

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Experiences of gay men during the pandemic through the lens of occupational justice

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ABSTRACT

Background: Occupational justice is realized when individuals can participate in meaningful activities regardless of their status in society without barriers. However, Filipinos, who identify themselves as lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgenders (LGBT+), continue to encounter prejudice in daily life. Their participation in daily activities during the pandemic is an important facet to be understood. Hence, this study aimed to describe the experiences of working gay men during the pandemic through from an occupational justice perspective.

Methodology: Purposive sampling was utilized in gathering individuals from an LGBT+ organization in a city within Batangas Province to attend a focus group discussion and a series of one-on-one in-depth interviews. The Occupational Justice Health Questionnaire (OJHQ) was used to guide the discussion. Deductive thematic analysis was employed to arrive at different themes.

Results: The experiences of the eight participants composed of working gay men show that the pandemic has brought injustices into the participants' daily lives. Gay men experienced varying degrees of occupational imbalance, deprivation, alienation, and apartheid such that they expressed frustration due to constraints in community cultural life, local events, and involvement in outdoor physical participation where they could showcase their individuality and talents.

Conclusion: The study contributes to the lack of inclusion and discourse on the experiences of the LGBT+ community that are unique and needs additional exploration to address specific needs. Despite being tagged as one of the most gay-friendly countries in Asia, there are still forms of discrimination and prejudice that still exist. Hence, the study was able to shed light on this through an occupational justice perspective, evoking justice-oriented practice among all stakeholders.

Keywords: LGBT+, COVID-19, Philippines, Experiences, Occupations

Introduction

Gender discrimination among LGBT+ members can be seen as prevalent in society [1,2]. Many diverse situations present problems, cause conflict, and a sense of disease for gay people [3]. Gay men bear the additional strain of having to choose whether to display a core part of their identity within a primarily heteronormative culture, from socializing on evenings out, to visiting healthcare professionals [4]. Through existing research, it was identified that gay men do experience injustices due to previous stigmatizing experiences in healthcare settings and a lack of provider awareness about

healthcare needs, where patients reported receiving inadequate care and they are at an increased risk for experiencing violence during the COVID-19 pandemic [5]. In the Philippine context, there is a published commentary by Delos Reyes and Blanco focusing on the SOGIE bill while looking at it from an occupational justice perspective. Members of the LGBT+ community have been highlighted on the SOGIE bill. It intends to guarantee that one's sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression are not used to deny access to rights that everyone is meant to have. [6].

However, there is still no published study that investigated the lives of Filipino gay men from an occupational justice perspective that could enable an up-to-date yet relevant understanding of their actual lived experiences that can equip occupational therapists and related professionals to contribute in to creating the development on of LGBT+ holistic care.

The concept of occupational justice means directly achieving health and well-being through various resources such as making decisions and sharing decision-making power in daily life, experiencing purpose and richness, and receiving fair and equitable privileges as a result of participation. [7]. Occupational Justice is also used to recognize the occupational rights of every individual to participate in meaningful activities through occupations regardless of their status in society. With the current situation of the LGBT+ community, where they continue to face malicious and blatant gender bias in all aspects of public and private life, including housing, employment, academic opportunities, the ability to purchase goods and services, and the ability to participate meaningfully in our society's decision-making processes, it becomes important to bring attention to their occupational rights by looking at an occupational justice lens [8,9]. Their participation in different occupations during the pandemic warrants examination to see the variation of their lived experience compared to others.

Framed by an occupational justice perspective, this study explored the experiences of gay men with regard to their access to human rights, their ability to engage in daily occupations, and their inability to participate due to existing occupational injustices. The Occupational Justice Health Questionnaire was used by the researchers to explore the experiences of the participants. There are studies that utilized the OJHQ. The case study by Delos Reyes *et al.* which described the experiences of some students who are enrolled in private universities during the COVID-19 pandemic [10]., and the study of Sy *et al.* is within the context of substance abuse and rehabilitation. With this, the OJHQ is utilized in such ways that the researchers identify injustices through different specific contexts[11].

A conceptual framework was conceptualized to explain the key concepts used by the researchers throughout the study and their relationships with each other. See (Figure 1).

