisler, 2000). In contrast, gender expression involves how individuals convey their gender identity through external attributes such as clothing, mannerisms, and hairstyles (Monro, 2019; Yarcia et al., 2019). Recognizing and supporting individuals in their gender identity and expression is crucial for their mental health and overall well-being, as social acceptance significantly impacts their quality of life (Brodsky, 2023).

Gender expression, which pertains to how individuals present themselves, plays a significant role in shaping how others perceive and treat them. These expressions often diverge from conventional norms

associated with one's sex assigned at birth, reflecting a broader spectrum of gender identities (Gamboa et al., 2021). The variation in gender expression is not merely a personal choice but a critical component of one's identity, particularly among students (Sanders, 2020). As students navigate their academic settings, expressing their gender can significantly influence their social interactions and educational outcomes (Reyes et al., 2019). Understanding how students manage and express their gender identity within academic settings is vital for assessing broader societal attitudes and developing effective support systems. Research indicates that nonconforming gender expression often leads to stigmatization and discriminatory practices in various social contexts, including schools (Tang & Poudel, 2018).

Recent studies stress the need to address gender issues in schools and universities, but many still focus more on institutional bias than on how students experience gender expression in their daily lives.

Although there has been some progress in gender inclusion, challenges like gender-based violence and exclusion are still not fully addressed (Condrón et al., 2025). Many programs rely on general training but often lack clear goals, solid theories, or proper ways to measure long-term impact on students (Matus et al., 2024). Studies show a gap in how schools support diverse forms of gender expression. Efforts in fields like STEM still focus predominantly on binary gender roles and miss out on the full range of gender identities. These limits point to the need for research that looks beyond numbers and better understands how gender expression affects students' daily experiences, especially in places where traditional gender norms are still strong (Beroiza-Valenzuela & Salas-Guzmán, 2024).

In the Philippines, traditional gender norms and expectations often exert significant pressure on individuals to conform to binary gender roles. This cultural context can be particularly challenging for students whose gender expression does not align with conventional norms associated with their sex assigned at birth (Cabrera, 2017; Vibal et al., 2024). Despite the growing global awareness and acceptance of diverse gender identities, there remains a substantial gap in understanding how these issues manifest in the Filipino educational system. Students with nonconforming gender expressions frequently face stigmatization, discrimination, and exclusion, which can adversely affect their mental health and academic performance (Evangelista et al., 2022). The lack of empirical data and targeted research on the population exacerbates the problem, leaving educational institutions ill-equipped to support these students effectively (Suen et al., 2020).

The study aims to fill the population gap by exploring the lived experiences of students with diverse gender expressions within academic settings. The research seeks to uncover their specific challenges and identify the support systems that enhance their well-being and educational outcomes.

Statement of the Problem

This study explores the dynamics between student gender identity and social environments and examines students' perceptions of gender expression. Specifically, the study aims to answer the following questions:

1. How do college students define gender expression and gender identity?
2. What are the challenges faced and experiences by college students in their gender expression and gender identity?
3. How do college students foster respect towards the gender identity of others?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employed a phenomenological research design (Vagle, 2018) to explore the lived experiences of students with diverse gender identities. The approach focuses on understanding how these students perceive, interpret, and make sense of their gender identity within their social environments. The method ensures the findings are grounded in the participants' experiences, offering a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena under investigation. The design is suited to the study as it emphasizes the importance of personal perspective and subjective experience, making it possible to reveal the profound impact of social

Table 1. Demographic profile of the participants of the study

Name	Age	Year	Biological sex	Gender identity
GER-1	26	4	Female	Female
GER-2	20	2	Male	Male
GER-3	22	3	Female	Lesbian
GER-4	21	3	Female	Lesbian
GER-5	22	4	Female	Asexual
GER-6	23	4	Female	Bisexual
GER-7	21	2	Male	Male
GER-8	19	1	Male	Gay
GER-9	23	4	Female	Bisexual
GER-10	21	3	Male	Bisexual

acceptance of students with diverse gender expressions (Errasti-Ibarrondo et al., 2018).

