

# Safe Spaces and Identity: LGBTQ+ Criminology Students Experiences

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## ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ criminology students regarding safe spaces, identity expression, and a sense of belonging. Specifically, it sought to determine how physical and social spaces, identity experiences, personal trajectories, and interpersonal interactions influence students' perceptions of safety and inclusion. A hermeneutic-phenomenological research design was employed to capture the essence of participants' lived experiences. The study was conducted in a higher education institution in the Province of Bukidnon. The participants consisted of ten purposively selected second- to fourth-year LGBTQ+ criminology students who voluntarily shared their experiences. Data were gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews conducted in a private and conducive setting. The data were analyzed using Max van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenological approach through thematic reflection and interpretation. Findings revealed that inclusive and respectful learning environments, supportive relationships, and institutional practices significantly shaped students' sense of safety, identity expression, and belonging, while also fostering self-acceptance and resilience. The study concludes that the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ criminology students are deeply influenced by the interplay of social interactions and institutional culture within academic environments. It is recommended that educational institutions strengthen inclusive policies, promote gender-sensitive practices, and foster supportive learning environments to enhance students' well-being and academic engagement.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The global and national context of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Asexual (LGBTQ+) inclusion in education emphasizes the shared responsibility of creating fair and inclusive learning spaces for all students, regardless of gender identity or sexual orientation. The LGBTQ+ community refers to individuals whose sexual orientations or gender identities differ from traditional societal norms, encompassing diverse identities such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, asexual, and other gender diverse groups. International efforts, such as those discussed by Smith (2022), highlight that the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 4 continues to promote equal and quality education for everyone. In line with this, Johnson (2023) explains that the UNESCO Safe Schools Initiative aims to protect students from bullying, violence, and exclusion, while the Safe Spaces Act in

the Philippines requires schools to maintain safe, inclusive, and gender sensitive environments.

Furthermore, the idea of safe spaces in schools continues to grow as a framework that promotes inclusion, equality, and respect for diversity (Beasy et al., 2021). Originating in social justice movements, this concept is now applied in education to create environments where students, especially those from marginalized groups such as LGBTQ+ learners, can express themselves freely without fear of discrimination (Caris-Hamer, 2025). Safe spaces aim to ensure emotional and physical safety, helping every learner feel valued, respected, and protected (UNESCO, 2023). Such inclusive learning environments contribute to achieving Sustainable Development Goal 4, promoting equal and quality education for all. These global and national efforts demonstrate a commitment to protecting human

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dignity and building inclusive schools where LGBTQ+ students can grow without prejudice (Beasy et al., 2021).

In addition, LGBTQ+ concerns among students are growing, according to recent studies. Nearly 75 percent of LGBTQ+ youth have seriously considered suicide, and 46 percent have attempted it, according to the 2024 Philippines National Survey on the Mental Health of LGBTQ+ Young People. The Trevor Project (2024) reports that 34 percent of respondents experienced physical threats or abuse, while 74 percent reported discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity. Only 22.4 percent of LGBTQ+ students reported bullying incidents to school personnel (Human Rights Campaign, 2023). UNESCO (2023) also notes that bullying online and offline remains widespread, showing that issues persist both globally and locally.

Moreover, even though the Safe Spaces Act (Republic Act No. 11313) aims to stop and punish gender based sexual harassment in schools, there are still significant implementation gaps. The Act requires gender sensitive investigative methods, codes of conduct against harassment, and designated officers to receive complaints (PCW, 2023). However, violations persist despite these provisions. Between 2016 and 2023, over 1031 violations were recorded in various institutions, including schools (RSIS International, 2023).

Consequently, LGBTQ+ students continue to face challenges that greatly affect their academic performance and emotional well-being (Kosciw et al., 2022). Many experience bullying, discrimination, and harassment from peers and sometimes even teachers, which causes fear, anxiety, and isolation. Earnshaw et al. (2022) note that homophobic and transphobic bullying remains common, pushing many LGBTQ+ learners to skip classes or withdraw from school. Fetner and Kush (2023) add that the lack of gender sensitivity and inclusive programs further contributes to poor academic performance and diminished emotional health.

