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# "*It felt like walking in the dark*": A Collaborative Autoethnography on the Challenges of Conducting LGBTQ+ Research in Southeast Asia

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**ABSTRACT**

The extant literature has shown that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) communities face considerable barriers in pursuing higher education and achieving their academic aspirations. To date, a critical gap remains in scholarly understandings of the enablers and barriers faced by researchers conducting LGBTQ+ research in Southeast Asia (SEA). This study aims to illuminate the challenges of conducting LGBTQ+ research in Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. As researcher-participants in this study, we conducted a Collaborative Autoethnography, critically reflecting on our work and research with LGBTQ+ communities across these SEA countries. Data were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis. Through four themes, we illustrated the significant barriers encountered as we navigated the social, legal, and political contexts of SEA societies and academia. The neoliberal Western gaze in SEA academia further compounded these challenges. We grappled with how to garner trust from and represent our respective LGBTQ+ communities in our research. We also faced threats that negatively impacted our overall well-being. Our study underscores the urgency of creating safe spaces for LGBTQ+ researchers and their communities to collaborate on meaningful research

**KEYWORDS**

LGBTQ+ researchers; LGBTQ + research; Southeast Asia; ASEAN; LGBTQ+ in Southeast Asia; diversity, equity, and inclusion; autoethnography

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agendas and interventions. Collaborative, multisectoral partnerships from various stakeholders can nurture an equity and social justice-based LGBTQ+ research agenda in the region.

Research in the extant literature has shown that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) communities face considerable barriers in pursuing higher education and achieving their academic aspirations (Eliason, 2023; Marr et al., 2022; Nopas, 2025; Wright-Mair & Marine, 2023). Compared to their cisgender and heterosexual counterparts, LGBTQ+ university students experience elevated stress due to family and work responsibilities, career limitations, sexual harassment, and discrimination (Marr et al., 2022). Even when fortunate to obtain employment within academia's increasingly precarious landscape, LGBTQ+ employees continue to experience challenges related to their gender, sexuality, and intersex identities. Academic institutions are structured by cis/heteronormative norms that inadequately acknowledge the needs of LGBTQ+ employees. As such, they may be subjected to erasure, marginalization, microaggressions, tokenization, and excessive intellectual labor (Eliason, 2023; Wright-Mair, 2023).

In recent decades, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) initiatives across various regions of the world have mitigated these challenges and enhanced the experiences of LGBTQ+ staff and students in academia (Graham et al., 2025). However, the implementation of such initiatives is greatly impacted by various socio-political forces and ideologies. One recent example involved the recent rollback of DEI policies and defunding of LGBTQ+ research following President Trump's reelection, which has intensified social exclusion and minority stressors (e.g., discrimination and rejection) for these groups in the United States (Ng et al., 2025). The ripple effect of such rollbacks and defunding can also be observed in countries such as Australia (Sawer & Sengul, 2025) and Aotearoa New Zealand (Galbraith & Lamusse, 2025).

To date, much of the existing research on the oppressive experiences faced by LGBTQ+ scholars and their resistance strategies has centered on those living in the Global North. Such research from the West offers valuable insights into the oppressive experiences faced by LGBTQ+ scholars and how they resist these through strategies to promote LGBTQ+ inclusion in academia. However, such empirical findings may not be generalizable or applicable to the lives and experiences of LGBTQ+ scholars in other regions of the world (Nopas, 2025; Tang, 2011). Insights garnered from these non-Western regions of the world are also intrinsically valuable and pertinent in their own right. Hence, it is crucial to amplify the voices and experiences of underserved LGBTQ+ scholars in the Global South, including Southeast Asia (SEA), to better understand the struggles and challenges they face and to examine their

unique, shared, and interconnected dimensions within broader global challenges.

## The Southeast Asian Context

Here in SEA, a critical gap remains in scholarly understandings of the enablers and barriers faced by researchers conducting research with LGBTQ+ communities. This dearth of research is due to the near-impossibility of securing government research funding on LGBTQ+ equity in identity-criminalizing contexts (e.g., Malaysia and Myanmar), the weaponization of religion to deny LGBTQ+ acceptance, a lack of institutional interest in addressing LGBTQ+ inequities, and the widespread misinformation and disinformation that prevent political and academic leaders from making evidence-based decisions (Manalastas et al., 2017; Tan & Saw, 2023; Wijaya, 2025). All SEA countries, apart from Thailand, have experienced colonization during which Indigenous LGBTQ+ cultures were actively erased, and legal systems that penalize LGBTQ + identities and relationships were inherited (ASEAN SOGIE Caucus, 2021). Despite these former colonies attaining independence, the legacy of colonization continues to exert influence throughout the region. This "colonial mentality," or the deeply rooted belief in the superiority of Western cultures over Indigenous ones, has hindered efforts to indigenize LGBTQ+ cultures and build solidarity among the oppressed to pursue a liberated collective future (Tuazon & Clemente, 2022).