Sample and Sampling Technique

The study employed the respondent-driven sampling (RDS) technique (Heckathorn, 1997). The RDS is particularly suited to the study as it allows for the deliberate selection of participants with direct experience with the phenomena under investigation. It targeted students who embody a range of conforming and non-conforming gender identities. The technique is crucial for accessing individuals who may need to be better represented in general population samples, thereby minimizing selection bias and enhancing the validity of the findings. Moreover, the RDS facilitates the inclusion of participants who can provide in-depth insights into the social dynamics and challenges faced by students with diverse gender identities, ensuring that the research accurately reflects their unique perspectives and experiences (Navarrete et al., 2022).

The study sample comprises ten participants aged 19-26, all from first- to fourth-year students. The biological sex distribution includes six females and four males, providing a balanced representation of different gender identities. Specifically, the participants include one female, two males, two lesbians, one gay, three bisexuals, and one asexual individual. The diverse composition allows for a rich exploration of various gender expressions and identities, ensuring that the study captures various experiences and challenges within the academic setting (Table 1).

Research Instrument

The instrument used in the study is a researcher-developed questionnaire designed to capture the experiences of students with diverse gender identities. The questionnaire includes open-ended questions to gather insights from personal experiences and challenges. The design ensures that the instrument addresses the multifaceted nature of gender expression and its impact on students' social lives. To ensure the validity and reliability of the questionnaire, it has been reviewed and validated by a panel of five experts specializing in psychology, sociology, education, and gender studies. These experts provided critical feedback on the questionnaire's content, structure, and language, ensuring that it effectively captures the experiences of the target population. The experts' validation process included evaluating the questions' clarity, relevance, comprehensiveness, and appropriateness of the response options (Hemming et al., 2018).

Data Gathering Procedure

The data-gathering procedure for the study involved conducting in-depth semi-structured interviews (Rutakumwa et al., 2020) to obtain

rich, detailed insights into the experiences of students with diverse gender identities. The process begins with recruiting participants through RDS, ensuring a diverse representation of gender identities. Potential participants are contacted via email and social media platforms, and those who express interest are provided with detailed information about the study, including its objectives, the interview process, and confidentiality assurances. Participants who consent to participate are scheduled for individual interviews at a convenient time and place, ensuring a comfortable and safe environment for open dialogue (Kamanzi & Romania, 2019).

During the interviews, a semi-structured format is employed, allowing the researchers to maintain a balance between guiding the conversation with predetermined questions and allowing participants to express their thoughts and experiences in their own words. The interview guide covers key topics such as personal experiences of gender expression and interactions with the community. The semi-structured approach ensures that while all critical areas are addressed, there is flexibility to explore emerging themes and follow up on participants' responses for deeper understanding (Knott et al., 2022). Each interview is recorded with the participant's consent and transcribed verbatim to facilitate thorough analysis.

Data Analysis

The study followed a meticulous process of thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2012) to ensure the integrity and richness of the data collected from the in-depth semi-structured interviews. Once the interviews were completed and transcribed verbatim, the researchers commenced with the initial phase of thematic analysis by immersing themselves in the data. The initial phase involved repeated transcript reading to familiarize oneself with the content. During this phase, researchers note preliminary ideas and significant points related to gender expression and social interactions. The notes served as the groundwork for identifying patterns and themes that will be explored in greater depth.

The next step involves generating initial codes from the data. Researchers systematically work through each transcript, highlighting meaningful units of text that relate to the research questions. These codes are then grouped into categories based on similarities and differences. To ensure the reliability of the coding process, researchers engage in peer debriefing sessions where they discuss and refine the coding strategies. The collaborative approach helps to minimize personal biases and enhances the accuracy of the analysis. At this stage, member checking is employed, where participants are invited to review the codes and initial interpretations to validate the accuracy of their accounts. The process ensured that the findings genuinely reflected the participants' perspectives.

Following coding, the researchers identified broader themes by examining the relationships between the coded data segments. Themes are defined, reviewed, and refined through an iterative process, ensuring that researchers accurately capture the complexity and depth of the participants' experiences. This phase involved checking for coherence within each theme and ensuring distinct boundaries between different themes. Finally, the researchers synthesize the themes into a coherent narrative that addresses the research questions. Thematic maps and models are created to represent the connections and hierarchies between themes visually. The synthesis is accompanied by illustrative quotes from the participants, which provide concrete examples of the themes and enhance the credibility of the findings (Kiger & Varpio, 2020).