Similarly, the continued presence of unsafe school environments shows that policies alone are not enough unless they are effectively implemented and monitored. Many LGBTQ+ students still share experiences of bullying, harassment, and limited institutional support (Kosciw et al., 2020). Building safe spaces requires active involvement from teachers, school leaders, and peers, not just written rules. Practical measures such as gender-sensitivity training and peer support groups have been shown to improve outcomes and school climate (Earnshaw, Bogart & Williams, 2022).

Likewise, only a few qualitative studies have focused on the voices of LGBTQ+ students, especially within local school settings. Without firsthand perspectives, many policies fail to address the real needs of LGBTQ+ learners (Kosciw et al., 2022). This lack of deeper understanding prevents the creation of learning environments that truly value inclusivity and equity. Examining their lived experiences will highlight needed improvements in school inclusivity and support systems (Badgett, Carpenter, & Sansone, 2021).

Additionally, international research shows that safe and inclusive environments remain inconsistent across contexts. A study in Australia revealed that LGBTQ+ students often feel less secure than how parents and teachers perceive the school climate, pointing to a gap in understanding their actual experiences (Ullman, 2024). Similarly, a systematic review found that inclusive school climates affirming policies, peer networks, and trained staff were associated with lower risks of depression and suicidal behavior among LGBTQ+ adolescents (Kosciw et al., 2020).

Furthermore, recent research shows that in many contexts, including the Philippines, heteronormative and cisnormative norms still dominate school culture, marginalizing LGBTQ+ students and making them feel unsafe or invisible (Dungog, 2025). Mori (2024) notes gaps in policies, facilities, and program development that contribute to persistent discrimination and adverse academic outcomes. Taken together, these studies suggest that, despite the presence of inclusivity policies, structural and cultural limitations within educational institutions continue to reinforce marginalization, underscoring the need for more effective, context-responsive implementation of inclusive practices.

In fact, a recent qualitative study in a Philippine university documented how LGBTQ+ criminology students cope with bullying and subtle forms of exclusion, showing strong effects on academic performance and mental health (Castillo, 2024). Research on safe spaces in higher education also found that affirming curricula and supportive peer relationships enhance belonging and well-being (Abesamis & Alibudbud, 2023). These findings highlight that criminology programs pose unique challenges. Overall, these findings indicate that while supportive environments can significantly improve student outcomes, the persistence of exclusionary experiences underscores the importance of strengthening both institutional support systems and peer-based inclusivity within criminology education.

Moreover, criminology is a traditionally male-dominated and conservative field grounded in law enforcement culture, which often upholds rigid gender norms, discipline, and heteronormative expectations (Garcia & Rios, 2022). LGBTQ+ criminology students may feel pressured to conform to traditional masculine behaviors or suppress their identities because of the perceived culture of policing and public safety institutions (Cox, 2023). Thus, the intersection of institutional culture and professional expectations creates a complex environment in which LGBTQ+ students must continually negotiate identity and conformity, underscoring the need for transformative approaches that challenge rigid norms and promote inclusivity within criminology programs.

Additionally, the level of acceptance LGBTQ+ students experience is significantly shaped by their daily interactions with professors, classmates, and school organizations. Supportive faculty, inclusive language, peer acceptance, and visibility of LGBTQ+ student groups contribute to a sense of safety (Vaccaro et al., 2021). Conversely, insensitive remarks or exclusion from class activities reinforce fear and invisibility, issues consistently documented in higher education research on LGBTQ+ experiences (Pryor et al., 2022). These interpersonal relationships play a central role in shaping safe spaces.

In this regard, identity development is deeply affected by school environments. Safe spaces allow LGBTQ+ students to express themselves authentically, explore their identities confidently, and feel accepted (Adhia et al., 2024). Without such spaces, students may hide their identities, experience emotional distress, or suffer academically (Pitcher et al., 2021). This makes safe spaces essential to both personal and academic growth, especially for LGBTQ+ students in criminology programs.

