

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Labor Migration and Queer Sexuality Exploration: A Narrative Inquiry of Filipino Queer Teachers in Thailand

Mark B. Ulla^{1*} and Elena E. Pernia²

¹Walailak University, Nakhon si Thammarat, Thailand

²University of the Philippines, Philippines

*mark.ul@mail.wu.ac.th

Abstract: Labor migration has always been considered a product of globalization, where people's mobility can be explained through the push and pull theory. However, there have been limited studies investigating how migration becomes a crucial factor among queer labor migrants in exploring and understanding their sexuality, especially from the Global South-South perspective. This study attempts to delineate queer sexuality in largely heteronormative discourses on Filipino labor migration from the perspectives of two Filipino queer teachers using narrative inquiry as an approach and online, semi-structured individual interviews as tools to gather the qualitative data. Findings revealed that besides the economic motive for their labor migration, the desire to explore and understand themselves as gay men motivated two Filipino teachers to work in Bangkok, Thailand. Having the capital skill allowed them to participate and engage in various queer discourses and practices within Bangkok's gay community. The findings imply that in the intersection of queer and labor migration, economy and sexuality are essential in understanding queer labor migration, especially within the Global South-South context.

Keywords: Filipino gay men, queer teachers, queer, labor migration, sexuality exploration

Previous studies on migration have acknowledged the push and pull factors why people leave their home countries and seek a better living in other countries. For instance, people are pushed to migrate because of political and economic instabilities, lower wages, high unemployment and underemployment rates, slow economic growth or stagnation, and poverty (Chalamwong, 2011) in their home countries. Others leave their home countries because of the affordances of high-paying jobs and a better welfare system in their destination countries. In other words, people who

experience poverty and low salary rates in their home country will most likely look for high-paying jobs in other countries. Similarly, people who experience political turmoil in their home country will most likely migrate to other countries to seek refuge.

Given the common reasons why people migrate, gay men's decision to relocate is also influenced by globalization (Carrillo, 2018; Karimi, 2020). However, exploring and understanding their identity and sexuality can also be considered the driving factors of their labor migration. Such reasons are especially

true in the Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN), where most of the countries in the region may not accept and tolerate gay men and other gender identities (Manalastas et al., 2017; Wilkinson et al., 2017). The desire for identity expression and sexual freedom is particularly important, especially if queer people may be constrained from practicing it in their cultural environment due to the threat of violence and homonegativity (Brumbaugh-Johnson & Hull, 2019).

In the Philippines, Yarcia et al. (2019) acknowledged that being a gay man in the country may entail some “risks of harassment and violence, sometimes even from relatives” (p.1), as the country may not yet accept and tolerate practices of homosexuality. The lack of acceptance and tolerance toward homosexuality in the Philippines is often linked to the lack of understanding of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity Expression (SOGIE) and the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA+) community. In addition, the influence of Catholicism, practiced mainly by the people, added to the issue of the country’s acceptance of gay men and other members of the LGBTQIA+ community. Consequently, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, specifically gay men, would choose to migrate to other cities or countries where they can work and earn money for their economic needs and express and explore their sexuality without discrimination.

Although a number of studies have examined the lives of gay men and their motivations to move to other countries, coming out stories, sexual experiences, and practices in their destination and host countries (Di Felicianantonio, 2020; Dhoest, 2016; Lewis & Mills, 2016; Wong, 2019; Yu & Blain, 2019), these studies have been conducted mostly in the Global North. In other words, there is a dearth of studies focusing on the lives of gay men within the Global South-South context. In particular, there are limited studies exploring how labor migration becomes a catalyst for embracing, exploring, and understanding sexuality among Filipino queers living and working in Thailand. Such a lack of studies is a significant research gap that should be addressed so that gay men within the Global South-South context become visible and represented in the migration and sexuality literature.

This present study tries to address such a gap and explore unexplored themes in the literature on migration as it uncovers queer sexuality in largely

heteronormative discourses on Filipino labor migration within the Global South-South context.