Notably, much of the extant research on LGBTQ+ communities in SEA has been authored by scholars from the Global North. It has historically been Eurocentric (imposing a Westernized lens and overemphasizing objectivity), pathologizing (associating LGBTQ+ identities with mental disorders), and racially derogatory (suggesting that SEA cultures and communities are uncivilized; ASEAN SOGIE Caucus, 2021). Colonial deficit-based ideologies about LGBTQ+ communities persist in SEA, despite some countries having historical records of accepting communities of diverse genders and sexualities (Hegarty, 2022). Further, when outsiders narrate the lived experiences of minoritized communities without genuine collaboration or consultation, those communities lose the agency to define narratives that reflect their realities (Smith, 2017).

This neoliberal Western Gaze, or the ways in which knowledge, categories, and narratives generated from the West or Global North are privileged as lenses to interpret the lives and experiences of LGBTQ+ communities in SEA, therefore marginalizes the locally generated identities, knowledge, and experiences that may not necessarily conform to the idealized forms of LGBTQ+ experiences in the Global North (Tang, 2011). This can include experiences of coming out, formation of same-sex relationships, and other LGBTQ+ practices in SEA. Furthermore, a decolonizing approach to LGBTQ+ SEA research

must shift away from deficit-based discourses and critically conscientize insider researchers and allies in the field about LGBTQ+ needs and aspirations (Smith, 2017; Sullivan & Day, 2021). This conscientizing increases awareness of socio-political issues to challenge such inequalities in SEA societies. Mobilizing transformative praxis compels us to examine the costs and workings of cis/heteronormativity as a colonial construct (Ansara & Hegarty, 2012), while laying the groundwork for strategic planning and actionable solutions to transform the status quo.

## The Current Study

The Principal Investigator and senior author of this paper (Kyle Tan; a cis queer man) first conceptualized the idea of amplifying the voices of SEA scholars when he was invited to contribute an essay on LGBTQ+ mental health in the region. Recognizing strong international interest in understanding the socio-material realities of LGBTQ+ people in SEA, he reached out to his peers in LGBTQ+ research, who then extended this invitation to their networks. Given the existing focus on the Global North, the team felt it was imperative to highlight the unique challenges researchers face when conducting research and working with LGBTQ+ communities in SEA. Furthermore, the team acknowledged that SEA continues to be viewed in monolithic terms in the extant LGBTQ+ literature. While there are some social and political similarities across SEA countries, they still differ greatly in their laws and policies, socio-economic priorities, and the rights and recognition of their LGBTQ+ communities. Such research within SEA also has policy implications for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)—a grouping of all 11 states in SEA that aims to promote economic and security cooperation and foster political solidarity across the region—in combating cis/heteronormativity.

This study embodies a critical stance toward the colonial narrative imposed on SEA early-career scholars in LGBTQ+ research (Boylorn & Orbe, 2020). Specifically, the study seeks to examine our intersectional experiences of conducting LGBTQ+ research in our respective countries, while critically interrogating the socio-cultural norms, discourses, context-specific laws and policies, and broader institutions that can facilitate and hinder LGBTQ+ research in SEA. As such, the study draws on counter-storytelling methodologies to capture novel narratives and illuminate challenges we face when our research is frequently construed as "marginal" or risks us being targeted by political and religious actors.

Counter-storytelling exemplifies our attempt to "queer," discern, and disrupt the norms of being cisgender and heterosexual researchers using the cis/heterosexist lens in research (Teman, 2019). In SEA, this also means critically examining the barriers to affirming our identity and conducting culturally safe research grounded in its unique political, social, and cultural contexts. It is

oversimplified to suggest that all SEA scholars are equally marginalized, or more so than those in the Global North. Some of us possess privileged positions through our race, gender, religion, and socioeconomic status in our respective countries, making it easier to interrogate and resist cis/heteronormativity. To that end, our study is grounded in the following research question:

- What are the challenges that early-career researchers face in conducting research with the LGBTQ+ communities in SEA?

## Methodology

An exploratory qualitative study was conducted to understand the experiences of early-career researchers working with LGBTQ+ communities in SEA. Specifically, we conducted a Collaborative Autoethnography (Roy & Uekusa, 2020), a qualitative, experiential approach in which researchers become active research participants reflecting, analyzing, and interrogating their lived experiences in response to a particular topic. In this study, we collaboratively examined our lived experiences of conducting LGBTQ+ research in our respective countries within SEA. The study is underpinned by a Critical Realist paradigm (Maxwell, 2012). This version of Critical Realism acknowledges the existence of a real material world but argues that our interactions with and experiences of this material reality are mediated by our existing knowledge, lived experiences, and socio-cultural backgrounds.