Limitation of the Study

The study acknowledges several limitations that may affect the generalizability and comprehensiveness of the findings. Firstly, the study's sample size is limited to ten participants, which, while providing in-depth qualitative insights, may not capture the full diversity of experiences within the broader population of students with diverse gender identities. Secondly, although the study includes participants with various gender identities, the range is not exhaustive, potentially overlooking the experiences of other non-binary individuals who might have distinct perspectives. Additionally, the study focuses exclusively on the social landscape. It does not delve into other aspects that could provide a more holistic understanding of the challenges and support for students with diverse gender identities.

Trustworthiness of the Study

The study's trustworthiness is established through a rigorous, data-driven analysis process. The researchers followed the outline of Nowell et al. (2017) for trustworthiness: First, to ensure a deep understanding of the participants' experiences, researchers immersed themselves in the data for two weeks, engaging in continuous reading and reflection to capture the nuances of the interviews. This prolonged engagement helped to build a comprehensive and empathetic understanding of the data (Green et al., 2007). Second, the coding process was meticulously documented, with detailed records of how codes were developed and refined, providing a clear audit trail that enhances the transparency and replicability of the study (Kiger & Varpio, 2020). Finally, researchers incorporated participant feedback through member checking. Participants reviewed the initial codes and emerging themes to validate the accuracy and authenticity of the interpretations, ensuring that the findings genuinely reflect their experiences (Birt et al., 2016).

Ethical Consideration

The study adhered to stringent ethical standards to ensure participant protection and respect. Participation is voluntary, with informed consent obtained after fully briefing participants on the study's objectives. Confidentiality and anonymity are rigorously maintained by anonymizing data and removing identifying details from transcripts and reports (Kamanzi & Romania, 2019). The researchers employ non-invasive methods to gather data safely and respectfully. Transparency is upheld by clearly communicating the study's purpose, procedures, and findings to participants and providing opportunities for them to ask questions and receive comprehensive answers (Birt et al., 2016). These ethical measures ensure that the study is conducted with the highest standards of integrity, respecting the rights and dignity of all participants.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study explored the lived experiences in the social landscapes that college students with diverse gender expressions encounter, highlighting the challenges and opportunities experienced.

Defining Gender Expression and Identity

Figure 1 presents the overview of the thematic chart on defining gender expression and identity. Two major themes were generated: self-expression and identity with six sub-themes and innate characteristics with three sub-themes.

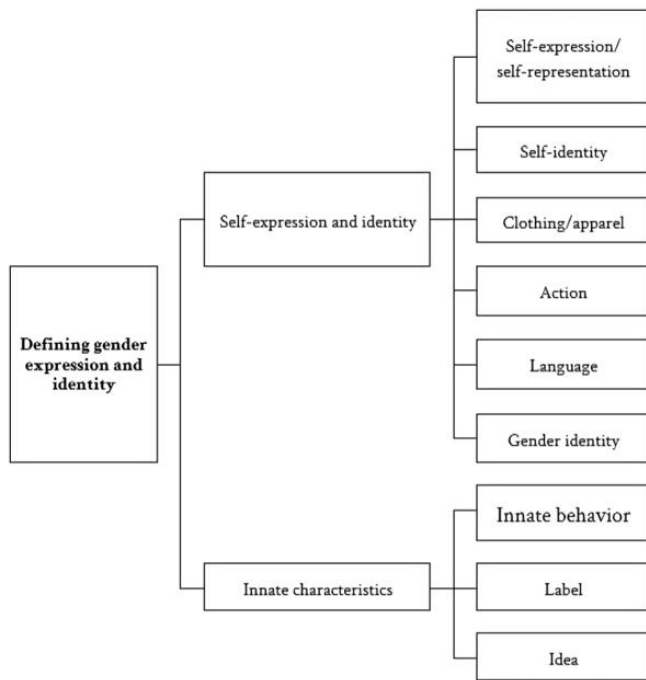


Figure 1. Overview of the thematic chart on the participants definition of gender expression and identity (Source: Authors’ own elaboration)

Table 2 summarizes the qualitative themes of the thematic chart on defining gender expression and identity. Moreover, **Table 2** presents sample verbatim responses to support the themes and sub-themes.