One model that influenced the framework is the Person-Environment-Occupation model. This is an important model that systematically focuses on the complex dynamic relationship of the person, environment, and occupation

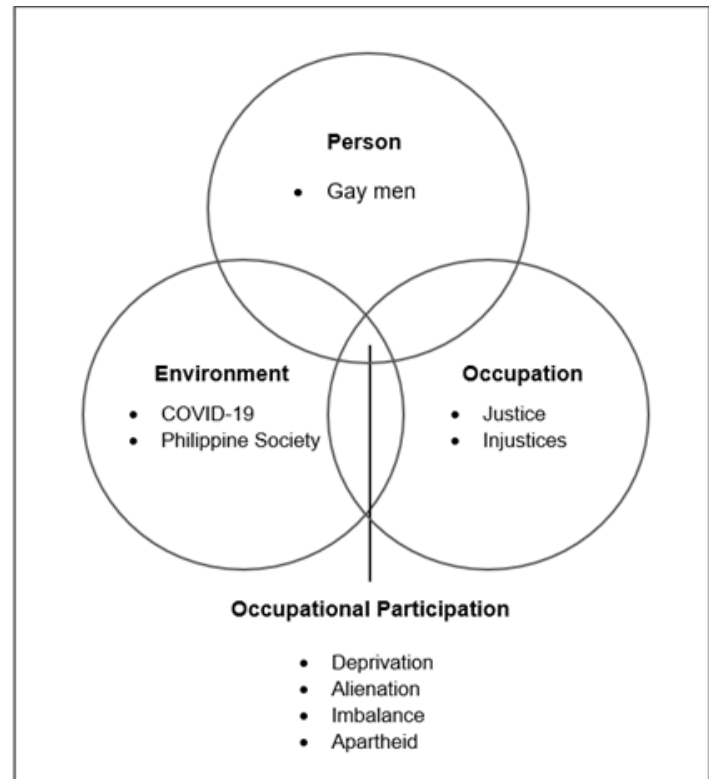


Figure 1. A conceptual framework for the study of occupational justice of the gay community in their occupational performance.

This figure shows the use of the Person-Environment-Occupation (PEO) model which focuses on occupational performance as influenced by the interaction of a person, environment, and occupation [10]. The person domain encompasses gay men who are the primary participants in the study. For the environmental domain, COVID-19 and Philippine society are included. The occupation was then classified as occupational justice or injustices. The three components are interdependent and affect each other. In this framework, the overlapping area of the three domains dynamically shapes occupational participation which is then classified into occupational deprivation, alienation, imbalance, and apartheid.

which influenced the outcomes of occupational engagement [9,12]. The model supports the framework as it mirrors a holistic view of how the person and the other factors contribute to the analysis of his occupational performance. The PEO model was chosen by the researchers for this study to examine the relationship between the sexual orientation of gay men and occupation within the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. This figure shows the use of the Person-Environment-Occupation (PEO) model, which focuses on occupational performance as influenced by the interaction of a person, environment, and occupation [13]. The person domain encompasses gay men, who are the primary participants in the study. Then for the environmental domain, COVID-19 and Philippine society are included. The occupation was then classified as occupational justice or injustices. The three components are interdependent and affect each other. In this

framework, the overlapping area of the three domains dynamically shapes occupational participation which is then classified into occupational deprivation, alienation, imbalance, and apartheid.

In the study conducted by Gocmen and Yilmaz (2017), LGBT+ individuals in Turkey experienced discrimination regarding their education, employment, and health care [14]. Hadden adds to Gocmen and Yilmaz's point by noting that there is still an existence of harassment through both physical and verbal manifestations [4]. Furthermore, Hadden's study also depicts how occupational injustice is experienced by LGBT+ individuals, especially in the areas of occupational deprivation and occupational marginalization. In the Philippine context, members of the LGBT+ community have been highlighted due to the rampant discrimination against them [15]. An ongoing discussion is about the passing of the SOGIE bill and the general public has put an emphasis on the LGBTQ community regarding this bill since they are one of the most vulnerable groups of people when it comes to discrimination in the society. LGBT employees reported they were fired or refused promotions unfairly. They are also frequently stereotyped as only being appropriate for certain jobs. Furthermore, discrimination, harassment, and exclusion from the labor field are frequently experienced as a result of not conforming to heteronormativity. [6].

The study by Kheller states that older gay men experienced inhibition in engaging in their occupations and other activities due to the discrimination being imposed on their sexual orientation [16]. Meach's study, shows similarities that an individual's sexual orientation affects his actions and occupational choices [17]. They both agreed that a person's sexual orientation is a contributing factor to the occupational justice and injustices the LGBT+ people experienced. [17].

Overall in general, all studies and literature that are included have a background and foundation of knowledge on the experiences of gay men during the COVID-19 pandemic using occupational justice. Moreover, the pieces of information presented helped the researchers become knowledgeable enough to understand how it is crucial to study LGBT+ individuals and occupational justice in general as a whole.