Queer Migration: Motives and Experiences

Although the use of the term “queer” is problematic as it was once used to refer to homosexuality, which may connote insult, indicate the idea of strangeness and differences (Minton, 1997), and imply political ideologies (Dilley, 1999), in this article, we used the term “queer” to refer to gay men and other members of the LGBTQIA+ community and the ways how they counter the heteronormative labor migration motives and practices, emancipating and integrating themselves in the new cultural environment.

Although the intersections of sexuality and migration among queer minorities can be explained through economic production and social reproduction, examining the experiences of gay men in the new culture is also important. These experiences among gay men living and communicating their preferred identity and sexuality in the destination country may provide a deeper understanding of the nuances of sexuality and migration. Manalansan (2006) highlighted that “part of the new emerging attitude toward sexuality, mirroring that of gender, is to understand the particular factors, conditions, and ideologies that shape sexual identities and practices, and how these permeate social institutions” (p. 229). For example, the study by Wong (2019), which pointed out the migration motivations among Chinese gay men in Sydney, Australia, affirmed that familial, economic, political, and sexual were the common reasons for Chinese gay men’s migration. Wong revealed that one of the factors of Chinese gay men’s migration to Australia was their sexuality, highlighting that they were more expressive of their identity and sexuality in Australia than in their home country. Adams et al. (2022) also supported this study, emphasizing that managing sexuality and disclosure is easier in the host country than in the gay men migrants’ home countries. In their study on Filipino gay migrants in New Zealand, Adams et al. (2022) mentioned that in New Zealand, it is a common practice that people never mind other people’s sexual orientation or gender expression, making the managing and sharing of identities easier than in the Philippines.

The topics of integration and placemaking experiences among gay men in different contexts are

also evident in the literature. For example, Yu and Blain (2019), who examined the placemaking experiences of Chinese gay migrants in Sydney and Melbourne, found that using digital/social media was pivotal among Chinese gay men. Such use of social media was necessary for recreating their gay identity and living their lives outside of their home country. Thus, Chinese gay men have used social media to come out anonymously, express their gay identity, and satisfy their needs sexually. Adams and Neville (2020), in their study on gay social lives with Chinese and South Asian gay and bisexual men as their participants, also maintained that using online applications and technologies was the primary method among the participants in connecting with the gay communities and reconnecting with their friends and families in Auckland, New Zealand.

Likewise, the importance of social media for queer people is also particularly true in the study conducted by Dhoest (2016) among gay men in Belgium. Dhoest noted that the internet plays a significant role in the lives of gay men as it serves as a venue to explore their sexuality, know about LGBTQIA+ equality, connect with other gay communities and national and international organizations, and be informed about the issues of sexual health. The internet has also been instrumental in reconnecting gay men and their families.

In a similar vein, the study by Patterson and Leurs (2019) also tried to probe the settlement and integration practices of gay men migrants in Amsterdam, the Netherlands, through their online and offline activities. The study affirmed that smartphones are integral in living a gay man's life in the country as these smartphones provide access to social media. Smartphones and social media enable gay men to integrate and settle easily in a new country. Specifically, social media allow gay men not only to reconnect to their family and friends in their home country but also with people and the members of the host country's gay community. According to Patterson and Leurs (2019), "social media use does not replace the importance of inter-ethnic social contact, but rather it is an extension of it. Forced migrants and expatriates bring their offline networks and incorporate them into their online networks" (p. 98).

Furthermore, the integration practices among gay men, making connections with the local community where they relocated, is also seen as one of the

important means to integrate themselves into a new cultural community. However, it must also be noted that gay men's daily stereotyped experience may affect their perception of ethnicity and belonging. Most often than not, these gay men may devise some ways for effective integration and belonging. These strategies include: not sharing their stories and experiences of discrimination, not talking about their home country, and not identifying themselves as members of the cultural minority. Most gay men believed that sharing their stories, experiences, and ethnic identity would not promote common understanding between them and the new community they are in, but only pity and superiority. In a 7-month ethnographic study conducted by Ocampo (2012) in Los Angeles, he found that his Latino gay participants negotiated their gender presentation of masculinity through how they dressed up, spoke, and associated themselves in various social scenes, especially when going to nightclubs. Ocampo also revealed that most of the Latino gay men, his participants in the study, did not want to be labeled as gay, especially those who had just come out from the closet. For them, the term "gay" was only associated with White feminine gay men. In addition, their dating preference also maintained their masculinity as most of them preferred to date only masculine gay men.

