

Research Article

A Lived Experience of and an Intersection of Gay Camarero and *Pagsasanto* in Aklan: A Gendered Perspective

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Abstract

This study explores how gender identity is expressed, negotiated, and formed within the religious role of gay *camareros* in the Filipino Catholic tradition of *pagsasanto*—the care and celebration of religious icons. Utilizing a qualitative phenomenological approach, the study examined the lived experiences of five gay *camareros* who have actively participated in *pagsasanto* for at least five years. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, where participants shared their insights on their religious devotion, gender identity, and the intersection of both. The findings reveal that *pagsasanto* is not only a devotional practice but also a space for self-expression, identity formation, and social inclusion. The participants' gender identity was shaped by factors such as family traditions, religious devotion, and community support, while their gender expression within *pagsasanto* was manifested in religious devotion, artistic expression, and performativity. Despite facing gender discrimination and subtle policing, the participants navigate traditional gender roles by challenging norms and reconfiguring their roles within the religious context. This study affirms that *pagsasanto* is a space where queer identities are not only tolerated but are actively produced, affirmed, and sanctified. The participants' religious labor serves as a site of queer spirituality and moral authority, illustrating how queer identity can thrive within traditional Catholic practices.

Keywords

Pagsasanto, Gay Camareros, Queer Spirituality, Identity Formation, Phenomenological Research, Performativity

1. Introduction

Behind every carefully dressed santo and each solemn procession stand individuals whose devotion is inseparable from their identity—lives continually shaped, affirmed, and transformed through the sacred labor they perform. In this sacred labor, faith did not simply guide action; it carved pathways of belonging, transformed personal stories, and illuminated how culture and selfhood are continuously reborn through tradition.

1.1. Historical Background

Pagsasanto, the tradition of caring for and parading religious images during religious festivities, is a deeply rooted aspect of Filipino Catholicism. These religious images, often intricately adorned and revered by the faithful, play a central role in significant events such as Holy Week processions, fiestas, and other religious celebrations [3]. The Catholic practice of *pagsasanto* is carried out by the *camarero*, the individual responsible for the care, maintenance, and presentation of religious images. Traditionally a devotional duty, the role

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holds social, cultural, and spiritual significance, linking ritual stewardship to community belonging and moral responsibility [9].

Furthermore, the *camarero* role in Filipino Catholicism has undergone a notable evolution, transitioning from an exclusively male domain to one embracing broader inclusivity. Traditionally held by devout men, it symbolized honor, trustworthiness, piety, and dedication in maintaining santos for rituals and festivals [6]. This shifted to include women, reflecting gendered ties to care and domesticity amid changing religious and cultural norms, subtly redefining devotion while preserving moral prestige [15]. More recently, the role has extended to gay *camareros*, marking a progressive transition that challenges conventional masculinity and religiosity, integrating diverse identities into a devotional landscape rooted in tradition yet adaptive to gender fluidity [1-12]. Through their artistry and commitment, gay *camareros* honor sacred images and exemplify Filipino Catholicism's growing recognition of inclusivity and gender diversity. This intergenerational, familial practice continues to transmit faith across generations, adapting to evolving social and spiritual contexts [1, 2].

Despite the significant role that gay *camareros* play in the tradition of *pagsasanto*, there is a noticeable gap in scholarly research that addressed the intersection of gender identity and religious practice within this context. Most studies on Filipino religious traditions tend to focus on the rituals, the religious images, or the broader cultural significance of these practices, often overlooking the experiences of the individuals who are intimately involved in these traditions. Furthermore, while there has been some exploration of LGBTQ+ identities in the Philippines, the specific experiences of gay *camareros* within the religious sphere remain underexplored.

This study aimed to fill a significant gap in the literature by investigating how gay *camareros* in Aklan navigated their roles and how their gender identity interacts with their religious responsibilities within *pagsasanto*. It also sought to document their life stories in relation to their participation in *pagsasanto*, analyze how gender is expressed, negotiated, and formed through their roles and responsibilities in the practice, and examine how they perceive *pagsasanto* as a social and cultural phenomenon. This research enriched academic discourse on gender and religion and informed broader discussions on inclusivity within religious and cultural traditions.

1.2. Pagsasanto

Pagsasanto, traditionally a Catholic devotional practice involving the caretaking of religious images or statues, was historically performed by old, wealthy women (*camareras*) and prominent political families. In recent years, this practice has seen significant participation by gay men (*camareros*), marking an important shift in the cultural and religious landscape. This change challenges traditional gender roles and highlights the intersection between gender diversity and religion in a predominantly Catholic society [1-4]. Tamayo (2024) argues that

the shift in *pagsasanto* from being matron-centric to gay men taking center stage as *camareros* represents a revival of a tradition rooted in pre-colonial times. These gay men mirror the role of the *babaylanes* in religious practices, highlighting their ongoing influence in Filipino religious life. This shift not only demonstrates the contribution of Filipino gay men to the preservation of *pagsasanto* but also underscores their significant role in the Catholic Church in the Philippines today.