Self-expression and identity

The sub-themes of *self-expression* and *self-representation* reveal a complex interplay where participants articulate their gender through personalized and often distinctive practices. Participants describe gender expression as an evolving process deeply tied to their sense of identity, emphasizing authenticity and rejecting stereotypical norms (Laxa, 2020). They often navigate societal expectations by constructing unique representations, including clothing choices, behaviors, and social interactions (Yarcia et al., 2019). This self-expression becomes a critical means by which they assert their individuality and challenge traditional gender binaries, reflecting a broader cultural shift towards recognizing diverse identities and expressions (Cortez, 2021).

The sub-theme on *clothing/apparel*, *actions*, and *language* emerged as key elements through which participants perform and communicate their gender identities. Clothing and apparel serve as immediate, visible markers of gender expression, allowing the participants to experiment with styles that align with their internal sense of self (Johnson, 2020; Yarcia et al., 2019). Actions, including body language and behaviors,

further delineate gender roles and provide a dynamic canvas for expressing gender fluidity (Ochoa et al., 2019; Reyes et al., 2019). Language, encompassing pronouns and gendered terms, is pivotal in shaping and affirming gender identity within social contexts (Calder, 2020). These elements illustrate that gender identity is not a static trait but a dynamic interplay of various expressive forms that the participants use to navigate and negotiate their presence in the social landscape (Tang & Poudel, 2018).

The overarching theme of *self-expression and identity*, encompassing the six sub-themes, underscores that the participants define gender expression and identity as deeply interwoven and multifaceted constructs (Reyes et al., 2024). Through clothing, actions, language, and broader self-representation, participants articulate a gender identity that is both personal and socially responsive (Tang & Poudel, 2018). The interplay of self-expression and self-identity highlights a continuous dialogue between internal self-perception and external social validation (Cerezo et al., 2020; Reyes et al., 2019). This dynamic process reflects a broader trend towards embracing gender diversity and the fluidity of identity, challenging rigid gender norms and fostering an inclusive environment where individual identities can be authentically expressed and recognized (Johnson, 2020).

Innate characteristics

The sub-theme of *innate behavior* reveals that many of the participants perceive certain aspects of their gender expression and identity as inherent or natural traits rather than solely socially constructed phenomena (Marco, 2021). The participants often feel an intrinsic alignment or dissonance with their assigned gender at birth, manifesting through behaviors, preferences, and dispositions that feel authentic and unchangeable (Johnson, 2020). These innate behaviors are seen as fundamental components of their identity, providing a foundation upon which their gender expression is built (Geonanga, 2018). This perspective emphasizes the belief in a core self that guides how the participants navigate their gender expression in the broader social landscape.

The sub-themes of *label* and *idea* indicate that the participants engage deeply with the concepts and terminology associated with gender identity. Labels, such as non-binary, genderqueer, or cisgender, serve as crucial tools for self-identification and community building, helping the participants to articulate their experiences and find solidarity with others (Tan & Weisbart, 2022). Meanwhile, the “*idea*” of gender encompasses a broader philosophical understanding of gender as a fluid and multifaceted construct. The participants often grapple with the limitations and implications of labels, balancing the need for personal clarity with the recognition that no single label can fully encapsulate their identity (Caliguia, 2021; Yarcia et al., 2019). This

Table 2. Summary of the qualitative themes on the participants definition of gender expression and identity

Theme	Sub-theme	Sample statement
Self-expression and identity	Self-expression/self-representation	“... how you express your gender in the community ...”
	Self-identity	“... how they identify themselves as he or she ...”
	Clothing/apparel	“... expressed by their clothing ...”
	Action	“... you expressed it through your action ...”
	Language	“... through your language ...”
	Gender identity	“... I identify myself as bisexual ...”
Innate characteristics	Innate behavior	“... gender identity is innate ...”
	Label	“Gender identity is your label for yourself ...”
	Idea	“... gender identity is more on ideas ...”

distinct engagement highlights the cognitive and reflective aspects of defining gender.

The overarching theme of *innate characteristics*, encompassing the three sub-themes, illustrates that participants define gender expression and identity through a combination of intrinsic traits and reflective understanding (Geonanga, 2018). Innate behaviors provide a foundational sense of self, while labels and conceptual ideas offer frameworks for articulating and exploring this identity (Caliguia, 2021; Marco, 2021). The participants view gender as an internal reality and a socially negotiated construct, emphasizing the interplay between inherent dispositions and the intellectual exploration of gender concepts (Reyes et al., 2024). This dual approach reflects a holistic understanding of gender identity, integrating natural inclinations with thoughtful engagement with societal norms and language (Yarcia et al., 2019).