The researchers believed that the result of this study could benefit the LGBT community, particularly those who experience injustices. This will also give awareness to the experiences of gay men during the COVID-19 pandemic such as higher rates of job loss, certain mental health conditions, and economic problems as compared to non-LGBT+

individuals [18], and may also help in educating society on gender and sexual awareness. In addition, this study presented more information using the occupational justice perspective on the experiences of gay men during the COVID-19 pandemic. This could help in the improvement and advancement of the student's common perspective of equality, non-discrimination, and diversity through the values and lessons taught in both private and public schools offering occupational therapy and related allied health courses. Facilitating a webinar that promotes equal engagement in occupation is one way that can help to achieve the goals of this study. Lastly, the study conducted could serve as a guide and source of information in generating a new study and provide findings and information to gain further and relevant knowledge of the topic.

Methodology

Research Design

A qualitative case study research design was used to analyze the data gathered through deductive thematic analysis. This method allowed the researchers to observe the participants, their interpretations, and their perspectives.

The researchers intend to classify the participation of gay men in their occupation during the pandemic, under the guidance of the Occupational Justice Health Questionnaire (OJHQ) to establish if most of their experiences make up occupational justice. The OJHQ is a five-part checklist with binary options (able and unable) across 27 items related to basic needs (Part I), overall well-being (Part II), living standards (Parts III & IV), and specific injustices decreasing occupational participation (Part V) [19].

Using the Occupational Justice Health Questionnaire (OJHQ), it was easier for the researchers to come up with specific yet detailed data from the respondents since this questionnaire mainly focuses on the occupation of an individual while investigating specific aspects that cater to the occupational justice perspective. It also caters to delivering a much more specific perspective in terms of their experiences in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Ethical Considerations

With the approval of the Department of Occupational Therapy within the College of Allied Medical Sciences, University of Batangas, the research proceeded. A letter was sent to the designated LGBT+ group in San Pascual, Batangas, and an informed consent form was sent to every

respondent before the collection of data. The informed consent form was agreed upon by the participants before they took part in the focus group discussion and one-on-one in-depth interviews. Before the interview, the researchers emphasized confidentiality and the right to withdraw from any phase of the research. The researchers kept all recordings and data employed confidentially.

Participant Recruitment

The participants who took part in this research were gay men belonging to an LGBT+ organization in San Pascual, Batangas City. The researchers used a purposive sampling method with the following inclusion criteria: gay men who are currently employed and at least 18 years old, residing in Batangas Province during the pandemic. They were excluded if they have not come out yet and they would still try to fit into the perceived heteronormative standards of society. Eight (8) gay participants from the specified organization took part in this research. See Table 1 for the demographic profile of the participants.

Data Collection

The data for the research was gathered from one-on-one in-depth interviews and a focus group discussion. Upon confirmation, the researchers delivered the schedule and meeting information over electronic mail. Four of the participants participated in the focus group discussion while the other four participants were interviewed one-on-one. The researchers led the focus group discussion and the interviews. and Taglish, the use of both Tagalog and English, was utilized. The researchers used the OJHQ as a guide for the discussion. The participants were interviewed using the Zoom Communications

platform as first-time users may quickly learn how to operate the platform owing to its user-friendly design, and it securely records and maintains sessions without the usage of third-party software. With the participant's permission, a feature of the Zoom Communications platform was used to record the meeting. Each meeting lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. The researchers then transcribed the meeting proceedings and the transcription was used to generate themes. Those data were stored in a Google Drive folder to which only the researchers had access.

Data Analysis and Discussion Approach

The first four authors did the recording and transcribing, followed by checking by the fifth author. This qualitative research examined the experiences and stories of the LGBT+ from the interview to identify occupational justice during the COVID-19 pandemic. Researchers employed the deductive thematic analysis to generate insights and understanding from the gained data, as it does not require detailed theoretical and technological knowledge of other qualitative approaches and offers a more accessible form of analysis [20]. Through this, the researchers acquainted themselves with the data and, based on similarities and differences, extracted the codes or sub-themes based on the occupational justice typologies [19].

Findings and Discussions

The experiences of the eight participants were analyzed through the lens of occupational justice. Using OJHQ as a guide during the focus group discussion and in-depth interviews, the researchers obtained statements from the participants about their access to basic needs, aspects of well-being, rights to health, and cultural beliefs and customs. The researchers employed four typologies of occupational justice such as occupational deprivation, alienation, imbalance, and apartheid to examine their experiences.

From the interview transcriptions, through manual code and sub-theme extractions, the researchers highlighted statements from the participants to form sub-themes that would fall under the general themes of the study. The researchers incorporated the themes from the different occupational justice typologies [19] to classify and examine the lived experiences of the participants from their statements. With this, the results were organized in such a way that each context from their statements would align similarly to each other to form a conclusion.