### *Researcher-participants*

Our initial goal was to have at least one experienced LGBTQ+ researcher from each SEA country. For this purpose, we defined "experienced researcher" as individuals with at least three years of involvement in LGBTQ+ research, care, or advocacy in academic, health, or community settings. Through snowball sampling, we identified 11 eligible participants from Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam. Efforts were made to recruit researchers from Brunei, Cambodia, and Laos. However, success was limited by our lack of connections to LGBTQ+ community groups and researchers in these countries. In line with the extant literature on collaborative and ethnographic research, the study team uses the term "we" throughout this manuscript to refer to the researcher-participants who participated in the study.

Regarding our demographics as researcher-participants in this study, we are currently employed or studying in universities and other

academic settings, with half of us based outside of SEA. We are also early-career researchers at various stages of our academic journeys (including Master's graduates, PhD candidates, and those who completed their PhDs within the past seven years). We would like to note that we have chosen not to disclose our specific gender identities and sexualities in this manuscript. While we recognize the importance of declaring our positionalities in shaping how we perceive the social world, some of us do not have the privilege of relocating from our home countries. Publicly disclosing our chosen gender and LGBTQ+ identities could place our lives at risk.

### *Research materials and procedures*

We held an online discussion in February 2025 to introduce ourselves and finalize the project's aims. Subsequently, each of us wrote a short reflection piece of about 1,000 words in response to the guided questions in Appendix 1 (under the Supplementary Information for this article). Everyone was encouraged to connect their reflections to positionality, power, and epistemologies. One researcher-participant chose to write in their preferred non-English language to better capture their thoughts and experiences. This reflection was translated into English by another researcher-participant proficient in both languages. All autoethnographic reflections were uploaded onto a shared Google Drive folder prior to analysis.

### *Data analysis*

The data were analyzed using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Led by the first author, the analysis team comprised five experienced qualitative researchers. We began the analysis by familiarizing ourselves with the reflection pieces. This included reading and rereading each reflection piece to become intimately familiar with the issues and challenges highlighted by researcher-participants in this study. Throughout the familiarization phase, we recorded notes, thoughts, and comments on the content and language used by researcher-participants to describe their experiences conducting LGBTQ+ research in SEA. We systematically coded each reflection piece, generating semantic and latent codes to address the research question outlined in the introduction. We discussed and refined the codes generated for each reflection piece at bi-weekly meetings before analyzing the next reflection piece. Once coding for all reflection pieces was completed, we sorted the codes by conceptual similarity and subsequently generated initial themes. These initial themes were further refined during team meetings before being finalized and written out. Codes and themes were collaboratively generated by the

analysis team in Google Docs and Miro Boards. ATLAS.ti Version 25 was also used to manage the codes and themes generated by the analysis.

### *Quality and trustworthiness criteria*

To ensure the study's quality and trustworthiness, we utilized strategies drawn from the Reflexive Thematic Analysis Reporting Guidelines (RTARG) by Braun and Clarke (2024). Firstly, we explicitly stated the study's aims and paradigm in the introduction and methodology sections of the manuscript. We maintained an audit trail of the entire research process, from developing the research question that underpinned the study to refining the codes and themes generated during analysis. The team also undertook analytic memoing to capture emergent insights and personal reactions observed during the analysis. We held bi-weekly to monthly meetings to reflect, debrief, and cross-check on our collaborative analysis. This allowed us to ensure coherence and collaboratively deepen the interpretation of the data. We also conducted follow-up communications with all researcher-participants during the analysis process to clarify specific aspects of their reflections. All researcher-participants were also invited to a discussion where themes generated from the analysis were shared. This member reflection strategy enabled researcher-participants to raise and share additional insights, clarifications, or responses regarding the themes. The analysis team also used such feedback to refine the themes generated for the study. This dialogic and iterative process facilitated the co-construction of meaning and enriched the overall interpretation of the data.

## Findings and Discussion

The analysis of the reflection pieces generated four main themes that encapsulated the challenges we faced when working with and conducting research among LGBTQ+ communities in SEA. The themes centered on the considerable barriers we encountered as we navigated the social, legal, and political contexts of SEA societies and academia. We also grappled with garnering trust from and representations of our respective LGBTQ+ communities as part of research, as well as faced threats that negatively impacted our physical, psychological and emotional well-being. These themes are depicted in Figure 1.