1.3. Saints, Stories, and Selfhood: The Lives of Gay Camareros

Numerous qualitative studies and ethnographies have explored the diverse life stories and pathways through which gay *camareros* (caretakers of sacred images) have entered and engaged in *pagsasanto* in the Philippines. A common theme across these studies is that many gay *camareros* were deeply exposed to Catholic religious practices from an early age, often growing up in devout families or religious communities. These environments provided essential access to *santo* images, which were frequently inherited, gifted, or entrusted to them by relatives, sparking their initial interest and later deepening their devotion [7].

In contemporary times, *pagsasanto* has undergone significant evolution, particularly with the increasing involvement of the LGBT community, especially gay men, as *camareros* or image caretakers. Manalansan [13] have explored this transformation. This study highlighted how gay *camareros* used *pagsasanto* as a platform to express their agency, negotiate their identities, and assert their place within both the religious and social spheres. Through their participation in *pagsasanto*, gay *camareros* not only contribute to the preservation of this cultural practice but also imbue it with new meanings, reflecting the adaptability and fluidity of religious traditions in response to changing social dynamics.

One of the key observations from these studies is how gay *camareros* navigate the intersection of their sexual identity and religious devotion. By performing roles traditionally held by others within the Catholic context, such as caretaking religious images, they redefine these roles and challenge the historical and theological boundaries set by the Church. Their involvement in *pagsasanto* thus represents not only a religious act but also an assertion of identity, power, and presence within a domain that has long been governed by heteronormative traditions.

1.4. Socio – Cultural Aspect

Studies indicate that gay *camareros* often come from familial Catholic backgrounds and are encouraged by older family members to engage in *pagsasanto*. Their participation is not just religious but also a form of self-expression, identity negotiation, and social performance. Gay *camareros* view *pagsasanto* as a source of personal achievement, devotion, and cultural expression. Despite conflicting Catholic teachings on

homosexuality, they find ways to reconcile their faith and gender identity through this practice [2-12].

The becoming of a gay *camarero* is deeply rooted in cultural and familial Catholic traditions. This role offers a platform for gender performativity and identity construction, enabling gay men to showcase talents, negotiate social roles, and cultivate a sense of community. The practice has evolved into a space where gay *camareros* support each other, creating networks that help them navigate challenges and establish unique identities within the religious and social sphere [3-12].

Gay *camareros* shared narratives of feeling marginalized within the Church yet maintain hope for greater gender inclusivity. They express collective feelings of powerlessness but also pride in their roles as caretakers of religious images. This participation redefines the meanings of devotion and challenges traditional norms, highlighting the dynamic interaction between religion, culture, and gender identity [1-14].

The study by Piamonte, Quintos, & Iwayama [1-10] found the multifaceted motivations and perceived benefits of gay *camareros* participating in *pagsasanto*, exploring both personal and sociocultural dynamics that shape their involvement. *Pagsasanto*, the practice of caring for and decorating religious images, is often seen as a form of devotion, but the study reveals that it holds deeper meanings for gay *camareros*, who are typically the central figures in this practice.

One key finding is that the entry of gay *camareros* into *pagsasanto* is greatly influenced by religious family dynamics, schooling, and community socialization. These socialization agents create a framework in which participation in religious practices like *pagsasanto* becomes both an expectation and a form of self-expression. Religious families, in particular, act as gatekeepers, instilling both religious values and a sense of belonging in their children. These families may encourage involvement in religious practices, ensuring continuity of tradition across generations. Likewise, schooling and community social networks further reinforce these religious values and offer spaces where individuals can learn about *pagsasanto* and be introduced to its cultural significance.

Access to religious images, or *Imahe*, which are central to the practice, occurs in two primary ways: through ownership or entrustment. Ownership, where participants personally acquire or inherit the images, provides a more permanent connection to the practice, while entrustment, where the images are temporarily held by the *camareros* for caretaking, reflects a sense of responsibility and respect for the religious figures. This access is not always guaranteed and can be subject to familial, community, or religious factors, making it a significant aspect of the social structure surrounding *pagsasanto*.

Additionally, according to Piamonte, Quintos, & Iwayama [2-10], gay *camareros* participated in *pagsasanto* due to the following reasons:

Self-expression. It is often judged by society for cross-dressing, gay *camareros* express their identity by decorating religious images and their carriage with flowers, artistic de-

signs, and expensive clothing adorned with beautiful embellishments. This allows them to express their "gayness" without fear of societal judgment. However, they are still mindful of their limitations in decorating these images.

Form of Repentance. Some conservative Catholics view gender as binary, considering being gay sinful and immoral. In response, gay *camareros* seek divine forgiveness by dedicating their time and resources to decorating and caring for religious images, even though this task is not always easy.

Personal Achievement/Accomplishment. Many people look down on gays, not only for their perceived sinfulness but also for seeing them as mere entertainers. *Pagsasanto* provides gay *camareros* with a sense of personal achievement, especially when others are impressed by how they decorate religious images and their carriages. This has earned them admiration and respect.

Devotion. The primary motivation for gay *camareros*' involvement in *pagsasanto* is devotion. They wish to demonstrate their love and gratitude to the saints by caring for and decorating their religious images.