Furthermore, schools that commit to safe and inclusive practices help LGBTQ+ learners build resilience, confidence, and interpersonal skills, traits needed in high-stress fields such as policing and investigation. Unsafe spaces, however, intensify anxiety, limit participation, and weaken academic performance. These ideas reinforce the earlier findings presented by Woodford et al. (2021) and Pitcher et al. (2021).

Despite increasing awareness of LGBTQ+ issues, a significant gap remains between inclusivity policies and the lived realities of LGBTQ+ students, as most studies focus on institutional frameworks rather than personal experiences (Miller, 2022; Meyer & Keenan, 2022). There is also limited research in the Philippine context, particularly among criminology students, despite ongoing concerns about discrimination and

mental health. Additionally, existing literature often relies on single disciplinary perspectives, revealing an interdisciplinary gap that overlooks the integration of criminology, psychology, gender studies, and education in understanding students' lived experiences and well-being. This study addresses these gaps by exploring LGBTQ+ students' experiences, challenges, and support systems, contributing to more inclusive and responsive educational environments.

Finally, understanding the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ students is essential because it reveals how they navigate educational settings often shaped by traditional or heteronormative norms. Listening to their stories provides insight into their emotions, identity struggles, relationships, and perceptions of safety, highlighting how school structures influence confidence and belonging. Using a phenomenological approach helps uncover what safe spaces truly mean to them and encourages schools to move beyond symbolic gestures toward genuine inclusion and respect.

## 2. Methods

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore and understand the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ students. Phenomenology aimed to uncover the meaning of individuals' everyday experiences by focusing on how they interpreted and made sense of significant events in their lives (Neubauer et al., 2021). This design was appropriate for the study as it enabled a deeper understanding of how LGBTQ+ students experienced safety, belonging, and challenges within their educational environment. Moreover, it provided a platform for participants' voices to be meaningfully expressed, making it suitable for examining their real-life experiences of discrimination, support, and identity expression.

The setting of this study was at a higher education institution in the Province of Bukidnon, which was selected for its distinctive sociocultural context and diverse student population. The intersection of campus culture, community values, and the evolving discourse on inclusion within the area shaped the daily experiences of LGBTQ+ students. By focusing on a single academic setting, the researcher was able to comprehensively examine how LGBTQ+ students perceived, constructed, and navigated safe spaces in both their academic and social interactions on campus.

Participants in this study consisted of self-identified LGBTQ+ students enrolled in the second to fourth years of the Criminology program. Using purposive sampling, the researcher specifically selected self-

identified gay students who were willing to share their experiences of safety, inclusion, and belonging within the school environment. To ensure that the participants reflected the focus of the research, only those who met the following inclusion criteria were invited: (1) they were self-identified gay students; (2) they were currently enrolled as second-, third-, or fourth-year criminology students; (3) they were at least 18 years old to provide informed consent; (4) they were willing to participate in a semi-structured interview; and (5) they were open to sharing their personal experiences related to safety, inclusion, and belonging on campus.

A total of ten (10) participants were selected and included in the study. Each participant took part in an interview designed to encourage open, honest, and reflective storytelling. To safeguard privacy and ensure participants' comfort throughout the process, pseudonyms were used, and all information provided was kept strictly confidential.

The primary instrument utilized in this study was a semi-structured interview guide developed by the researcher. The guide consisted of open-ended questions designed to elicit in-depth insights into LGBTQ+ students' lived experiences, particularly their perceptions of safety, inclusion, and sense of belonging within the school environment. These questions encouraged participants to narrate their experiences freely and in detail, enabling the researcher to capture the essence and meaning of their personal realities. The interview guide was organized into key thematic areas, including relationships with peers and teachers, participation in academic and extracurricular activities, access to support services, and perceptions of institutional policies. In addition, probing and follow-up questions were incorporated to clarify responses and further enrich the data gathered.