Generally, the mentioned studies in the literature investigated only the different migration decisions among gay men. These studies did not examine how labor migration becomes a catalyst for embracing, exploring, and understanding sexuality. Likewise, although the mentioned studies had gay men as participants, these were all situated in the Global North, where homosexuality may be accepted and tolerated (Poushter & Kent, 2020). These studies, which described the pattern of queer migration from Global South to Global North, did not disclose nor consider the job migration status as a factor in gay men's migration decisions. These aspects are essential for understanding the intersection between sexuality and migration studies, especially in the Global South-South context and among Filipino queer men living and working in Bangkok.

Given the scarcity of studies that look into the intersections of sexuality and migration, especially among gay men within the Global South-South context, this study examines the complexity of the relationship between sexuality and migration from the perspectives of two Filipino queer teachers in Bangkok, Thailand.

As studies of this kind are mostly overlooked, the study's findings may add to the growing literature on queer migration and advance our understanding of the intersectionality of sexuality and migration in a Global South-South and a non-Western context and perspective. Specifically, this study sought to answer the following question:

1. How does the labor migration to Bangkok, Thailand, among Filipino queer teachers enable them to view, explore, and understand their sexuality?

Methodology

Narrative Inquiry

The narrative inquiry makes use of stories as the data for the study. These stories are told by the participants who experienced the world and the phenomenon in which they live. They are "personal stories shaped by the knowledge, experiences, values, and feelings of the persons who are telling them" (Moen, 2006, p. 61).

In the context of gay migration, narrative inquiry is used as a methodological approach to understanding the experiences of Filipino queer teachers as participants of the study. The narrative approach also highlights two Filipino queer teachers and how they viewed, explored, and understood their sexuality as labor migrants in Thailand. As storytellers, these participants are "characters in their own and other stories" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2).

Furthermore, narrative inquiry allows researchers to work

within the three-dimensional narrative inquiry spaces [because they cannot] bracket themselves out of the inquiry but rather need to find ways to inquire into participants' experiences, their own experiences as well as the co-constructed experiences developed through the relational inquiry process. (Clandinin, 2006, p. 47)

Research Setting

The study was conducted in Bangkok, Thailand, where, according to anecdotal records, a number of Filipinos are working. With its booming red lights districts, where various entertainment venues and bars are housed, Bangkok has become a safe tourist

destination among gay men. This can be attributed to Thailand's not banning, discriminating, and criminalizing people based on their gender identity and sexual orientation (Suriyasarn, 2014). Thus, considering Bangkok as a safe destination among gay men, the current investigation finds the place as deemed appropriate for the study's locale for the following reasons: the presence of a number of gay bars and clubs, the presence of a number of professional Filipino queers, and the availability of a place where Filipino gay men can communicate their identity and sexuality. These factors imply that the first author/researcher, although a passive participant, would have the opportunity to fulfill the objectives of the study.

Participants

Because the study involved participants from the "hidden population" who are often marginalized in the heteronormative society, two self-identified Filipino queer men working as English teachers in Bangkok, Thailand, voluntarily participated in the study. They held work permits and were recognized by the Thai government as foreign workers in the country. They were the first author's acquaintances belonging to the same online Filipino community group on Facebook in Bangkok. The first author, who is a Filipino working as a lecturer in one of the universities in the southern part of Thailand, first met them at one of the events organized by the Philippine Embassy and, since then, maintained contact with them on Facebook. Moreover, before the present study was conducted, the first author contacted them individually and privately for their help if they knew someone who could be the participant in the study. They presented themselves along with three other Filipino queer men who were also members of the Filipino group on Facebook. However, only these two participants were chosen because they fitted the following criteria for the study: (a) working in Bangkok, (b) self-identified as a Filipino queer man, (c) have worked at least 3 years in Bangkok, (d) age is between 29 and 35 years old, and (e) willing to be interviewed.