Furthermore, gay *camareros* continue to engage in *pagsasanto* due to the benefits they derive from the practice. According to Romerosa & Antonio [5-12], gay *camareros* believe that their devotion to the saints brings prosperity and safety. In return for their service, they experience benefits such as improved health, livelihood, and personal and social growth [3-10].

They viewed their well-being and security as gifts from God, resulting from their devotion. *Pagsasanto* has also contributed to their personal development by teaching them valuable skills and fostering positive attitudes and behaviors. Furthermore, taking care of Santo has raised their moral and social standing in their community. Although these benefits are acknowledged, gay *camareros* emphasize that they do not expect anything in return for their efforts.

Therefore, the role of stewarding a santo began as a hobby or a means of gaining social status but evolved into a profound spiritual calling. Studies described the journey as one of personal transformation, with caring for and beautifying the images serving as a creative outlet that was previously forbidden in their youth (e.g., playing with dolls). In this sense, *pagsasanto* became a bridge between their religious identity and artistic self-expression [2-14].

While openly gay *camareros* expressed a sense of empowerment through their visibility and involvement in church rituals, which offer psychological security, validation, and a sense of community—experiences often unavailable in other parts of their lives due to their sexual orientation—they also articulate a shared feeling of "powerlessness." They express a collective hope for more explicit inclusion within the Church, as the Catholic doctrine still conflicts with full acceptance of the LGBTQIA+ community [6-12].

Devotion and Display: Gender, Faith, and the Self in Pagsasanto

The practice of *pagsasanto* in the Philippines, rooted in

Catholic tradition, emerged as a significant space for the expression, negotiation, and formation of gender identities, particularly among gay *camareros* (caretakers of sacred images). This phenomenon illustrates the complex intersection of sexual identity, religious devotion, and gender performativity, providing new insights into how marginalized individuals engaged with and transformed cultural and religious practices. *Pagsasanto* thus served as an avenue for gay *camareros* to engage in processes of self-expression, identity negotiation, and the formation of gender roles, all within a society where traditional gender norms and Catholic teachings on homosexuality often conflicted.

Pagsasanto as Gender Expression

Pagsasanto served as a platform for gender expression, where gay *camareros* publicly articulated and performed their gender identities through the care and adornment of religious images. Tagulinao's [3-14] study highlighted how gay *camareros* navigated the intersection of their sexual identity and religious devotion by using *pagsasanto* as a creative outlet. This creative process, which involved the decoration of religious statues and participation in religious processions, allowed these individuals to express their personal and artistic identities in ways that were culturally and religiously accepted within the Filipino context.

The expression of gender through *pagsasanto* was particularly significant because it provided a socially acceptable avenue for activities traditionally associated with femininity, such as artistic expression, nurturing, and attention to detail. These were roles that, for many gay men, had historically been suppressed or deemed inappropriate, especially in secular or non-religious spaces. *Pagsasanto* thus functioned as an emancipatory act, where gay *camareros* could channel energies that were previously viewed as deviant into religious and creative endeavors. This dual role—both spiritual and artistic—reinforced the notion that *pagsasanto* served as a powerful space for gender expression, merging religious devotion with artistic creativity and self-affirmation [4-14].

Pagsasanto as Gender Negotiation

Beyond self-expression, *pagsasanto* also represented a site for gender negotiation. The involvement of gay men in roles traditionally reserved for women (such as caretaking of religious images) marked a significant shift in the gendered structure of *pagsasanto*. Historically, *pagsasanto* had been predominantly the domain of elite women (*camareras*) or influential families, underscoring its association with social status and cultural capital [4-12]. However, the increasing participation of gay men in this practice led to a reconfiguration of these traditional gender roles, creating a space where gender identities were performed, redefined, and, at times, contested.

As Romerosa and Antonio [5-12] argued, gay *camareros* not only performed gender roles associated with femininity but did so in a manner that challenged the normative gender expectations set by both Catholicism and Filipino society. In their roles as *pagsasanto* practitioners, these individuals nego-

tiated their gender identities by occupying positions that combined traditionally feminine traits—such as nurturing, beauty, and creativity—with authority and public visibility traditionally associated with male roles in religious contexts. This negotiation of gender within the practice reflected the fluidity of gender roles and how cultural and religious practices evolved to accommodate and challenge traditional understandings of gender.

Moreover, *pagsasanto* offered gay *camareros* an opportunity to assert their place within the broader social and religious contexts. The practice became a tool for gender negotiation, where gay men, often marginalized due to their sexual orientation, found a space for recognition and respect within the community. Through their involvement in *pagsasanto*, they engaged in a subtle act of resistance against heteronormative and patriarchal expectations, carving out a space for themselves within the Catholic tradition. This gender negotiation was not just about asserting individual identity but also about reconfiguring the social and cultural dynamics of religious practice [4-10].