Prior to data collection, the interview guide underwent expert validation by research advisers and qualitative research specialists to ensure clarity, appropriateness, and alignment with the study's objectives. A pilot interview was subsequently conducted to assess the flow, sequencing, and effectiveness of the questions. Based on the feedback received, necessary revisions were made to enhance the instrument's reliability and its ability to generate meaningful, relevant data.

Throughout the data collection process, the interview guide served as a flexible yet structured tool, enabling the researcher to adapt questions to participants' narratives while maintaining alignment with the study's central themes. This flexibility ensured a more natural flow of conversation and facilitated the

emergence of rich, authentic, and contextually grounded data.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Prior to distributing questionnaires, the researcher secured the necessary approvals from the following authorities: the Misamis University Ethics Review Committee (MUREC) for the research protocol; the Technical Review Board for the research proposal; the Review Assessment Committee; and the Informed Consent Assessment Panel. These approvals ensured that the study complied with institutional and ethical standards governing research involving human participants.

Furthermore, the researcher emphasized that all data collected through the survey would be used solely for academic purposes. Participants were assured that their identities would remain anonymous and that all information gathered would be kept strictly confidential. Each participant was fully informed about the purpose of the study and was asked to voluntarily indicate their willingness to participate and to provide honest and sincere responses to the questionnaire.

Moreover, any sensitive information shared by the participants was handled with the highest level of privacy and respect. The study strictly implemented appropriate measures to safeguard anonymity and confidentiality, including secure data storage and restricted access to research materials, thereby ensuring the protection of all participants throughout the research process.

### **3. Results and Discussion**

The findings are presented under the following themes: Inclusive and Respectful Learning Spaces; Experiencing Identity through Comfort, Self-Expression, and Emotional Anxiety; Negotiating Authenticity and Acceptance in Social and Institutional Interactions; and Evolving Self-Acceptance and Resilience over Time. Each theme is discussed with supporting narratives from participants and interpreted in relation to existing literature and the study's theoretical framework, providing a comprehensive understanding of LGBTQ+ students' lived realities in the academic setting.

#### **Inclusive and Respective Learning Spaces.**

This theme highlights the acceptance and belonging among LGBTQ+ criminology students. Inclusive and respectful learning spaces for LGBTQ+ students often involve feeling accepted, valued, and treated equally within the academic environment, regardless of sexual orientation or identity (Woodford et al., 2021). In criminology programs, students frequently interact with peers, teachers, and institutional

structures that shape how safe or comfortable they feel expressing their identities. For the participants, inclusive learning spaces imply environments where diversity is respected, communication is supportive, and individuals are evaluated based on their abilities rather than their sexual identity (Ullman, 2022). Some participants described welcoming spaces as those where equality and respect are consistently practiced. Others emphasized that negative comments, stereotypes, or discriminatory attitudes create feelings of discomfort and exclusion within the learning environment.

As noted by Participant 1, a welcoming space is characterized by equal treatment and evaluation based on one's performance rather than sexual identity. Participant 2 similarly emphasized that respect and the absence of stereotypes contribute to a sense of comfort in school spaces. Participant 3 also described experiencing both acceptance and judgment at different times, noting that people often hold diverse perspectives toward LGBTQ+ identities. These insights highlight that the inclusivity of learning environments largely depends on how individuals treat and interact with one another. These experiences are reflected in the following responses:

*"Spaces feel welcoming when people treat me equally and judge me based on my performance, not my sexuality. They feel unwelcoming when there is discrimination, judgment, or negative comments about my identity."* (P1)

*"For me, a welcoming space is when I feel respected, while on the other hand unwelcoming spaces is where people joke, judge or stereotype others."* (P2)

*"For me, it is both welcoming and unwelcoming at times. Not everyone can fully accept us, but sometimes it feels normal because people have different perspectives. There are moments when I feel accepted, and there are also times when I feel judged since not all people share the same understanding and views."* (P3)

*"If I am respected and treated equally, the space feels welcoming. However, if I am judged, excluded or treated differently because I am gay, then it feels unwelcoming and uncomfortable for me."* (P6)