Participants were asked if they would be willing to be interviewed online. They were also informed about the study and its purpose and told that their participation was voluntary. It was also emphasized to them that if they felt uncomfortable with the questions, they could withdraw their participation at anytime. Moreover, all the information they shared would be treated with the

utmost confidentiality in the paper and its publication. When they agreed, a letter to the participant and a letter of consent signed and approved by the Human Research Ethics Board of the first author's university were forwarded via email. The first author conducted the in-depth semi-structured individual interview in Filipino and English during their most convenient time using *Zoom* or *Google Meet* between September 2021 and October 2021. With permission from the participants, the online interviews, which lasted between 50 and 120 minutes, were recorded.

Data Analysis

After the interview, data were transcribed, read, and repeatedly examined to describe the stories and their relevance to the purpose of the study. To ensure the correctness of the transcripts, individual transcriptions were received by the participants for member checking and approval. Furthermore, manual inductive coding was performed because the data only came from the two participants, comprising not a huge dataset. In inductive coding (Thomas, 2006), the researcher closely read the transcripts, identified the recurring patterns of life stories in the data, and assigned the patterns to categories that best described the participants' life stories.

In the following narratives, participants were given pseudonyms to withhold their identity and ensure confidentiality.

Findings

As Filipino queer teachers, participants of the study viewed working in Bangkok, Thailand as an opportunity to earn higher salary rates. They recognized that Bangkok is a city with many equal employment opportunities, whereas such opportunities were limited in their home country, the Philippines. However, they also recognized that working in Bangkok allowed them to explore, validate, and understand their sexuality because Bangkok afforded them with safe spaces for gay practices and discourses. Such stories were shared by Pete and Jas, the participants of the study.

Coming to and Working in Bangkok

Pete, who came from Cagayan de Oro City in Mindanao, is a 32-year-old English teacher in one of

the international schools in Bangkok. His coming to Bangkok in 2018 was incidental as he did not plan to work in the city. He was supposed to work in Dubai, but his company got a problem with his documents. While his company in Dubai was working on his documents, he was advised to come to Bangkok and wait for his papers. However, he was advised again to go back to the Philippines after not getting the documents needed for his employment. This time, he chose to stay and looked for a job in Bangkok.

Actually, it was my first time to come to Bangkok, although I already traveled to many countries in Asia. I came to Bangkok for my transit flight to Dubai. However, I was told by my employer in Dubai that they could not process my documents, and I had to go back to the Philippines to do my papers there. I already had a plane ticket to Dubai, and I felt that going back to the Philippines could be a waste of money. Since I am an education graduate and I have my cousin here, I tried to apply as a teacher. Luckily, I got the job, and I realized that it is easy to find a job in Thailand, especially if you can speak English. I didn't come home to the Philippines anymore since I already enjoyed working in Bangkok, and I already lost my interest in going to Dubai.

Jas, who already traveled to Bangkok as a tourist many times before, left his job in the Philippines as an electronics and communication engineer because of the lack of employment options and low salary rates. He is 35 years old, from Quezon City in Metro Manila, and has been working as a Mathematics teacher in Bangkok since 2017.

My brother, who works here as a teacher, convinced me to try looking for a teaching job here and leave my job as an engineer in the Philippines. He said that Thailand offers a good salary compared to the one I was earning before. He said that I could try changing a career path from being an engineer to becoming a Math teacher since there is a huge demand for Math teachers in Thailand. I applied and luckily, I got the job.