Pagsasanto as Gender Formation

In addition to expression and negotiation, *pagsasanto* played a crucial role in the formation of gender identities. The practice allowed gay *camareros* to shape and solidify their gender identity through their involvement in religious rituals. Piamonte [5-10] noted that many gay *camareros* were introduced to *pagsasanto* through familial and community-based religious practices, where they learned the traditions associated with the care of religious images. Their entry into *pagsasanto* was thus not merely an individual choice but a continuation of cultural and religious traditions that influenced how they constructed their gendered selves.

The process of gender formation within *pagsasanto* was further shaped by psychological and social factors. Tagulinao's [5-14] research underscored the psychological benefits of *pagsasanto*, where gay *camareros* experienced reduced anxiety, stress, and depression through their engagement in the practice. These mental health benefits indicated that the act of caring for religious images provided not only spiritual fulfillment but also psychological healing, contributing to the formation of a positive and resilient self-identity. The devotion to religious imagery offered a sense of purpose and belonging, which was particularly important for gay *camareros* who may have faced societal marginalization due to their sexual orientation.

Moreover, *pagsasanto* allowed gay *camareros* to shape their identities in a communal context. As they progressed in their involvement with the practice, they gained recognition within their religious communities, further reinforcing their social and spiritual roles. The act of performing gender roles within the context of *pagsasanto* helped to solidify these identities, offering gay men a chance to create a meaningful place for themselves both within their religious and social communities [7-12]. This ongoing process of gender formation re-

flected the adaptability of *pagsasanto*, demonstrating how religious practices could serve as both a space for personal growth and the collective reimagining of gender roles.

Therefore, *pagsasanto* operated as a site for gender expression, negotiation, and formation. Gay *camareros*, through their involvement in the practice, navigated a complex intersection of sexual identity, religious devotion, and gender roles. By engaging in *pagsasanto*, these individuals expressed their identities, negotiated their positions within the broader religious community, and formed new, inclusive understandings of gender that challenged traditional norms. This dynamic interplay between gender and *pagsasanto* highlighted the evolving nature of gender roles and the fluidity of religious traditions, illustrating how *pagsasanto* served as both a form of devotion and a space for the negotiation and formation of gender identities in the contemporary Filipino context.

Faith, Culture, and Color: Pagsasanto through the Eyes of Gay Camareros

Gay *camareros*—individuals who care for religious images (*santos*) in Filipino Catholic traditions—consistently characterize *pagsasanto* as a multifaceted, transformative phenomenon. Drawing from ethnographic studies, they perceive the practice as a means of self-expression, both aesthetic and spiritual; a site of legacy and achievement; a form of social negotiation; and a catalyst for community building. This perspective underscores how *pagsasanto* serves as a cultural bridge, allowing gay *camareros* to navigate the tensions between their sexual identities and the conservative doctrines of the Catholic Church in the Philippines, where religion and culture are deeply intertwined [8].

Pagsasanto allows gay *camareros* to channel artistic skills in ways that garner respect and admiration from their communities, blending aesthetic creativity with spiritual devotion. For instance, *camareros* often embellish *santos* with intricate fabrics, jewelry, and floral arrangements, transforming these religious icons into expressions of personal artistry. This aesthetic dimension not only reflects their creativity but also fosters a spiritual connection, where the act of dressing and adorning the *santo* becomes a meditative ritual. Studies highlight how this self-expression empowers gay *camareros* to assert their identities in a society that often marginalizes LGBTQ+ individuals, turning religious practice into a form of subtle resistance [1]. By infusing their personalities into these sacred objects, they create spaces for visibility and affirmation, challenging the notion that devotion must be devoid of individuality.

Gay *camareros* view *pagsasanto* as a profound site of legacy and achievement, where stewardship of the *santo*, participation in processions, and recognition from religious circles cultivate a sense of accomplishment and belonging. In Filipino culture, passing down the care of a *santo* from generation to generation symbolizes familial and communal continuity, and for gay *camareros*, this role often becomes a marker of personal triumph. Ethnographic accounts reveal that many *camareros* take immense pride in mastering the rituals, such

as preparing the *santo* for festivals like the Fiesta or the Santacruzan, which involve public displays of devotion. This recognition from church leaders and community members reinforces their status, providing a rare avenue for achievement in a context where their sexual orientation might otherwise limit social mobility [11]. Ultimately, *pagsasanto* offers a legacy that transcends personal identity, embedding gay *camareros* within the broader tapestry of Filipino Catholic heritage.

In the religious setting of *pagsasanto*, gay *camareros* engage in social negotiation, where their roles as devoted caretakers can partially obscure the doctrinal "sin" ascribed to their sexuality. While the Catholic Church in the Philippines remains largely exclusive, the practice grants a unique space for partial acceptance, allowing *camareros* to negotiate their place within both community and ecclesiastical structures. This negotiation is evident in how *camareros* often maintain discretion about their sexuality to preserve their roles yet subtly challenge boundaries by embodying "divinity" through their service. Research indicates that these dynamic fosters a contingent buy-in, where the church tolerates their participation if it aligns with traditional norms, thereby enabling gay *camareros* to advocate for inclusion without overt confrontation [5]. Such social maneuvering highlights the adaptive strategies employed by marginalized groups within rigid institutions.