*"These spaces feel welcoming to me when teachers and classmates communicate with me in a respectful and supportive way and when we help each other with our tasks. It also feels welcoming when school spaces are accessible to everyone without discrimination or exclusion."* (P7)

*"A space feels welcoming when there is inclusivity and respect for diversity. It feels unwelcoming when stereotypes, bias or discrimination are present."* (P10)

Participants' responses highlight that inclusive and respectful learning spaces significantly influence LGBTQ+ students' sense of safety and belonging in criminology programs. The narratives of Participants 1, 2, 6, and 7 emphasized that equal treatment, respectful communication, and supportive interactions contributed to a welcoming academic environment. In contrast, stereotyping, judgment, and exclusion created feelings of discomfort and emotional distance. These experiences indicate that the quality of interpersonal relationships within the learning environment plays a crucial role in shaping students' perceptions of acceptance and inclusion. Participants' accounts further suggest that inclusive learning spaces are experienced not only through institutional policies but also through everyday social interactions in the classroom and campus environment. When peers and teachers demonstrated respect, fairness, and supportive communication, students felt more confident expressing their identities and participating in academic activities. In contrast, discriminatory remarks and bias led to feelings of marginalization.

These results support Queer Theory, which posits that inclusive environments challenge heteronormative structures and affirm diverse identities within educational spaces, allowing LGBTQ+ students to express themselves authentically. Similarly, the results align with Minority Stress Theory, as supportive interactions reduced experiences of stress, while discrimination and exclusion contributed to emotional distress and feelings of marginalization. Furthermore, the results are consistent with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which emphasizes that students' experiences are shaped by immediate social interactions (microsystem), such as relationships with peers and teachers.

These results are consistent with previous studies indicating that inclusive and affirming school environments enhance students' sense of belonging and emotional well-being, while discriminatory experiences negatively affect their participation and psychological health (Kosciw et al., 2020; Woodford et al., 2022; Poteat et al., 2022). Moreover, related studies further emphasize that inclusive educational environments play a crucial role in promoting the well-being and academic engagement of LGBTQ+ students. McField et al. (2025) highlighted that respectful school climates and supportive peer relationships significantly improve students' sense of

belonging and participation in school activities. Similarly, Kosciw et al. (2022) noted that inclusive learning environments that respect diversity help reduce discrimination and promote equality among students. In addition, Russell and Fish (2020) explained that supportive school environments characterized by respect, acceptance, and inclusive practices contribute to improved psychological well-being and academic engagement among LGBTQ+ learners.

### **Experiencing Identity through Comfort, Self-Expression, and Emotional Anxiety.**

This theme highlights how LGBTQ+ criminology students experience their identity through varying levels of comfort, confidence, and emotional tension within different academic spaces. The meaning of comfort for LGBTQ+ students often involves feeling accepted, respected, and free to express their identity without fear of judgment or discrimination. Within criminology programs, students frequently encounter environments where interpersonal interactions and social attitudes influence their sense of emotional safety and self-expression. For participants, comfort in school spaces depends largely on the attitudes of instructors and classmates, as well as the overall environment of acceptance within the classroom and campus community. Some participants described feeling confident and motivated when surrounded by supportive peers and teachers. Others emphasized that the presence of discrimination, judgment, or negative attitudes toward their identity can create feelings of anxiety, caution, and emotional discomfort.

As cited by Participant 1, comfort in academic spaces depends on whether instructors and classmates are supportive and professional. Participant 2 similarly emphasized that some spaces feel open and respectful, while others feel tense due to perceived judgment. Participant 5 also described experiencing discomfort when sensing negative reactions from peers toward their sexual identity. These insights suggest that the emotional comfort of LGBTQ+ students in school spaces often fluctuates depending on the attitudes and behaviors of those around them. These experiences are reflected in the following responses:

*“My comfort level depends on the people in those spaces. When instructors and classmates are supportive and professional, I feel confident and motivated. However, if I sense discrimination or bias, I become more careful and reserved.” (P1)*