### *Theme 1: Navigating the social, legal, and political structures concerning LGBTQ+ rights, issues, and research in Southeast Asian societies*

The first theme illustrated the ways in which we, as researcher-participants in this study, had to navigate and grapple with broader social, legal, and political

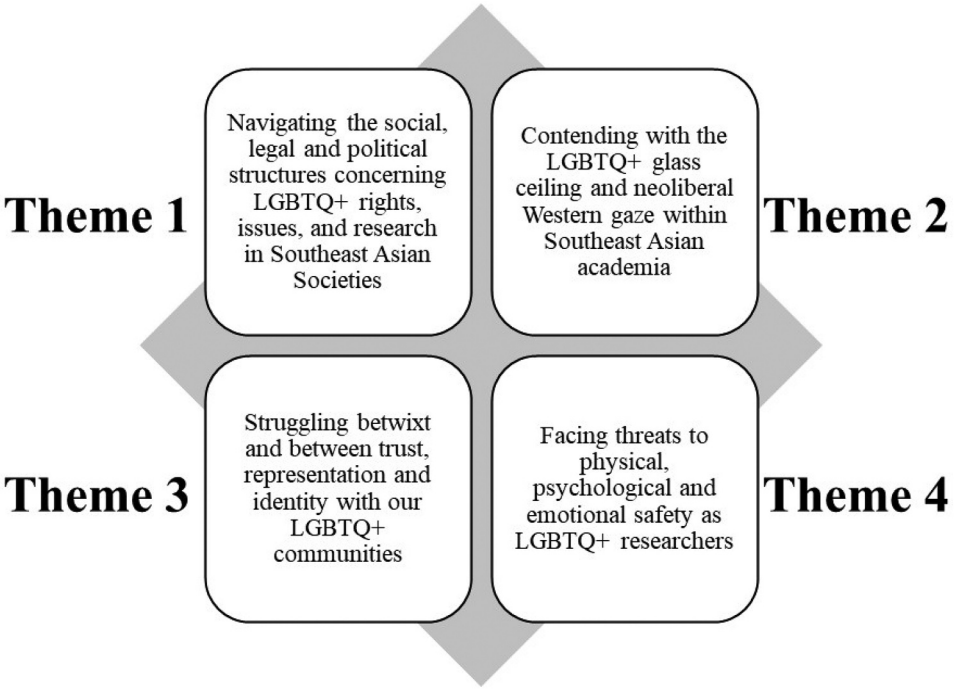


**Figure 1.** Visualization of the themes generated from the Collaborative Autoethnography.

barriers in conducting LGBTQ+ research. We also faced difficulties in connecting with our communities due to the norms, laws, and policies that marginalize LGBTQ+ communities in SEA. LGBTQ+ rights and equality were perceived as problematic and contradictory to the social norms, political beliefs, and legal structures that underpin much of SEA societies. These include the continued privileging of cis/heteronormativity rooted in conservative religious fundamentalism, such as Catholicism in the Philippines (Del Castillo et al., 2021), Islam in Malaysia and Indonesia (Wijaya, 2020), and Buddhism in Myanmar and Thailand (Hlaing et al., 2025), which are often politicized to problematize the existence of LGBTQ+ communities. Religious influences, some with colonial origins (e.g., in the Philippines) and others conflated with right-wing ideologies (Radics, 2025), have infiltrated political decision-making processes to shape how governments enact legal and social protections for LGBTQ+ communities.

To date, LGBTQ+ communities across many SEA nations continue to be denied adequate rights, recognition, and protection (ASEAN SOGIE Caucus, 2017). Despite clear evidence of inequities in social, economic, and health domains (Alibudbud, 2025; Tan & Saw, 2023), the rights and concerns of LGBTQ+ communities continue to be treated as peripheral to those of the general population. Cis/heteronormative socio-political ideologies and structures, which permeate all levels of the systems within which researchers

operate, including legal structures, funding bodies, and academic institutions, pose significant barriers to conducting LGBTQ+ research in SEA.

Our analysis showed how pervasive and deeply ingrained cis/heteronormative values persisted across countries in SEA. All of us highlighted instances and experiences of how binary gender categories (e.g. male and female), traditional gender roles and expression, and heterosexual relationships were seen as natural and universal in our respective contexts. These socially constructed categories were also positioned and privileged as the norm and morally sound. Those outside of such norms are considered immoral, including those who identify as LGBTQ+. Consequently, many SEA societies hold negative perceptions of LGBTQ+ communities, upholding heterosexual privilege and contributing to their marginalization and oppression. In the following excerpt, Htike shared how growing up in Myanmar shaped his identity and positionality, pushing him to rely on self-motivation to continue his LGBTQ+ advocacy amid widespread prejudice and fear of repercussions.