Challenges Encountered and Experiences in Expressing Their Gender Identity

Figure 2 presents an overview of the thematic chart regarding the encountered challenges in expressing their gender identity. Three major themes were generated: attitudes and responses, social dynamic, and societal framework.

Table 3 summarizes the qualitative themes of the thematic chart regarding the challenges encountered in expressing their gender identity. Moreover, Table 3 presents sample verbatim responses to support the themes and sub-themes.

Attitude and responses

The sub-theme on the *positive* aspects, such as *mindset*, *confidence*, and *acceptance*, of the participants experiences with gender expression and identity highlights the resilience and growth many students achieve despite challenges (Pedragoza et al., 2024). A proactive and open mindset enables the participants to navigate their gender expression with a sense of purpose and authenticity. This positive outlook is often reinforced by increasing self-confidence as students become more comfortable with their identity and expression (Laxa, 2020; Yarcia et al., 2019). Additionally, acceptance from peers, family, and the broader community is crucial in fostering a supportive environment where students can thrive (Gacusan et al., 2021). The combination of positive internal and external factors empowers students to embrace their gender identity more fully and confidently.

The sub-theme on the *negative* aspects, such as *judgment*, *taken as a joke*, *misinterpretation*, and *prejudice*, of the participants' experiences reveal the significant social challenges they face in expressing their gender identity. The participants report encountering judgment and

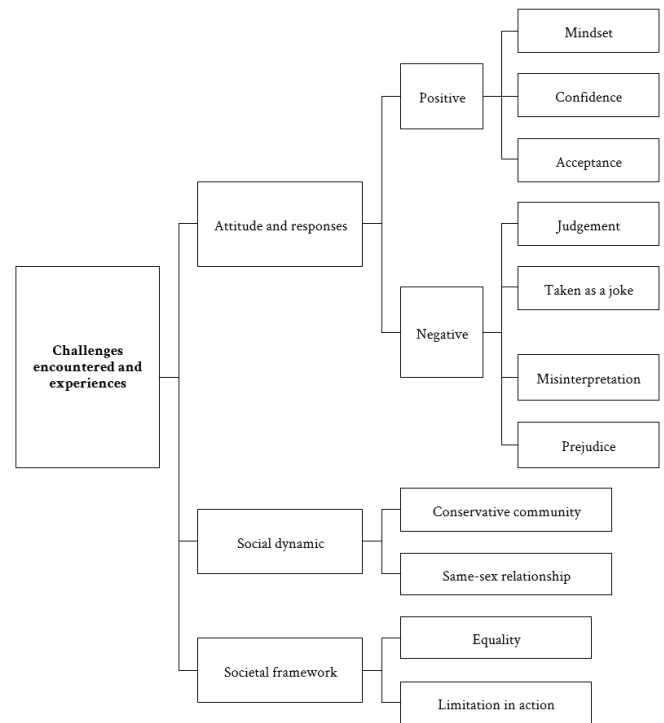


Figure 2. Overview of the thematic chart on the participants encountered challenges and experiences in expressing their gender identity (Source: Authors' own elaboration)

critical attitudes from peers and authority figures, which can undermine their self-esteem and sense of belonging (Domingo & Escobido, 2024; Reloj, 2021). Being taken as a joke or having their identity trivialized further exacerbates feelings of alienation and invalidation (Amistad, 2022). Misinterpretations of their gender expression often led to misunderstandings and negative stereotyping, while prejudice manifests in discriminatory behaviors and systemic inequities (Taragua, 2020). These negative responses create a hostile environment that hinders students' ability to freely and authentically express their gender identity.