*“Some areas feel more open and respectful, while others feel tense like you’re being watched or judged.” (P2)*

*“In certain classrooms and campus areas, my comfort level changes depending on the people around me. There are times when I feel that some students look at me with disgust because I love someone of the same sex. Because of that, I sometimes feel uneasy or less comfortable in those spaces.” (P5)*

*“In certain classrooms and campus spaces where I feel accepted and respected, I become more responsible and able to think more clearly and wisely. When the environment feels safe, it helps me act more mature and confident in my decisions.” (P6)*

*“My comfort level depends on whether the environment is supportive and free from judgment. Positive interactions with instructors and classmates make me feel at ease.” (P9)*

*“Certain spaces make me comfortable when there is acceptance and equality. However, environments with bias or discrimination make it difficult for me to fully express myself.” (P10)*

Participants’ responses indicate that comfort and emotional safety significantly influenced LGBTQ+ students’ ability to express their identities within criminology programs. The narratives of Participants 1, 5, 6, and 10 indicated that supportive environments fostered confidence, maturity, and authentic self-expression, whereas experiences of judgment or discrimination elicited anxiety, caution, and emotional discomfort. These experiences suggest that the quality of interpersonal interactions within the learning environment shaped students’ comfort levels. Participants’ accounts further revealed that emotional safety in school spaces enabled them to participate more confidently in academic activities and make thoughtful decisions. Conversely, environments characterized by bias or negative attitudes led students to become more reserved and guarded in expressing their identities.

These results support Queer Theory, which emphasizes that affirming environments enable individuals to express diverse identities freely while challenging restrictive norms. Similarly, the results align with Minority Stress Theory, as supportive environments reduced emotional distress, whereas discrimination and bias contributed to anxiety, identity concealment, and psychological strain. Furthermore, these experiences are consistent with Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory, which explains that students’ development and behavior are shaped by immediate social interactions and environmental conditions, particularly within the microsystem of peer and teacher relationships.

These interpretations agree with previous studies indicating that supportive and inclusive educational environments play a critical role in shaping LGBTQ+ students' emotional well-being and identity expression. Research shows that students who experience acceptance and respect within school settings are more likely to develop confidence, actively participate in academic activities, and maintain positive mental health (Wernick, Kulick, & Chin, 2021). Similarly, Russell et al. (2025) emphasized that environments characterized by discrimination or bias often lead to anxiety, identity concealment, and reduced academic engagement. In addition, Kosciw et al. (2022) highlighted that supportive interactions and inclusive school climates are essential in fostering students' emotional well-being and authentic self-expression.

### **Evolving Self-Acceptance and Resilience Over Time.**

This theme highlights how LGBTQ+ criminology students gradually develop self-acceptance and emotional resilience as they navigate their identity within the academic environment. The meaning of self-acceptance for LGBTQ+ students often involves recognizing, embracing, and taking pride in their identity despite experiences of anxiety, uncertainty, or fear of judgment from others. In criminology programs, students frequently encounter social expectations and attitudes that may initially make them feel nervous, guarded, or uncertain about openly expressing their identities. For participants, self-acceptance is not immediate; it develops over time through reflection, personal growth, and the courage to affirm their identity. Some participants described feeling anxious or cautious when their identity became visible to others. Others emphasized that, over time and with experience, they learned to stand firm, build confidence, and take pride in who they are.

As cited by Participant 1, feelings of nervousness and fear of judgment were present at first, but over time, confidence and self-assurance developed. Participant 2 similarly emphasized caution and guardedness due to concerns about how others might perceive their identity. Participant 4 also described an earlier stage of confusion and self-questioning before eventually reaching a sense of pride and acceptance of their identity. These insights suggest that identity development among LGBTQ+ students often involves a gradual transition from uncertainty and anxiety to greater confidence and resilience. These experiences are reflected in the following responses:

*“At times, I feel nervous or anxious, especially when I think people might judge me. But as time*

*passed, I learned to stand firm and be confident. I remind myself that I deserve to be here just like anyone else.” (P1)*