Bangkok as a Sex City

Both Pete and Jas perceived Bangkok as a city that welcomes and accommodates all people regardless of their sexuality. In fact, they held sexual imagery of the city, where they could potentially meet new sexual partners, experience some gay activities, and explore more of their sexual fantasies. However, their orientation to the “sex city” made them realize how gay men were provided with such a safe space to explore their sexuality. Pete mentioned:

It was my first Saturday here in Bangkok because I arrived at midnight on Friday via Cebu Pacific. My friends, who happened to be your friends also, brought me to Silom Road. I have just arrived from the Philippines, and I was very excited to see the nightlife in Bangkok. We took the BTS sky train and got off at Saladaeng Station. When we walked down Silom Road, I was shocked. I saw a lot of sex toys, sex poppers, and sex drugs that were just openly sold on the sidewalk. From Soi 2 near the Burger King up to Soi 6 near the Kasikorn bank, that sidewalk was filled with all those things. Then, when we went to Soi 4, there were a lot of pimps offering massage and sex shows. At that moment, I realized how liberated and open Bangkok is when it comes to sex.

I actually had a funny experience that I could not forget. One time, we were in the bar and there was this Thai gay man who always looked at me. We always had eye-to-eye contact maybe because we were so drunk already. I went to the toilet and I didn't know he followed me there. While we were peeing, we looked at each other's penis. We ended up going inside one of the cubicles and kissed torridly. To my surprise, his boyfriend barged in and he saw us kissing. I didn't know that his boyfriend was there, following him to the toilet. I didn't know also that we did not lock the door. I got out from the cubicle and returned to the table where my friends were. The situation was awkward as we were just sitting next to them. Luckily, his boyfriend did not make any commotion.

Jas also observed and was impressed by how welcoming and accepting Bangkok is when it comes to

gay men like him. His orientation to the place happened when he went to a bar and to the massage parlor.

My first experience in Bangkok was in Silom. I was in the bar with some of my friends and saw people kissing each other, two men kissing each other. Others also tried to hug me from my back, and I don't care anymore. Everybody doesn't care because everyone is doing it. I felt shocked at first. I was scared of what might happen to me. But I also realized that this is how gay men do it here. When I was also in a massage parlor, I didn't know there was an extra service. I didn't tell my masseuse to have an additional service, but he had pleased me already. I'm sensitive, and it excites me, so I gave in. You know, it's Bangkok, it's like “sex in the city.” Gay men here are liberated and open to activities like sex, orgies, and sex and drugs.

Bangkok as a Safe Place for Gay Men

Participants highlighted that because Bangkok is an open place to explore their sexuality, they could be whatever they like and do whatever they want. Unlike when they were still in the Philippines, where they could not freely express themselves, in Bangkok, they formed and validated their sexuality through the experiences, influences, and support they had from the gay community in Bangkok. For instance, Pete, although his parents knew that he was gay, he still had to be discreet about his sexuality and identity because he was surrounded by people who may not be comfortable with him as a gay man in the Philippines.

Although my parents know about my identity and sexuality, I was also a discreet gay man when I was in the Philippines. I was surrounded by religious people. My parents are religious because we are born-again Christians. Also, my cousins are working in the military. This is the reason why coming to Bangkok is like freedom for me. It is like I am living on my own, away from the eyes of my parents and the people in my community in the Philippines. When I was still in the Philippines, I had to discreetly go to saunas. When I arrived here, I was amazed by the gay nightlife in Bangkok. I knew that I didn't have neighbors who will make a gossip about me, so I just enjoyed my gay life here by trying

some of the sexual activities that I never tried before in the Philippines. I understand myself now, and I realize that it's only in the Philippines where I could not be free.

Meanwhile, Jas also shared the same experience with Pete in that he described himself as a bird flying freely in Bangkok. He realized that there were still a lot of things that he did not know about his sexuality that he only came to understand and experience in Bangkok.

The gay community in Bangkok is not the same as in the Philippines. For me, I'm not like this. Here in Bangkok, I was able to spread my wings and fly. In the Philippines, people there have a negative perception of gay people, and they discriminate against gay people. Here, you can be whomever you want because Thai people do not discriminate against and judge gay people. In Bangkok, you will see two men holding each other's hands, kissing, and making out in public. You will just be amazed. There are also places here where you can do outdoor sex. I have become more sexually explorative and adventurous here in Thailand. When I was still in the Philippines, I already experienced some of those, but it was only here in Bangkok that I became more bold and daring. I was able to explore my wild side, having sex and making out in many places in Bangkok.