The overarching theme of *attitude and responses*, encompassing both positive and negative sub-themes, reflects the complex social dynamics the participants navigate in expressing their gender identity. On the positive side, a supportive mindset, growing confidence, and acceptance significantly enhance students' experiences, enabling them to assert their identity with resilience and pride (Gacusan et al., 2021; Pedragoza et al., 2024). Conversely, judgment, trivialization, misinterpretation, and prejudice pose substantial obstacles, contributing to an

Table 3. Summary of the qualitative themes on the participants encountered challenges and experiences in expressing their gender identity

Theme	Sub-theme	Sample statement
Attitude and responses	Positive	Mindset “... one of the good aspects is my mindset ...”
		Confidence “... I have the confidence on the way I dress ...”
		Acceptance “... they accept my gender identity ...”
	Negative	Judgement “... how you acted towards others, you will be judged for later actions ...”
		Taken as a joke “... they are taking as a joke my feminine actions ...”
		Misinterpretation “... you have to express according to your gender identity to avoid misinterpretation ...”
		Prejudice “... when we say about gender there will always be a prejudice ...”
Social dynamic	Conservative community “...we are deeply rooted into a conservative community...”	
	Same-sex relationship “...my dad somehow accepts me of who I am but he won't accept me to have same sex relationship...”	
Societal framework	Equality ...there is an action that a woman cannot do compared to a man.”	
	Limitation in action ...one of the challenges that I experience is that I limit my actions.”	

environment that can be both hostile and invalidating (Amistad, 2022; Domingo & Escobido, 2024). Together, these attitudes and responses underscore the dual realities the participants face: while progress and support are evident, significant challenges remain (Yarcia et al., 2019). Addressing these challenges requires continued efforts to foster understanding, inclusivity, and respect for diverse gender expressions and identities within the college community (Tang & Poudel, 2018).

Social dynamic

The sub-theme of the *conservative community* highlights the significant challenges faced by the participants in expressing their gender identity within socially conservative environments. Students from such communities often encounter rigid gender norms and traditional beliefs that can deeply resist change (Alegre, 2018). This resistance manifests in limited acceptance and understanding of diverse gender identities, creating a climate of fear and repression (Yarcia et al., 2019). Participants report experiencing pressure to conform to conventional gender roles, facing ostracism, or even outright hostility when deviating from these norms (Evangelista et al., 2022). The conservative community's adherence to traditional values thus poses a substantial barrier to the free expression of gender identity, leading to feelings of isolation and marginalization for those who do not fit within these prescribed boundaries (Reyes et al., 2019).

The sub-theme of *same-sex relationships* reveals the additional layers of complexity and challenge for the participants navigating their gender identity and expression within the context of their romantic relationships. Participants in same-sex relationships often face heightened scrutiny and discrimination, both from within and outside their immediate social circles (Chavez & Ceneciro, 2023). The intersection of sexual orientation and gender identity can amplify the difficulties students encounter, including stigmatization and lack of acceptance (Montaño et al., 2022). These relationships often bring to the forefront societal prejudices and misconceptions, leading to potential conflicts with peers, family members, and within the larger community (Reyes et al., 2019). This compounded marginalization underscores the intricate ways in which gender expression and sexual orientation intersect, posing significant hurdles to achieving a fully accepted and authentic self (Yarcia et al., 2022).

The overarching theme of *social dynamic*, summarizing the two sub-themes, encapsulates the intricate social challenges the participants face in expressing their gender identity. Within conservative communities, students struggle against rigid norms and traditional beliefs that constrain their ability to express their gender openly (Alegre, 2018; Evangelista et al., 2022). The environment fosters exclusion and resistance, making it difficult for students to find acceptance and understanding (Yarcia et al., 2019). Similarly, those in same-sex relationships encounter compounded challenges, facing discrimination and stigmatization that intersect with their gender identity (Montaño et al., 2022). Together, these sub-themes illustrate the multifaceted social dynamics that shape and often hinder the experiences of college students. The interplay between community values and personal relationships creates a complex landscape where students must navigate significant obstacles to achieve authenticity and acceptance in their gender expression and identity (Reyes et al., 2019).

Societal framework

The sub-theme of *equality* underscores the participants' significant challenges in striving for equal recognition and treatment in their