> As an openly gay scholar and researcher from Myanmar, my positionality is profoundly shaped by personal experiences in a deeply conservative society characterized by traditional Buddhist cultural norms, pervasive patriarchal structures, and discriminatory colonial-era laws, most notably Myanmar Penal Code Section 377, which criminalizes homosexuality. Growing up in these circumstances generated a climate of shame, exclusion, and widespread fear, which influenced my identity formation and shaped my academic focus and advocacy strategy. (Htike, Myanmar)

Beyond the pervasive cis-heteronormative norms, ideals, and beliefs, we also faced various legal and political structures that impeded our work with LGBTQ+ communities in SEA. These included laws and social policies that continue to marginalize the rights and needs of LGBTQ+ communities in many SEA countries. For example, in countries such as Malaysia, Myanmar, and Indonesia, being part of the LGBTQ+ community is still considered a criminal offense (ASEAN SOGIE Caucus, 2017). Working directly with the LGBTQ+ community in such circumstances posed considerable risks to researchers and potential participants, as they could be persecuted under the law. In other SEA countries, where some anti-LGBTQ+ legislation has been repealed, ongoing challenges remain through censorship and scrutiny from the authorities (Wijaya, 2020). Here, Quynh contextualizes their experience in accessing queer archives that were central to their research on queer female sexuality in Vietnam:

> While Vietnam has witnessed the decriminalization of same-sex marriage and the introduction of transgender rights bill in the past decade, the restrictions emanate from the mainstreaming of this local LGBTQ movement. Though legitimizing certain discourses, the marriage between the LGBTQ movement and the state has blurred queer memories and narratives that challenge nationalism or uncover queer desires of the female subject whose heterosexuality is enmeshed with patriarchal nation-making. Many LGBTQ organizations have experienced the censorship of artworks and textualities

> portraying female menstruation, vaginal pleasures, and lesbian lexicon. To excavate and piece together the queer archive of quotidian female sexual realities in Vietnam, I trace the underground spaces of queer activists dodging the authorities' scrutiny, as well as slowly collecting my own archives of fleeting digital and material queer affect in the country. (Quynh, Vietnam)

Additionally, we also experienced the ways in which religion fueled the systemic and epistemic oppression of LGBTQ+ people and their communities in SEA. Monotheistic faiths and their practices viewed being LGBTQ+ as "wrong in the eyes of God" (Del Castillo et al., 2021) or breaking a fatwa (Islamic religious ruling; Kinoshita, 2025). Those who fall outside the values of dominant teachings are often perceived as evil or deviant, and are subsequently shunned and marginalized. Even in Buddhism or Hinduism, being LGBTQ+ may be perceived as a consequence of bad karma from a previous lifetime (Ocha, 2023). LGBTQ+ communities are sometimes scapegoated for natural disasters, framed as punishment for past wrongs, which contributes to the ongoing pathologization of their identities. Here, Rattanakorn, a researcher from Thailand, describes how the LGBTQ+ community is viewed and treated in a country generally considered a leader in SEA LGBTQ+ rights. He offered insider perspectives that challenged the belief that LGBTQ+ rights in Thailand have advanced sufficiently to eliminate stigma for researchers in this field.

> The root of Thai culture is based on the values of goodness and appropriateness in society, which bring expectations that people uphold and maintain these values, as well as comply with societal norms. Being LGBTQ+ isn't considered good or appropriate, which brings shame and embarrassment to oneself, family, and/or institution. Linked to Buddhism and Hinduism is the belief in reincarnation, past life and karma . . . with the belief that someone was born LGBTQ+ because of their bad karma in the previous life. Therefore, being LGBTQ+ in [Thai] society is morally wrong, less-than, inappropriate, and considered a person's past life faults. Recently, there has been a significant shift in society, such as the passing of the same-sex marriage bill and the organizing of pride events. However, these values and culture still have a deep-rooted foundation in society and impact LGBTQ+ people's mental health. (Rattanakorn, Thailand)

The evidence from the analysis suggests that the social norms, religious beliefs, and legal structures that underpin much of SEA societies have impeded the ways in which we conducted our research and interacted with LGBTQ+ communities in our respective contexts. These deterrents have also discouraged LGBTQ+ communities and researchers from engaging in research and practice due to the risk of persecution for violating these restrictions. For instance, some SEA countries continue to use Section 377A of the Penal Code and religious laws to justify the criminalization of LGBTQ+ communities (Radics, 2021). Such colonial legal frameworks hinder meaningful engagement between researchers and their LGBTQ+ communities. Many refrain from participating in LGBTQ+

research projects for fear of repercussions, impeding the development of much-needed services and programs that support these communities. Before its repeal in Singapore, the presence of Section 377A caused LGBTQ+ communities in the country to live in liminal spaces where same-sex acts were criminalized but the law was not outrightly enforced (Radics, 2021). Here, Alif, a researcher from Singapore, vividly captured this sentiment:

> Section 377A (S377A) of the Penal Code in Singapore [. . .] was inherited from British Colonial rule. This particular section of the penal code, which criminalizes consensual sex between men, was only recently repealed in November 2022. While the Singapore government has outrightly stated how S377A would not be actively enforced in the decades leading up to its repeal, its existence hung over the LGBTQ+ community's head like a sword of Damocles. The presence of S377A not only impacted Singapore's LGBTQ + community but also impeded the work of researchers and practitioners who are interested in helping this marginalized community. (Alif, Singapore)