Table 1. *Demographic Details of Participants*

Demographic Profile of the Participants		
Participants	Age	Work
Mr. S	22 years old	call center agent
Mr. T	21 years old	financial assistant
Mr. U	38 years old	call center agent
Mr. V	25 years old	factory worker
Mr. W	30 years old	call center agent
Mr. X	20 years old	municipal employee
Mr. Y	23 years old	financial advising consultant
Mr. Z	26 years old	call center agent

Occupational Deprivation

Occupational deprivation is the state of being hampered from opportunities to participate in meaningful occupations due to uncontrollable factors [21]. Due to circumstances beyond the individual's control, the individual's involvement in required or meaningful activities is restricted for an extended time. Participants experienced drastic changes from different factors that emerged, most especially because of restrictions brought upon by the pandemic. Some participants used to be students before the pandemic started and have since stopped their education during the pandemic. This is due to the changes in their priorities and responsibilities, specifically within their family. Financial reason is the main cause and the shift to online learning during the pandemic added more stress to finding the resources needed to comply. Mr. V, one of the participants noted, *"Life is hard. I knew that I wouldn't be able to study, so I stopped anyway. I will work first since I am already at the right age to work."* [Mr. V]

All the participants expressed that they experienced a significant decrease in engaging in recreational activities and opportunities. Some expressed how these were the experiences that drastically changed their routine, which led them to feel overwhelmed during the beginning of the pandemic. They also stated how did the national policy about these health protocols not only became a huge obstacle for them to engage in these occupations, but also their individual health concerns. A participant Mr. U stated that *"Before, we were able to organize pageants and a band for our barangay, but there are no such things now since we are all concerned for our health."* [Mr. U]

The pandemic created a massive change in their physical and social activities. Since activities were limited only to their homes, it became difficult for them to maintain a healthy lifestyle. They also expressed their immense routine change because of these limitations. In terms of their physical health, the participants answered how they had mostly resorted to excessive gadget use during the pandemic instead of engaging in physical exercises. Before the pandemic, their daily routine consisted of different occupations in which they can really physically move their bodies, even in the simple act of taking transportation to their work which they considered a physical exercise. On the other hand, for social activities, they stated how their first-hand communication only involved family members and that sometimes talking online with their friends became an occasional thing.

Occupational Alienation

Occupational alienation refers to the deep feelings of

incompatibility with different occupations, to the extent that basic needs and wants appear impossible to attain or maintain [22]. Some occupations are experienced as being mentally and spiritually enriching. These occupations provide people with the opportunity to express themselves and have much creativity. However, others are mundane and regimented, which can lead to boredom and isolation. When people often feel that their daily life lacks purpose or meaning, it may lead to occupational alienation.

Travel restrictions mandated by the government because of the pandemic limit the occupations of the participants. Routines became rigidly repetitive, which made daily life boring or lacking in meaning. A participant, Mr. S stated, *"Because of the same routines in this pandemic, it feels suffocating."* [Mr. S]

Feeling demotivated is also a common occurrence. Being restricted from going out, the participants' inspiration is gone; their excitement for their occupations is not what it used to be. For Mr. W, *"This pandemic makes me feel lazier. I tried (doing other things) before, but I feel tired, that's why I stop doing (those things)."* [Mr. W]

Occupational Imbalance

Occupational imbalance is when people are unoccupied, under-occupied, and over-occupied [9]. There is a lack of proportion in an occupation that results in decreased wellbeing. It is caused by having too little to do or being excessively burdened to do things regularly.

Most participants lost their balance of engagement in most of their occupations due to the pandemic. According to them, they had to prioritize providing for their family's needs instead of focusing on attaining and continuing the career they started prior to the pandemic. They considered the factor that a lot of people lost their jobs during the pandemic and due to financial instability, as the reason why they decided to work and be responsible to sustain their needs. According to one participant Mr. S, *"I need to put my family first before my own growth and wants."* [Mr. S]

Participants who most of the time worked in their homes stated that the pandemic has brought them more time to bond with their families. This is because they do not have to travel to the workplace back and forth, they also do not have to spend time working with their workmates. The time they spent in the workplace prior to the pandemic was spent bonding with their families. However, because of the restrictions and safety measures that are mandated by the

government, it was not that easy to go out and bond with their families. A participant Mr. T noted, *"Because of the pandemic, my family got closer because we're always together."* [Mr. T]

Lack of proportion in an occupation resulting in decreased well-being is the main concern of the participants. Most participants stated that their work-from-home experience frequently led to burnout because they were accustomed to resting at home after a long day of work, but their place of rest has now become their workplace. *"Although I have enough time for rest and sleep, I still feel tired and restless,"* [Mr. S] stated.