*“I feel nervous and more guarded, like I need to act carefully to avoid attention because many of my schoolmates don't know my true identity, only my close friends.” (P2)*

*“At first, I felt shy and embarrassed when my identity became visible to others. I used to question myself a lot-whether I was really lesbian, bisexual, or something else-because I was still struggling to understand that part of me. But now, I feel proud of who I am and have accepted this part of myself.” (P4)*

*“Honestly, I feel proud and happy when my identity becomes visible to others. My body feels lighter and more at ease because I have already accepted who I am. However, there are times when I still feel shy or embarrassed, especially when I become the topic of conversation.” (P5)*

*“I feel nervous at first when my identity becomes visible, but I try to stay confident and remind myself to be proud of who I am.” (P8)*

*“When my identity becomes visible, I feel cautious at times, but I remain confident and grounded because I value who I am.” (P10)*

Participants' responses indicate that both internal reflection and external social experiences within the school environment shaped the journey toward self-acceptance among LGBTQ+ students. The narratives of Participants 1, 4, 5, and 10 indicated that while moments of anxiety, caution, or embarrassment occurred, these experiences gradually gave way to confidence, pride, and emotional resilience. These experiences suggest that identity development among LGBTQ+ students is a dynamic process that evolves as individuals gain greater understanding and acceptance of themselves. Participants further revealed that the ability to remain confident and grounded despite fear of judgment reflected the development of resilience, enabling them to continue participating in academic life while affirming their identities.

These results support Queer Theory, which emphasizes that identity is fluid and continuously shaped through personal reflection and social interaction, allowing individuals to affirm their identities over time. Similarly, the results align with Minority Stress Theory, as the initial experiences of fear, anxiety, and stigma reflect minority stress. At the same time, the gradual development of resilience demonstrates individuals' ability to cope with and overcome these challenges. Furthermore, these

experiences are consistent with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which explains that identity development is influenced by ongoing interactions within various environmental systems, particularly through relationships and social experiences within the school context.

These interpretations agree with previous studies suggesting that the development of self-acceptance and resilience is a crucial aspect of LGBTQ+ identity formation. Research indicates that LGBTQ+ individuals often experience an initial stage of uncertainty or fear of judgment before gradually developing confidence and pride in their identity (Russell & Fish, 2020). Similarly, Meyer (2022) found that overcoming experiences of stigma and discrimination can strengthen personal resilience and empower individuals to affirm their identities with greater confidence. These perspectives reinforce participants' experiences that self-acceptance is a gradual, evolving process that plays a vital role in shaping resilience, identity expression, and overall well-being within educational environments.

### **Negotiating Authenticity and Acceptance in Social and Institutional Interactions.**

This theme highlights how LGBTQ+ criminology students navigate the balance between expressing their authentic identities and adapting to the expectations of their academic and institutional environment. Negotiating authenticity for LGBTQ+ students often involves managing how they present themselves in spaces where professional standards, gender norms, and institutional expectations shape behavior and appearance. Within criminology programs, students frequently encounter environments that emphasize discipline, professionalism, and conformity to established norms, which may influence how openly they express their identity. For the participants, navigating authenticity means adjusting certain behaviors or expressions to align with professional expectations while remaining true to their personal identity and values. Some participants described consciously adapting their appearance or behavior in order to fit into environments where masculinity and professionalism are emphasized. Others emphasized that social interactions, jokes, and expectations can sometimes pressure them to modify their self-expression.

As noted by Participant 1, criminology standards require discipline in appearance and behavior, yet authenticity can be maintained while adhering to professional expectations. Participant 2 similarly emphasized adjusting self-presentation during certain program activities where masculine norms are expected. Participant 5 also described experiencing

emotional discomfort when others disregard their feelings or make offensive jokes related to their identity. These insights suggest that LGBTQ+ students often negotiate how openly they express themselves based on expectations and interactions in their academic environment. These experiences are reflected in the following responses:

*"Criminology requires discipline in appearance and behavior. I respect and follow those standards. Although I adjust to professional expectations, I still remain true to myself. I believe I can be both professional and authentic." (P1)*