### *Theme 2: Contending with the LGBTQ+ glass ceiling and neoliberal Western gaze within Southeast Asian academia*

In Theme 2, our analysis revealed that we had to contend with the LGBTQ+ glass ceiling and the neoliberal Western gaze within SEA academia. This theme recurs throughout our reflections and analyses. Building upon prior research highlighting how organizational cultures, policies, and processes impede the advancement of minoritized groups (García Johnson & Otto, 2019), we introduce the term "LGBTQ+ glass ceiling" to refer to the barriers and limitations imposed upon those doing LGBTQ+ research, coalescing at the nexus of institutionalized bureaucratic and structural barriers. This glass ceiling intertwines with the entrenched Western-centric and rising neoliberal standards that continue to shape academic environments. In particular, Western epistemologies remain central in many SEA academic spaces due to the haunting legacies of colonialism and ongoing imperialism, which manifest as uneven developments and North-South hierarchies (Burford & Wijaya Mulya, 2019). This broader pattern is also being articulated in more granular socio-cultural contexts within each society, where neoliberal demands for individual success and self-improvement leave the burden and responsibility on researchers to advance their own LGBTQ+ research.

#### *Limited support and resources for LGBTQ+ research in Southeast Asian societies*

A significant challenge is the scarcity of resources, opportunities, and expertise that support LGBTQ+ research in SEA. Without equitable support systems, early-career researchers like ourselves described the ways in which "it felt like [we were] walking in the dark" (Rattanakorn; Thailand) as we struggled to undertake our research or sharpen our disciplinary knowledge. Many of us

further explained how LGBTQ+ research does not benefit from governmental and institutional support. Funding channels for conducting LGBTQ+ research in SEA and across individual countries are limited, and available funding is often modest and insufficient to meaningfully advance LGBTQ+ scholarship (Ng, 2018).

Even in countries where same-sex marriage and other LGBTQ+ rights have been legalized, queer research only exists on the periphery of governmental agendas. Concerns with national identity, morality, and respectability intertwine in legal and political spheres. This intertwinement keeps queer research in the margins and from becoming a priority for many SEA governments. In other words, the project of state-making produces queer transgressions as the antithesis of the good in the nation. This, in turn, marks LGBTQ+ research as politically sensitive, stigmatizing, and shameful. Rattanakorn encapsulates this reality:

> Even though Thailand has just passed the bill that recognizes same-sex marriage in 2024, the sense of appropriateness, and the need to save face and not bring shame onto one's institution remain as barriers to LGBTQ+ research. Therefore, governmental and private sectors consider LGBTQ+ related issues as nonconforming to the goodness of Thai traditions … trivialize and push aside the topic. Consequently, institutional financial support and resources are scarce, if any at all. (Rattanakorn, Thailand)

At the university level, we are frequently deprived of necessary training, mentorship networks, and outreach platforms for queer studies. Such neglect arises from the prevailing perception that LGBTQ+ research does not merit investment due to the absence of national funding mechanisms and the reluctance to be associated with LGBTQ+ advocacy (Ng, 2018; Tan & Liow, 2024). Without supportive networks in academia, early-career researchers like us are left to shoulder the responsibility for self-training and building our own professional networks. Even when such opportunities exist, they are disproportionately centralized in metropolitan areas, resulting in uneven access to training. Early-career researchers in queer studies, therefore, seek opportunities for funding, mentorship, and networks of expertise outside their home countries. Reflecting on these unevenly distributed resources, Junix elaborates on this situation in the Philippines:

> One challenge that affects my professional growth as a queer early-career scholar from the Global South is that access to mentors in LGBTQ+ psychology is highly centralized in the country's capital. For scholars like me who are based outside the National Capital Region, opportunities for rigorous mentorship are limited unless I migrate or study in Metro Manila. This reflects a broader center-periphery dynamic in Philippine Psychology, where Manila-based institutions have the critical mass of scholars, networks, and resources. As a result, scholars from the regions often shoulder the added burdens of uprooting our lives, navigating class barriers, and balancing family expectations to access these spaces. (Junix, the Philippines)

Even for international research grants, funders often embody a Western gaze, expecting research design, methodology, and dissemination to meet Eurocentric standards while having a limited understanding of SEA lived experiences (Nopas, 2025; Tan & Liow, 2024). This gatekeeping nature of grant distribution is further compounded for us as early-career researchers from SEA. We are still developing our research portfolios and skill sets, and often lack the necessary experience and credentials to meet Westernized expectations for securing such funding. Here, Aron further unpacks this difficulty:

> Conducting research is financially demanding . . . researchers rely on external funding to run their projects. However, in my experience, there is little to no funding available within my area of research (i.e., critical approaches to HIV). Often, funding bodies prioritize research grants for established researchers and principal investigators who are considered 'experts' in the field, and hold a doctoral degree. This presents a significant challenge for early-career researchers like me, as applying for a research grant with a positive outcome would be nearly impossible. (Aron, the Philippines)

Due to the underdevelopment of researchers in queer studies, early-career LGBTQ+ researchers who wish to work among and for their local SEA communities face various challenges within and outside academic settings. For example, our analysis highlighted how many of us faced employment insecurities. We must therefore compete for the few, and sometimes nonexistent, positions in gender and sexuality research in our respective countries. Further, our analysis showed how the respectability of one's research agendas is linked to employability in the SEA context. Many of us in queer studies reflected on how our curriculum vitae (CVs) risk being stigmatized and marginalized in academic environments. Being open about such skill sets and expertise in our CVs can disadvantage us in the employment process. Here, Kyle describes his difficulties in securing employment in academic institutions in Malaysia:

> In Malaysia, recording research experiences of LGBTQ-affirming research may tarnish a person's CV because it signals this person is defiant and may cause trouble to the university, especially in a public university. LGBTQ-affirming research is treated as a greater risk than any other topic, and it may result in fewer choices of academic institutions' employment. This also resulted in difficulty securing supervisors for these research topics due to pressure from the university's higher-ups. (Kyle, Malaysia)

In addition to the lack of training and career advancement opportunities, early-career researchers are also burdened with heavy teaching responsibilities (Burford & Wijaya Mulya, 2019). Not only does research generate less income than teaching for institutions in the region, but researchers also have to teach outside their areas of expertise because LGBTQ+ studies are underdeveloped in many SEA countries. While tenured faculty can reduce their teaching load through their own research in some contexts, young researchers such as

ourselves often feel overwhelmed juggling demanding teaching responsibilities and research without adequate support. Here, Aron further shares the exhaustion he experienced juggling these responsibilities:

> In the Philippines, research culture is not a high priority. Many faculty members are overwhelmed by teaching responsibilities and, therefore, unable to allocate time for research. Furthermore, in my experience collaborating with other researchers in the Philippines, I found that many of them are also employed as teaching professionals at their institutions and face similar challenges in balancing research and full-time teaching duties. (Aron, the Philippines)

Many of us who relocated overseas as a strategy of coping with these challenges find ourselves having to justify studying LGBTQ+ communities in our own countries, who are usually marginalized in the imaginary of white, Western academics. The question, "Why Southeast Asia?" continues to haunt our efforts to secure funding outside our region. Quynh narrates this struggle with obtaining funding as a SEA scholar who moved to the United States:

> As an international student affiliated with an American institution, I have had some difficulty securing funding for my research in Vietnam. I started my higher education abroad, so I lack the necessary networks within Vietnamese academia to have information about funding opportunities in the country. At the same time, international students in the US are usually limited to a few funding options, which can be challenging and competitive to acquire. (Quynh, Vietnam)

### *Academic institutions fear the repercussions for supporting LGBTQ+ research*

The limited resources and support for LGBTQ+ research also stem from academic institutions' fearfully avoiding the potential consequences of supporting queer research. Given the heteronormative structure of many SEA societies (Hegarty, 2022; Wijaya, 2025), LGBTQ+ research is viewed as suspicious and receives hostile surveillance from the state and the public. Therefore, academic institutions engaged in LGBTQ+ research could come under the same scrutinizing gaze and would face consequences when veering away from cis/heterosexist ideals (Da, 2022). In other cases, the prospect of social criticism discourages many faculty members from mentoring and guiding LGBTQ+ research. As cis/heteronormative beliefs seep into all parts of societies, undertaking LGBTQ+ research comes under harsh scrutiny by the public (Tan & Liow, 2024). For example, in Indonesia, faculty members and institutional leaders consider LGBTQ+ research to be controversial and sensitive, which in turn, poses personal and professional risks to academics in the country. Below, Andrian summarizes the struggles in finding faculty willing to support LGBTQ+ research in such a heteronormative context:

> Finding local collaborators who highly understand gender and sexuality issues and demonstrate allyship is particularly challenging. Very few researchers in Indonesia are willing and able to engage in queer-focused research with the necessary sensitivity and expertise. Further, there is a lack of institutional support and recognition for LGBTQ+ research within Indonesian academia, which often considers this topic to be controversial or sensitive. This limits opportunities for research grants, publication and academic collaboration, particularly for those who have not yet obtained a doctoral degree. The prevailing attitudes towards LGBTQ+ topics pose personal and professional risks, making it difficult to openly pursue such research and disseminate findings. (Andrian, Indonesia)

One implication of this institutional prejudice involves delays in ethical review and approval of LGBTQ+ research proposals, which can be a time-consuming and cumbersome process in SEA. Not only are LGBTQ+ studies considered "socially and politically controversial," but queer participants are also often labeled as "high-risk groups" (Tan & Liow, 2024). Findings from our analysis described the despair of waiting during the review process, not knowing what prejudices we may encounter. Some of us waited more than six months, only to be told to submit our ethics application elsewhere. The other implication centers around the overemphasis on public health-related research to understand the lives of queer folks in SEA. Below, Alif illustrates how grants and funding for LGBTQ+ research in Singapore were skewed toward those undertaking research at the intersections of public health.