Occupational Apartheid

Occupational apartheid refers to the state of restricting or depriving the groups of people to having access to dignified and meaningful participation in occupations of daily life. This is based on race, color, disability, national origin, age, gender, sexual preference, religion, political beliefs, and status in society [23]. The sense of belongingness and acceptance for gay members of the Philippine society during a pandemic is challenged. Members of their family and friends are accepting, but they still face social discrimination outside their homes. Formby stated that a sense or experience of community was linked to reported wellbeing, including combating isolation, heightening confidence and self-esteem, and sometimes improving or maintaining physical health [23].

One participant believed that affirming families and friends play an important factor in their increased self-esteem and sense of belongingness. The participant Mr. W asserted that *"I have a supportive family, so I feel safe and comfortable at home and outside of our home. I don't care about others' judgment about me."* [Mr. W] Another participant thinks that people's negative views of gay men affect how she celebrates her identity and her life pattern. The participant stated that *"I have experiences of name-calling, rejection, and discrimination before and during the pandemic. I am afraid to go out sometimes because I already anticipate that occurrence,"* [Mr. V] stated.

Continuing employment discrimination against some gay men greatly affects their mental and emotional health. During the pandemic, discrimination appears to be highlighted because gay men are unable to present themselves in person during interviews when they are already judged based on their sound on the phone. One participant admitted that he had to hide his identity to get the job. The participant Mr. Y mentioned that *"I modulated my voice because the interviewer sensed that I am a gay while I'm speaking on the phone. It's sad that I need to hide my identity."* [Mr. Y]

While gay men who are seeking a job experience discrimination [24], most of the working gay participants in this study did not experience any discrimination in their workplace. One participant believes that a happy workplace translates to happy employees [4]. The participant Mr. W declared that *"I am a call center agent and discrimination doesn't have a place in our company. Those who will discriminate against us for our sexual orientation will get fired."* [Mr. W]

Due to the pandemic, various events were canceled and restricted thereby, affecting the participants' engagement in the Philippine society's cultural life and local events. The participants experience difficulties practicing their religious traditions and practices due to the risks of the contagious virus. Although, one participant Mr. W said that he can still go to church as long as he attends the earliest mass.: The participant stated that *"I still go to church but I have to wake up early to attend the earliest mass for my safety."* [Mr. W] This remark expresses how gay men try to attend public gatherings with as few people as possible in order to avoid being endangered or uncomfortable.

Aside from the areas where the participants experienced occupational injustices, other parts of the OJHQ were achievable. The participants can access food, shelter, peace, have income and sustainable resources, can realize their aspirations, and satisfy their needs.

Conclusion

The experiences of working gay men revealed how the COVID-19 pandemic affects their access to occupational justice. Through the lens of occupational justice, the experiences of gay men show that the pandemic has brought both injustices and justice into the participants' daily lives.

The study revealed that there were differences regarding the experiences of gay men during the pandemic and prior to the pandemic. The majority of the participants are concerned with their health and their work nowadays unlike before the pandemic where they focus most of their time hanging out with friends and participating in different leisure activities. They also stated that restrictions negatively impacted their lives due to limitations in social gatherings. On the other hand, some participants claimed that they experienced burnout prior to the pandemic due to schedule complications of face-to-face classes and work. Some also stated that they were discriminated against because of their sexual orientation on positions in their work before the pandemic.

Moreover, the study shows how occupational deprivation, alienation, imbalance, and apartheid were experienced by the gay members of the chosen organization. Through their accounts, the researchers were able to organize the different information under the themes. The OJHQ was used to guide the researchers throughout the focus group discussion. This study showcased the effectiveness of OJHQ as a tool in determining occupational justice experienced by gay men during the pandemic in in-depth interviews and a focus group discussion, which could not be flashed with ordinary guide questions or discussions. The results were easily manifested using this tool as it provided the researchers with specific questions in specific areas that generated specific and expounded answers.

Implications

- OJHQ can be a relevant tool to explore the lives of varied marginalized groups such as the LGBT+ community where information that could be extracted are is vital in creating support, promoting safe space, reflecting the practice of justice, and acknowledging the changing nature of injustices.
- LGBT+ community needs to be enabled to experience occupational justice by professionals such as encouraging discussion with and support for LGBT+ organizations in conducting awareness-raising activities and programs about discrimination and opposing demonstrations of prejudice towards them during the pandemic.
- Local officials and policymakers are highly encouraged to provide a strict execution and adherence to local ordinances that prohibit discrimination against the non-binary community.

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