However, it must be noted that while the participants acknowledged the influence brought about by their engagement with the gay community in Bangkok on their sexuality exploration, they were also aware of the risks that may come along with it. One of the risks they guarded against is the HIV-AIDS infection that may also impact their health and working conditions in Bangkok. Jas feared contracting HIV when doing public and random sexual activities. According to him, he still engaged in sexual activities in Bangkok but only with one person whom he already had gotten to know. He also emphasized that he always used protection such as a condom and got himself tested at least once a year.

I prefer having sex with someone I already know, at least through a chat message. I don't do random sex. I wanted to try orgies, but I fear

getting HIV. HIV cases in Thailand are also high. But, whenever I engage in sex, I wear a condom and do HIV testing at least once a year. I think getting a syphilis test is also one of the requirements for work permit renewal. We all know this. That is why we have to be careful.

Furthermore, although engaging in same-sex sexual activity in Bangkok may not be his first sexual encounter as he may have experienced this in his home country, the different spaces for sexual activities in the city allowed Pete to have a deeper understanding of his sexuality and the kind of gay culture Bangkok has.

You know what? It is only here in Bangkok where I experienced everything. From public sex to orgies, I had the best time experiencing these activities. And I have no regrets because I'm happy and I enjoy doing them. It is only here in Bangkok where I got to know myself better.

For Jas, he admitted that he would always feel at home when going to the gay district and participating in gay sexual practices in Bangkok.

You know what, I felt a sense of belonging whenever I go to Silom Road. I feel alive and different. And I don't mind paying for these places because we have to understand that this is also business. For me, going to these places and participating in gay activities is the only way to engage with the gay community in Bangkok. We don't need to pretend because everyone is the same.

Labor Migration and Sexuality Exploration

With the participant's engagement with the new cultural environment, they perceived how members of the LGBTQIA+ community were given the platform for visibility, especially at workplaces. Jas expressed:

I am really impressed by how LGBT people are treated here in Thailand compared to how they are treated in the Philippines. Here, you would see lady boys working at 7-Eleven stores and they are not discriminated. Unlike in the Philippines, when you say lady boys, they are only limited to working at beauty parlors. And to me, it seems that lady boys cannot find a job

in big companies. If they could, they had to hide their identity as gay men. They have to pretend that they are straight people.

Participants also acknowledged that being Filipino queer teachers was an advantage for them to get a sense of belonging in Bangkok's gay community and consume some gay spaces in the city. Jas maintained,

I think it's all about getting a job here. If you have a job means you have a salary. Many people want to work here, especially fellow Filipinos, but they are not lucky. And for me, this is the advantage of having a college degree and speaking English. These are the factors that helped us be recognized here in Thailand. If we do not have a job here, we cannot be here. Of course, when you work here, you have the money to avail of the services in gay spaces in Silom.

Moreover, having a job and earning a good sum of money enabled them to engage and participate also in some gay activities in Bangkok's gay community, allowing them to explore their sexuality. Pete mentioned,

For me, having a job in Bangkok and receiving a good sum of money at the end of the month is an advantage if you want to participate and join the fun in the gay community. It is a common belief that if you don't have the money, you cannot buy and do things you like. We can go to the bars. The most important thing is when we go out, we have the money to spend on anything.

Discussion

In labor migration studies, push factors such as low salary rates, poverty, and economic instabilities are the common reasons professionals and other skilled workers leave their home countries and seek better job opportunities abroad (Edo, 2018; Edo & Rapoport, 2019; Gheasi & Nijkamp, 2017). Based on the findings of the current study, these push factors also played a crucial role in the decision to migrate among the participants of the study, who were Filipino queer teachers in Bangkok, Thailand. Although economic factor shaped their labor migration, these two Filipino

queer men teachers also recognized the opportunity to explore, validate, and understand their sexuality as they constantly engaged with the gay community in Bangkok.