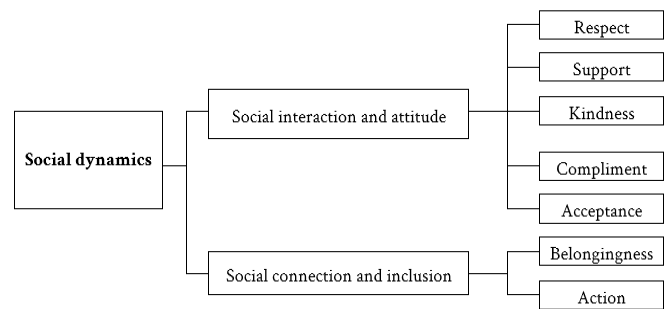


Figure 3. Overview of the thematic chart on the social dynamics of the participants on others gender expression (Source: Authors' own elaboration)

gender expression and identity (Evangelista et al., 2022). They encounter systemic biases and institutional barriers that prevent them from fully participating in various aspects of campus life (Tang & Poudel, 2018). This quest for equality involves personal acceptance and structural changes within educational policies, housing, healthcare, and extracurricular activities (Taragua, 2020). The struggle for equal rights and respect highlights a broader societal issue where entrenched norms and discriminatory practices impede true inclusivity and fairness in gender expression and identity (Yarcia et al., 2019).

The sub-theme of *limitation in action* reveals how societal norms and expectations restrict how the participants can express their gender identity through actions and behaviors. Participants report feeling constrained by fear of judgment or reprisal, leading them to modify or suppress their authentic expressions (Evangelista et al., 2022). These limitations manifest in various settings, from classroom interactions to social activities, where non-conforming behaviors might attract negative attention or exclusion (Ochoa et al., 2019). The pressure to conform to traditional gender roles and the lack of supportive environments exacerbate these limitations, stifling students' ability to freely explore and express their true selves (Reyes et al., 2019). This pervasive sense of restriction highlights societal resistance to diverse gender expressions (Tang & Poudel, 2018).

The overarching theme of *societal framework*, summarizing the two sub-themes, illustrates the structural and cultural challenges the participants face in their gender expression and identity. The pursuit of equality remains a significant hurdle, with systemic biases and institutional barriers perpetuating unequal treatment and opportunities (Tang & Poudel, 2018). Concurrently, societal norms and expectations limit students' actions, compelling them to conform to traditional gender roles to avoid negative repercussions (Reyes et al., 2019). These sub-themes reveal a societal framework that is often resistant to change, maintaining rigid structures that hinder the authentic expression and equitable treatment of diverse gender identities (Yarcia et al., 2019).

Social Dynamic on Others Gender Expression

Figure 3 presents the overview of the thematic regarding the social dynamics of the participants on others gender expression. Two major themes were generated: social interaction and attitude and social connection and inclusion.

Table 4 summarizes the qualitative themes of the thematic chart regarding the social dynamics of the participants on others gender expression. Moreover, **Table 4** presents sample verbatim responses to support the themes and sub-themes.

Table 4. Summary of the qualitative themes on the social dynamics of the participants on others gender expression

Theme	Sub-theme	Sample statement
Social interaction and attitude	Respect	"... respect your gender first before respecting others ..."
	Support	"... support them the way you want to be supported ..."
	Kindness	"First is kindness ..."
	Compliment	"... compliment their clothing ..."
	Acceptance	"... accept them for who they are ..."
Social connection and inclusion	Belongingness	"... do not exclude others as a group practice based on their gender ..."
	Action	"... they must act accordingly if they want to be respected ..."

Social interaction and attitude

The sub-themes of *respect*, *support*, and *kindness* highlight how the participants actively foster respect towards the gender identity of others through intentional and compassionate behaviors (Tang & Poudel, 2018). Participants emphasized recognizing and validating each person's gender identity by using correct pronouns and names, listening empathetically, and providing emotional and social support (Evangelista et al., 2022). Acts of kindness, such as standing up against discriminatory behavior and creating inclusive spaces, play a critical role in building a respectful and supportive community (Jacinto et al., 2024). These positive interactions are fundamental in promoting an environment where all students feel valued and understood, encouraging a culture of mutual respect and solidarity in gender expression (Pedragoza et al., 2024).

The sub-themes of *compliment* and *acceptance* illustrate additional ways the participants foster respect towards others' gender identity. Offering genuine compliments and affirmations about someone's gender expression can significantly boost their confidence and sense of belonging (Marco, 2021). At an individual and community level, acceptance involves embracing diverse gender identities and expressions without judgment (Jacinto et al., 2024). By normalizing and celebrating differences, students create a more inclusive atmosphere where everyone feels seen and respected (Reloj, 2021). These actions contribute to a positive and affirming environment, reinforcing the importance of validation and acceptance in supporting gender diversity (Reyes et al., 2019).