Pagsasanto acts as a catalyst for building strong, supportive networks among gay *camareros*, helping them navigate logistical and emotional challenges. The communal aspects of the practice—such as group preparations for processions, shared meals during rituals, and mutual support in maintaining *santos*—create bonds that extend beyond religious duties. Many *camareros* report that these networks provide emotional refuge, offering solidarity in the face of societal stigma and familial rejection. Anthropological studies emphasize how *pagsasanto* fosters a subculture of resilience, where gay *camareros* form alliances that address practical needs, like resource sharing, while also offering psychological support [8]. This community-building aspect transforms *pagsasanto* into a platform for collective empowerment, reinforcing identities and challenging isolation in a predominantly heteronormative society.

Despite the empowerment derived from their religious roles, gay *camareros* remain acutely aware of their contingent acceptance—often feeling "tolerated" rather than fully embraced, provided their devotion remains central and their sexuality discreet. Nevertheless, they affirm that *pagsasanto* is a critical site for contesting gender boundaries, fostering community, and subtly advancing LGBTQIA+ inclusion within the deeply Catholic fabric of Filipino society. This duality reflects broader themes in queer Filipino studies, where religious practices serve as both constraints and opportunities for liberation [1, 2].

Theological Perspective of Gay Camarero

Though the Roman Catholic Church does not have a document specifically on the “*Gay Camarero*” its theological stance on religious icons and popular devotion is found in the *Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments* (2001) [17], which establishes that while popular devotions (like *pagsasanto*) are valid, this leads back to the Liturgy.

According to Sapitula, J. J. (2014), the *camarero* tradition can be viewed theologically through the lens of the *Sensus Fidei* (the sense of faith of believers) [18]. This perspective argues that the Holy Spirit works through the laity, including those whose identities are “irregular” by institutional standards. He further discusses how popular piety allows marginalized groups to “negotiate” their space within the Church. The *camarero* uses the beauty of the *santo* to manifest a “liturgical belonging” that the institutional pulpit might deny them.

2. Methodology

An interpretative phenomenological approach investigated the lived experiences of gay *camareros*, aiming to capture their emotions, motivations, challenges, and the meanings they attribute to their roles as *camareros*. It sought to explore how these gay *camareros* navigated the intersection of their devotion to *pagsasanto* and the societal and religious challenges they encountered. Additionally, the study examined how they achieved personal and spiritual fulfillment within this practice, despite potential conflicts with their sexual identity.

The study was conducted in the municipalities of Malinao, Numancia, Lezo, Kalibo, and Makato in Aklan, Philippines, chosen for their cultural and social significance. These areas provide a meaningful context for examining the lived experiences of gay *camareros*, particularly in their roles within *pagsasanto* practices. Known for their strong religious traditions, these municipalities offer an ideal setting to explore how gay *camareros* navigate their devotion amid beliefs that may at times conflict with their sexual identity. Their close-knit communities offer insight into how individuals reconcile spiritual practice with personal identity and social expectations, making these locales a meaningful context for exploring the intersection of religion, identity, and community dynamics.

Given the exploratory nature of the research and the resources available to the researcher, total enumeration was taken, whereby five participants were deemed sufficient. Inclusion Criteria; they must be openly-gay, they must be a *camarero* who serves either as owner or steward of at least one *Santo/imahe* commonly featured in Roman Catholic Lenten processions, and they must have been *camareros* for more than five years.

The data collection process for this study began after obtaining ethical clearance and necessary permissions. Participants were contacted through their personal social media accounts, such as Facebook and Instagram, and informed consent was acquired before proceeding with any data collection activities. The consent process ensured that participants were

fully aware of the study’s objectives, their voluntary participation, and the confidentiality of their responses.

The primary data for this study were gathered through interviews with five openly gay *camareros* who were selected based on specific criteria. This selection ensured that the participants had substantial experience and engagement in *pagsasanto*, providing rich data for the research questions. The interviews aimed to explore their lived experiences, focusing on their personal and religious journeys as gay *camareros*, as well as their experiences navigating gender and cultural expectations within the context of *pagsasanto*.

During the interviews, the researcher employed a conversational approach, or *pakikipagkwentuhan*, which allowed participants to share their stories in a relaxed and open manner. While many ideas emerged during these conversations, not all were directly related to the research questions but still contributed to the richness of the data. The interviews were audio-recorded with the consent of the participants to ensure accuracy and to preserve the nuances of their responses. These recordings were then transcribed verbatim, capturing the complete responses for further analysis.

The primary instrument was an interview guide using a conversational approach, and the inductive Thematic Analysis guided the analysis of the interview data. Journal writing was done for self-awareness, transparency, and continuous evaluation.

To ensure the integrity of this study, researchers adhered to the criteria of trustworthiness. Credibility was established through member checking, and transferability was ensured by providing thick descriptions of the research context. To maintain dependability, a clear audit trail was kept, and confirmability was addressed through reflexive journalism to avoid researchers’ bias.

Initial Coding. During this stage, the researcher closely read the transcripts and generated initial codes by identifying meaningful segments of data. These codes were aligned with the research objectives and served as a foundation for later analysis.