First, Bangkok allowed them to freely communicate their identity and sexuality, with no judgments and biases against them. They found Bangkok the exact opposite of the Philippines regarding treating gay men and expressing their sexuality. Although previous studies claimed that some LGBTQIA+ people experienced discrimination (Ojanen, 2009; Suriyasarn, 2014) in their destination countries, the participants recognized that there is greater visibility, recognition, and tolerance among members of the LGBTQIA+ community in Thailand. They felt a sense of equality, recognition, and validation in Bangkok because, contrary to the findings by Grigoleit-Richter (2017) and Rajendran et al. (2017), they did not experience the problems of gender inequality, prejudices, and biases in Bangkok, their host city.

Furthermore, participants perceived Bangkok as a city that warmly welcomes them and provides them with a safe space for work and expressing their sexuality. In other words, participants viewed Bangkok as a safer space to explore their sexuality. Such a perception can be tied to how accommodating Bangkok is for LGBTQIA+ people and how it provides various gay places for gay activities, especially within its gay districts. Shrestha et al. (2020) and Manalastas et al. (2017) maintained that Thailand is more friendly and accommodating toward LGBTQIA+ people, as evident in the presence of gay spaces (e.i., gay bars, saunas, and sex surgery clinics) in the country.

It can be noted that participants found the freedom to participate in gay practices and activities in Bangkok without the fear that people may judge and discriminate against them. They could express their authentic selves, assert their rights, and achieve visibility (Lewis & Markwell, 2020) in Bangkok's society, which was restricted to them back in their home country. Comparing how they presented themselves in their home country, they conveyed that they were able to get out of the box and be true to themselves in Bangkok. In other words, they can freely participate and engage in various queer activities, which give them a chance "to feel a sense of belonging by affirming social identities" (Hahm et al., 2018, p. 244). This finding corroborated other studies (Hahm et al., 2018; Lewis & Markwell, 2020; Wong, 2019), maintaining that acceptance in

society is an essential factor among queer people because they got through such acceptance a sense of social identity and belonging and are rendered visible.

Although the Philippines, their home country, is regarded as a gay-friendly nation (Rodriguez, 1996; Tang & Poudel, 2018) and ranked first in Asia for closing the gender gap (World Economic Forum, 2021), participants acknowledged their identity and sexuality exploration was limited. The homonegative perceptions toward them reinforced such limitations, influenced mainly by their family, society, and religion. Yarcia et al. (2019) acknowledged that gay men in the Philippines are occasionally subjected to harassment and violence from family members because the country may not yet embrace and allow homosexual behavior. Moreover, the Catholic Church has regularly fought and rejected attempts to acknowledge LGBTQIA+ people's rights (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

Efforts to advance LGBTQIA+ rights [that] have met with resistance from the Catholic Church, which has been an influential political force on matters of sex and sexuality. While the Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines (CBCP) rejects discrimination against LGBTQIA+ people in principle, it has frequently opposed efforts to prohibit that discrimination in practice. (p.10)

Cornelio and Dagle (2022) also recognized that even if being gay is not a sin in the Philippines, the Catholic Church treated being gay as an "objective disorder." As a result, discrimination and bullying are pervasive in the country's social institutions, such as schools and workplaces (De Guzman, 2020; Tang & Poudel, 2018; Ulla & Pernia, 2022).

Second, Bangkok offers gay spaces to explore and communicate their identity and sexuality. Although these spaces are commercialized, participants perceived that they could express their sexuality in Bangkok. Participants had the impression that they could be and do whatever they wanted. They could explore and confirm their sexuality through experiences, influences, and support from the gay community in Bangkok, which they could not get in the Philippines. They realized that there were still many things they did not know about their sexuality that they only came to understand and experience in Bangkok. For instance, they found out they were adventurous,

wild, bold, and daring when it came to sexual activities. In other words, they become more sexually explorative and adventurous in Bangkok.

Consequently, their exploration of their sexuality through engaging in various gay activities facilitated their understanding of their sexuality. It also validated their identity, emancipating them from rampant homonegativity and discriminatory practices in their home country. Although these spaces may have been available in their home country, participants were limited to consuming such spaces because of the country's dominant culture of heteronormativity. As noted by Baytan (2015), the Malate district in Manila used to be the gay capital from the 1970s to the 1990s. However, it is no longer considered as such today because gay men no longer gather there as a group "for fear of being 'outed' or identified as gay" (Baytan, 2015). In addition, Baytan also emphasized that the presence of online dating platforms, the emergence of social media applications, notorious traffic congestion, and the erratic work schedules among gay men contribute to why Malate today is no longer popular among gay men.