*"Sometimes I adjust on how I present myself to fit in, especially during activities in my program where masculinity is expected." (P2)*

*"It has a big impact on me because I sometimes feel like my feelings are disregarded just because I am different from others. People expect me to be strong because I am bisexual, and some jokes become offensive and cross boundaries." (P5)*

*"I'm not completely sure, but I think it has something to do with how I socialize with others in class. The way I interact with people during activities and within certain expectations can influence how openly I express myself." (P6)*

*"Appearance, expectations, and class activities sometimes influence how I express myself, but I try to stay authentic while following school standards." (P8)*

*"I adjust my expression depending on expectations and activities, yet I make sure I remain true to my identity and values." (P9)*

Participants' highlights indicate that LGBTQ+ students often navigate a complex balance between authenticity and acceptance within criminology programs. The narratives of Participants 1, 2, 8, and 9 indicated that students adjusted aspects of their self-presentation in response to institutional expectations while maintaining their core identity. In contrast, Participant 5's experiences revealed how stereotypes, jokes, and assumptions created emotional tension and reinforced the need to carefully manage identity expression. These accounts suggest that students' expression was influenced by both social interactions and institutional norms within the academic environment. Participants further indicated that negotiating authenticity became a strategy for maintaining both professional belonging and personal integrity within the program.

These results support Queer Theory, which emphasizes that identity is socially constructed and often negotiated within systems that reinforce

normative expectations, particularly in structured environments such as criminology programs. Similarly, the results align with Minority Stress Theory, as the need to manage identity and respond to stereotypes reflects the psychological strain associated with stigma. At the same time, the ability to adapt demonstrates coping mechanisms that mitigate stress. Furthermore, these experiences are consistent with Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, which explains that identity negotiation is shaped by interactions within immediate social environments and broader institutional structures.

These interpretations agree with previous studies suggesting that LGBTQ+ individuals often navigate identity expression within institutional environments that emphasize traditional gender norms and professional expectations. Research indicates that students in discipline-oriented programs may adjust their behavior or appearance to align with institutional standards while preserving their sense of identity (Pitcher et al., 2021). Similarly, Jones and McEwen (2021) highlighted that individuals continuously balance authenticity and social acceptance within structured environments such as schools and workplaces. In addition, Wernick, Kulick, and Chin (2021) emphasized that supportive and inclusive institutional climates enable LGBTQ+ students to express their identities more openly while maintaining professional engagement.

The poem *Claiming Our Space* reflects the emotional journey of LGBTQ+ students as they navigate educational environments in search of acceptance, respect, and belonging. It captures the realities of moving through classrooms and campus spaces while negotiating personal identity, social expectations, and the desire to feel safe and valued. Through its reflective tone, the poem illustrates how everyday interactions, institutional norms, and peer relationships shape students' experiences within academic settings. It highlights the courage required to express one's identity while confronting uncertainty, judgment, and the ongoing effort to find a place where one's sense of identity is acknowledged and respected.

#### Claiming Our Space

In classrooms and halls, we seek respect,  
 where spaces feel inclusive and safe.  
 Our bodies and hearts navigate fear and courage,  
 expressing who we are, day by day.  
 Through time, we grow-  
 from doubt to self-acceptance and resilience.  
 In every peer, every rule, every glance,  
 we negotiate belonging,  
 finding strength in being seen, heard, and valued.

The poem closely relates to the present study as it reflects the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ criminology students in their pursuit of inclusive and respectful learning spaces. The lines describing the search for safety, acceptance, and respect mirror participants' experiences navigating classrooms and campus environments where they may encounter both support and discrimination. The poem also emphasizes the process of identity development and resilience, which aligns with the participants' experiences of expressing their identities while adapting to the expectations of criminology programs. Ultimately, the poem symbolizes how LGBTQ+ students continuously negotiate their sense of belonging within educational spaces, highlighting the importance of supportive relationships, inclusive environments, and recognition of diversity in fostering their confidence, well-being, and academic participation.

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