Theme Identification. The generated codes were organized into potential themes. Through a systematic comparison of codes, the researcher identified patterns and connections within the data. An expert in qualitative research reviewed and validated the codes and themes to ensure they aligned with the study’s objectives and accurately represented participants’ experiences.

Theme Development. In this stage, the themes were refined and further defined based on feedback from the expert. The aim was to capture the core essence of participants’ insights, reflecting key aspects such as the factors influencing their entry into *pagsasanto*, the intersection of gender and *pagsasanto*, and their perspectives as gay *camareros*.

Data Interpretation. The identified themes were interpreted and analyzed within the context of the research objectives. This step focused on uncovering insights related to the factors driving participation in *pagsasanto*, the intersection of gender

with the practice, and how gay *camareros* perceived *pagsasanto* as a social and cultural phenomenon.

Report Writing. The findings were synthesized and presented narratively, following phenomenological principles. The report incorporated relevant participant quotes and textual data to illustrate the identified themes, accompanied by scientific explanations to support the analysis.

3. Results

The findings revealed that *pagsasanto* functions as both a sacred tradition and a transformative platform through which gay *camareros* articulate their identities, affirm their spirituality, and cultivate belonging within the community. Across the narratives, devotion and identity coexisted and evolved within the sacred practice.

This study employs Confirmability as defined by Guba and Lincoln (1994) to ensure that the findings remain a true reflection of the participants' lived experiences rather than a projection of the Catholic Church – which often frames the homosexual identity as 'objectively disordered' (Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, 1986) – and the Via Pulchritudinis (Way of Beauty), where the gay *camarero* finds a 'sacred space' for devotion (Pontifical Council for Culture, 2006). Confirmability ensures that the "gendered" theological expressions of the *camareros*, such as their role in *pagsasanto* as a form of 'creative devotion' (Cornelio, 2016), are documented neutrally. This methodological discipline allows the study to present a balanced 'theology of the margins,' where the *camarero* meticulous care for the santo is recognized as a legitimate, albeit informal, manifestation of the *sensus fidelium* (sense of the faithful).

The life stories of gay *camareros* in the practice of *pagsasanto* revealed that this tradition functioned as both a sacred inheritance and a transformative space where faith, identity, and community intersected. Grounded in family and religious traditions, many *camareros* traced their devotion to early exposure through familial rituals, which provided the foundation for their sense of vocation and belonging. At the same time, *pagsasanto* offered a medium for expressing and shaping gender identity, allowing participants to merge faith, artistry, and queer self-expression in creative and spiritual ways. Engagement in these practices also fostered community and spiritual support, cultivating emotional resilience, social affirmation, and a sense of shared belonging within both family and religious networks. Collectively, these dimensions showed how inherited devotion evolved into an active, personal affirmation of identity, transforming religious participation into a meaningful expression of faith, creativity, and selfhood. As one participant narrates;

I have been involved in pagsasanto since I was a child. I was raised by my very religious grandparents. Having that kind of foundation at a young age—being involved in church activities and belonging to a devout family—made the presence of saints a normal part of my life. Because I

always saw santos [saint images] around me, I naturally developed an interest in them, and that is probably where everything started. I was born into a family that already had our own karo (carriage for carrying religious images), so my interest in santos and becoming a camarero naturally opened up for me. I began taking the responsibility for caring for our karo of the Pieta when my grandfather died; I was already in high school then. The karo has been with our family for forty-six years now, and I am currently thirty-three years old. I have been carrying and managing this Pieta karo for more than sixteen years. As of now, I am maintaining three karos. Two of which I acquired, while the other one is the pieta which was from my grandfather.

Exploring how gender was expressed, negotiated, and formed through *pagsasanto* revealed three interrelated dimensions under the theme "Shaping Identity": developing a sense of self, creating social networks, and building resilience. Developing a sense of self allowed *camareros* to affirm their queer identities within a sacred framework, as devotional practices such as caring for and dressing the santos became acts of personal reflection and self-recognition. Creating social networks fostered community integration and acceptance, as collaborative preparation of processions and altars provided opportunities for social recognition, support, and shared purpose. Building resilience emerged through sustained engagement, with repeated participation strengthening confidence, moral integrity, and the capacity to navigate conservative social expectations, highlighting how religious devotion and queer identity were mutually reinforcing.

"Unleashing the Self through *Pagsasanto*" demonstrated that identity formation was expressed through religious devotion, artistic expression, and performativity. Participants' meticulous care for the saints blended spiritual responsibility with aesthetic creativity, while ritualized enactments enabled them to perform gendered identities in culturally meaningful ways. This was expressed by a participant saying;

Being a camarero has become a meaningful way for me to express my gender identity as a member of the LGBTQ community; it also allows me to showcase my creativity in designing the float and adorning the saints.

These practices offered insight into the co-construction of identity, showing how queerness was intentionally integrated into sacred expression rather than concealed, allowing participants to claim visibility and legitimacy within their faith community.