Another important finding from the study is how their earning power and capital reinforce the exploration of their sexuality. It can be noted that participants are teachers who recognized that working in Bangkok and earning a monthly salary enabled them to participate and engage in various queer discourses and practices within Bangkok's gay community. They acknowledged that if they did not have the work in Bangkok, they would not likely be in gay safe spaces and engage in sexual activities. Such an exploration of their sexuality within these commodified and commercialized gay spaces reveals how much of the queer culture in Bangkok is largely shaped by pink money. Ulla and Pernia (2022) mentioned that the presence of various gay spaces and gay districts in Bangkok became the pull factor among gay men to come to the city. Although the participants' consumption of these gay spaces in Bangkok allowed them to understand their sexuality and became an avenue for them to participate in Bangkok's gay community and get identity validation, their queer practices and discourses were not only limited to Bangkok's gay community. In other words, as emphasized by Jas, one of the study's participants, "going to these places and participating in gay activities is the only way to engage with the gay community in Bangkok," suggesting that they

could also disengage with the community to explore their sexuality. In other words, being Filipino queer teachers give them a choice not only to consume such gay spaces but also the freedom to express their identity and achieve visibility.

Although the present study provides a nuanced understanding of queer labor migration from the perspectives and experiences of two Filipino queer teachers in Bangkok, Thailand, it also offers implications. Findings suggest that for queer labor migrants, having a job that provides one's economic and sexual needs is critical in exploring and understanding one's sexuality and seeking community belonging in the host country. Because professionals are economically oriented individuals (Grigoleit-Richter, 2017), the study participants, who were Filipino queer teachers, could consume such gay spaces because they worked and earned money in Bangkok.

Lastly, the findings also imply that social institutions (e.g., family, religion, workplaces) have a critical part in emancipating and recognizing gay men and other members of the LGBTQIA+ community. These institutions may push gay men to leave their home countries and settle in other countries where they feel safer and are recognized. Thus, these social institutions should facilitate the recognition and visibility among members of the LGBTQIA+ community to ensure societal equality. It can be argued that support from the gay community, family acceptance, and other social institutions are critical factors for gay men to understand their sexuality.

Conclusion

The present study has explored how labor migration becomes a communicative practice of emancipation and empowerment among these two Filipino queer teachers who could explore and understand their sexuality in Bangkok, Thailand. The findings suggest that economic and personal factors shaped the decision among the participants to come to and work in Bangkok. However, working in Bangkok means that it not only addresses their financial difficulties but also becomes an avenue for them to view, explore, and understand themselves as gay men. As emphasized, they may be deprived of the affordances of safe gay spaces in the

Philippines, but they got to be accommodated by an accepting and welcoming gay community in Bangkok. In other words, through their constant engagement with their new cultural environment, they began to feel free to express and explore their sexuality, enabling them to understand themselves. The presence of gay spaces in Bangkok and the welcoming, friendly, and accommodating society facilitated the exploring and understanding of the participants' sexuality.

Although the present study seeks to understand how labor migration becomes a pathway to understanding one's sexuality from the perspectives of two Filipino queer teachers working in Bangkok, Thailand, it also has its limitations that other scholars, policymakers, and LGBTQIA+ advocates should consider. First, the study followed the qualitative approach, employing online semi-structured individual interviews as a data-gathering method. This method was employed due to travel restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, the lives and experiences of gay men in the new cultural environment should also be explored using other methodological tools. Future studies that could include other highly skilled gay men as labor migrants in other parts of the region should be conducted to provide a new perspective on migration and sexuality. Such studies would contribute to our understanding of how other gay men in the region with different cultures viewed themselves as gay men in their host country.

Declaration of Ownership

This report is our original work.

Conflict of Interest

None.

Ethical Clearance

This study was approved by our institution.

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