The overarching theme of *social interaction and attitude*, encompassing the five sub-themes, reflects how the participants foster respect towards the gender identity of others through everyday interactions and attitudes. By emphasizing respectful communication, empathetic support, acts of kindness, and genuine compliments, students actively contribute to a culture of acceptance and validation (Pedragoza et al., 2024). These positive social behaviors and attitudes are essential in creating a welcoming and inclusive environment where diverse gender identities are recognized and celebrated (Jacinto et al., 2024). Collectively, these efforts highlight the pivotal role of social interactions in promoting respect and fostering a supportive community for all students, regardless of their gender identity (Evangelista et al., 2022; Reyes et al., 2019).

Social connection and inclusion

The sub-themes of *belongingness* and *action* emphasize the proactive steps the participants take to foster respect towards the gender identity of others. *Belongingness* involves creating an inclusive environment where all students feel valued and integral to the community, regardless of gender identity (Evangelista et al., 2022). Participants achieve this by forming supportive groups, participating in allyship, and cultivating community through shared experiences and understanding (Taragua,

2020). The sub-theme of *action* focuses on students' tangible measures, such as advocating for inclusive policies, organizing educational workshops, and directly challenging discriminatory behaviors (Ochoa et al., 2019). These actions demonstrate a commitment to not only acknowledging diverse gender identities but actively working to ensure they are respected and upheld within the campus community (Johnson, 2020; Reyes et al., 2019).

The overarching theme of *social connection and inclusion*, summarizing the two sub-themes, highlights how the participants foster respect towards the gender identity of others through intentional community-building and proactive initiatives. By creating spaces where everyone feels a sense of belonging and taking concrete actions to support and advocate for inclusive practices (Johnson, 2020), students contribute to a respectful and accepting environment (Reyes et al., 2019). This dual approach of fostering connection through emotional and social bonds and practical actions to promote inclusivity underscores the importance of relational and structural efforts in cultivating a respectful and inclusive campus atmosphere (Tang & Poudel, 2018; Yarcia et al., 2019). Through these combined efforts, students ensure that respect for diverse gender identities is deeply embedded in the social fabric of their college community (Chan et al., 2022).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The study revealed the intricate challenges and dynamics regarding gender expression and identity. Through qualitative interviews, it was evident that self-expression is a critical facet of gender identity, encompassing personalized clothing choices, behaviors, and language. These expressions are deeply tied to participants' sense of authenticity and individuality, challenging traditional gender norms and advocating for broader recognition of diverse identities. Nonetheless, participants face significant challenges within conservative communities where rigid gender norms prevail, leading to feelings of isolation and repression. Additionally, those in same-sex relationships experience compounded discrimination, facing scrutiny both for their gender identity and sexual orientation. The result highlights the intersectionality of gender expression and sexual orientation, amplifying the difficulties in achieving acceptance and authenticity.

Nevertheless, supportive social dynamics are pivotal in fostering respect for gender diversity. Acts of respect, support, kindness, and acceptance from peers and the community significantly enhance students' experiences, promoting a culture of inclusivity. However, the negative aspects, such as judgment, trivialization, and prejudice, continue to create hostile environments, undermining students' self-esteem and sense of belonging. The pursuit of equality remains a substantial hurdle, with systemic biases and institutional barriers

impeding fair treatment and opportunities for gender-diverse students. Societal norms and expectations often restrict authentic expressions, forcing students to conform to traditional roles to avoid negative repercussions.

In conclusion, while there are positive strides towards acceptance and respect for gender diversity, significant challenges persist. The findings underscore the importance of continued efforts to create inclusive environments that support and validate diverse gender expressions and identities.

Recommendations

To address the challenges identified in the study, it is crucial to implement comprehensive educational programs that promote understanding and respect for gender diversity. Institutions could incorporate gender sensitivity training for faculty, staff, and students to foster a more inclusive campus environment. Additionally, policies could be developed to safeguard and support gender-diverse students, ensuring their rights and needs are met across all areas of campus life.

Further research could focus on longitudinal studies to track changes in attitudes and experiences of gender-diverse students over time. Exploring the effectiveness of existing and implemented policies and programs can provide valuable insights into best practices for fostering inclusivity. Additionally, investigating the intersectionality of gender identity with other factors such as denomination, socioeconomic status, and cultural background can offer a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by diverse student populations.

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