Under "Forging Identity in Sacred Spaces," the subthemes of confronting traditional roles, navigating intersections of identity, and engaging with community dynamics revealed the negotiation of normative expectations. Gay *camareros* challenged gendered assumptions in religious labor, reconciled faith with sexuality, and gradually cultivated communal acceptance. Their visible participation and dedicated service reshaped social perceptions, providing insight into how queerness and Catholic devotion could coexist harmoniously, transforming sacred spaces into sites of affirmation, inclusion, and

identity formation.

The Church is conservative... so it's a great opportunity that LGBTQ+ are helping in the church... so they can feel that they are still part of it and not rejected by the Church.

The perceptions of gay *camareros* highlighted *pagsasanto* as a multifaceted social and cultural phenomenon, encapsulated under the main theme;

"Pagsasanto in Practice: Gay Camareros' Social and Cultural Reflections." Through gender expression and identity, participants experienced *pagsasanto* as a sacred space where queer self-affirmation was intertwined with spiritual devotion, allowing them to articulate and embody their identities within culturally meaningful rituals. As expressed by a participant;

This is our contribution to the community and the church, which shows our earnest effort to be part of society without any stigma attached to LGBTQ+ people.

The subtheme of religious devotion illustrated that their participation demanded moral discipline, spiritual responsibility, and a sustained commitment that transcended mere aesthetic practice, reflecting a deep engagement with faith as both personal and communal. Meanwhile, supportive social space emphasized the relational dimension of the tradition, as collaborative involvement fostered inclusion, unity, and empowerment, enabling participants to gain recognition, social acceptance, and a sense of belonging within their communities. These insights suggest that gay *camareros* perceived *pagsasanto* not only as a devotional practice but also as a dynamic social institution that bridges faith and cultural identity. By negotiating traditional norms and fostering community engagement, *Pagsasanto* emerged as a platform for visibility, inclusivity, and cultural dialogue, evolving into a living expression of spirituality that embraces diversity and nurtures acceptance. Verbatim of participants were;

In my family, they are very open to me being a camarero despite me being gay... They are really very supportive.

Although the religious environment is conservative, I've learned that my identity as a gay person and this spirituality can coexist.

The findings reveal that *pagsasanto* operates as a dynamic space where spiritual devotion, identity formation, and social transformation intersect.

I was also able to convince many gay individuals to help out... it creates bonding among the LGBTQ+... they get to know themselves and discover their talent in decorating the float.

For gay *camareros*, the practice transcended mere religious obligation, becoming a powerful medium for self-expression, artistic creativity, and cultural engagement. Through meticulous care of the santos, collaborative ritual labor, and visible participation in sacred ceremonies, they navigated and reconciled faith with gender identity, asserting authenticity within traditionally conservative spaces. As reflected by a participant;

It is a sacrifice because once you become a camarero, the moment you start it, you're truly committed to finish it... it becomes a lifetime service to God.

Ultimately, *pagsasanto* emerged as both a cherished inheritance and a transformative practice—one that enabled gay *camareros* to embody devotion, negotiate gender, and reshape communal notions of belonging within the evolving landscape of Filipino Catholicism.

4. Discussions

Gay *Camateros* could organize peer support groups or associations within parishes or local communities to share experiences, resources, and creative practices related to *pagsasanto*. By collaborating with one other, they can sustain traditions, enhance their artistic skills, and find emotional support among peers. They may also initiate small exhibitions or open-house events during Holy Week preparations to showcase their devotional artistry and explain its spiritual meaning. Furthermore, gay *camareros* are encouraged to actively participate in broader parish programs beyond *pagsasanto*, such as catechesis, choir service, or community outreach, to strengthen their visibility and integration in the faith community.

Religious Leaders and Institutions are highly encouraged to formally recognize the contributions of *camareros*, including LGBTQ+ practitioners, in parish ministries and Holy Week activities. Recognition may be done through parish commendations, certificates, or inclusive representation in liturgical committees. Church leaders should also assign gay *camareros* to visible roles during religious events to affirm their devotion and capability. To promote inclusivity, parishes may conduct regular safe-space dialogues and theological reflection sessions between clergy and LGBTQ+ members, fostering mutual respect and understanding. Additionally, providing gender-sensitivity and inclusivity training for priests, catechists, and lay leaders can help improve pastoral care and reduce prejudice within church settings. As explained by a participant;

Educational Institutions can integrate discussions on *pagsasanto*, Filipino religiosity, and LGBTQ+ participation in subjects related to Religious Education, Sociology, and Philippine Culture. Schools and universities can encourage students to conduct research projects, documentaries, and creative outputs that highlight the contributions of gay *camareros* to cultural and spiritual life. Moreover, institutions can host academic seminars and symposiums that bring together scholars, practitioners, and advocates to explore the intersection of faith, identity, and culture, thereby fostering an environment of understanding and inclusion.

Community, especially barangays and parish-based organizations, shall promote inclusive practices during local religious celebrations. Gay *camareros* should be included in planning committees for processions, fiestas, and other devotional events to ensure equitable participation. Public celebrations such as exhibits, festivals, or processional showcases can feature the contributions of LGBTQ+ individuals to foster acceptance and appreciation. Mentorship programs pairing experienced *camareros* with younger participants may also be

established to sustain the continuity of artistry, devotion, and craftsmanship across generations.

Cultural Workers shall have documentation and preservation of *pagsasanto* should be prioritized, especially the evolving roles of LGBTQ+ *camareros*. This can be achieved through oral history projects, video documentaries, and digital archives that record their stories and craftsmanship. Collaborations with museums, universities, or local heritage councils can result in community exhibits and publications that highlight *pagsasanto* as part of the Philippines' intangible cultural heritage. Furthermore, supporting community-based art programs and storytelling projects centered on queer religious narratives can help bridge generational gaps and foster appreciation of diversity in faith practices.

Future Researchers shall broaden the scope of inquiry by exploring *pagsasanto* practices in various regions of the Philippines and across different Christian denominations. Comparative studies examining queer religiosity and gender expression in Southeast Asia could offer deeper insight into cultural variations and shared experiences. Future studies may also focus on generational perspectives to understand how older and younger LGBTQ+ *camareros* differ in their experiences of faith and visibility. Interdisciplinary approaches that combine gender studies, theology, art, and anthropology are encouraged to deepen the understanding of queer religious identity. Additionally, longitudinal studies may examine the long-term effects of *pagsasanto* participation on personal growth, social inclusion, and resilience among LGBTQ+ individuals.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this study affirm that *pagsasanto* functions not only as a religious duty but also as a culturally charged and socially negotiated space where gay *camareros* enact devotion, assert identity, and exercise agency. Through the lens of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), the practice of caring for, adorning, and parading santos is understood as a historically situated activity system in which gay *camareros* serve as active subjects who engage with mediating tools—religious images, rituals, and material practices—within a structured but evolving social context. This framework clarifies how their identities are continually shaped, negotiated, and transformed through sustained participation in a communal tradition that spans generations.

Gender Performativity further illuminates how the embodied tasks of dressing saints, preparing floats, and managing processional aesthetics operate as repetitive expressions through which gender is enacted, recognized, and legitimized. These ritualized acts demonstrate that gender identity among gay *camareros* is not predetermined but is continually produced through their devotional artistry and public participation in sacred ceremonies. Their visible, skilled, and emotionally invested contributions destabilize rigid gender norms by

showing that queer identity can be authentically expressed within a religious domain often perceived as conservative.

Cultural Dynamics Theory complements this understanding by highlighting how *pagsasanto* is not static but evolves through the interactions, interpretations, and innovations of its participants. As gay *camareros* reinterpret aesthetic conventions, introduce new devotional practices, or negotiate roles traditionally dominated by heterosexual men, they subtly transform the cultural script of the tradition. Their involvement illustrates how cultural systems adapt over time, integrating new meanings and identities while maintaining continuity with historical roots.

Taken together, these theoretical perspectives reveal that *pagsasanto* is a living cultural activity where devotion, artistry, and gender identity are interwoven. Gay *camareros* operate within a system marked by both tension and possibility—tension arising from the intersection of queer identity and Catholic tradition, and possibility emerging from their capacity to navigate, reconcile, and reshape these forces. Through their sustained engagement, they become transformative cultural agents who expand the boundaries of religious participation and enrich the communal understanding of faith and identity.

Ultimately, *pagsasanto* emerges as a sacred, socially mediated, and culturally dynamic space where queer identities are not merely accommodated but actively expressed, affirmed, and woven into the fabric of local Catholic life. The presence and contributions of gay *camareros* demonstrate that spiritual devotion and queer subjectivity are not contradictory but mutually reinforcing—capable of coexisting, co-creating meaning, and sustaining a tradition that continues to evolve with time.

Abbreviations

CHAT	Cultural-Historical Activity Theory
LGBTQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer/Questioning, with the "+" Signifying Other Identities Like Intersex, Asexual, Pansexual, Two-Spirit, and More

Author Contributions

Charimar Icawalo: Conceptualization, Data curation, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Resources, Visualization, Writing – original draft

Victoria Gepty: Formal Analysis, Methodology, Project administration, Software, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Validation

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Biography

Charimar Icawalo is a licensed professional teacher currently serving as Teacher I at the Malinao School for Philippine Craftsmen under the Department of Education. Committed to continuous professional growth, he pursued postgraduate studies and obtained a Master of Arts in Education, majoring in Social Science. He also completed Bookkeeping NC II, further strengthening his expertise in finance and accounting. He brings a strong industry background to his teaching practice by working as an Accounting Assistant at The Tides Hotel Boracay, and later served as an Accounting Supervisor at Conti's Specialty Foods, Inc. These experiences provide him with practical insights that enrich his classroom instruction. His combined experience in education and industry enables him to deliver practical, relevant, and learner-centered instruction, preparing students for both higher education and real-world business environments.

Victoria Gepty is an Associate Professor at Aklan State University, holding a Doctor of Philosophy degree in Social Science. She currently serves as the Chair of the Master of Arts in Social Science Teaching program. Her research interests include phenomenological studies, ethnography, and narrative inquiry. She also mentors students in research.