> While there are grants and funding for scholars and researchers to undertake research with the LGBTQ+ community, these have typically been targeted at research projects that intersect with public health issues affecting LGBTQ+ individuals. While public health is a pertinent area of focus for the LGBTQ+ community in Singapore, other aspects of social life, such as relationships and families, LGBTQ+ rights and equality, can synergistically impact the health and well-being of Singapore's LGBTQ+ community. (Alif, Singapore)

This focus is considered safe and respectable for researchers to publicly pursue and discuss. It is also strategically employed to avoid potential legal or political complications related to LGBTQ+ research (Tan et al., 2026). With funding concentrated on public health issues, other social justice and equity concerns of LGBTQ+ communities are neglected, receiving little to no aid or support. Due to fears of legal and social consequences, many institutions actively turn early-career researchers such as ourselves away from LGBTQ+ research or reject LGBTQ+ projects altogether. Researchers interested in queer research may pivot to topics deemed safer and more "sanitized." At the same time, those who persist must endure unaddressed resource limitations and see their reputation tainted by participating in socially perceived "tabooed" research agendas.

### *Western epistemologies imposed on Southeast Asian lived experiences and knowledge*

Scholars and researchers in SEA conducting LGBTQ+ research experience the Western gaze surveilling and shaping their research and academic journeys in two fundamental ways. Firstly, the domination of white, Western personnel in key positions within academic institutions outside the region means they must navigate and negotiate this power imbalance throughout their academic journeys, from grant applications and research publications to employment (Nopas, 2025). Secondly, given how LGBTQ+ studies have been institutionalized within Euro-American gay and lesbian histories (Teman, 2019), SEA researchers are compelled to negotiate the applicability of Western queer frameworks while embedding SEA epistemologies into their research. Without guidance and mentorship, emerging researchers struggle to reinvent the queer studies canon based on their idiosyncratic local and regional queer experiences. For example, in our findings, the Western gaze is steeped in how our research is produced. Western frameworks already established in LGBTQ + and queer studies are imposed on SEA realities, seeking to shape research, policymaking, and activism in the region (Nopas, 2025; Tan & Liow, 2024). Many of us reflected on the mismatch between the experiences of queer people in Western countries and those in the Global South, including ourselves, many of whom live in developing, non-democratic countries in the SEA region. Junix reflects on this question:

> Ultimately, much of LGBTQ+ scholarship and theorizing is WEIRD (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic). In my experience, I realized local sexualities and identities do not necessarily align with [their] LGBTQ+ terms and frameworks. There are localized terms (e.g., bakla—a term used in the Philippines to describe someone who was assigned male at birth but identifies in a feminine or gender nonconforming manner) and practices that do not fit neatly into dominant Western experiences, such as coming out. (Junix, the Philippines)

The over-citation of Western studies in SEA is partly driven by the lack of LGBTQ+ research grounded in local experiences. As many of us illustrated in our reflections, we could not base our research on existing literature on queer histories and realities in our societies, as that literature is either minimal or draws on pathologizing perspectives. Rattanakorn reflects on this:

> The existing literature seems like a drop in the ocean, where the literature is scattered and may not lead to the advancement of LGBTQ+ psychology in Thailand. Not a lot of literature has explored and covered the psychological issues and mental health of LGBTQ+ people in this country, leading to the reliance on Western literature, which may not have the best cultural implications for Thai LGBTQ+ people. (Rattanakorn, Thailand)

A further illustration of Western scholarly dominance involves conforming to Western systems of queer categories and identities as part of the

ethical approval process, particularly for researchers engaging with communities beyond the borders of their primary institutions. As one researcher recalled, their research would not have been granted ethical approval unless they clearly labeled their Vietnamese participants according to the black-and-white LGBTQ+ identities used to estimate the level of risk involved in the research. Even though these identities do not resonate with their participants, whose local cultural logics define them differently, they are still forced to identify themselves with these foreign categories. Here, Quynh illustrates:

> . . . my application for ethical approval is often challenged by the need for clear labelling and categorization of my research participants. This is because the institutions in charge of this matter rely on these identity-based categories to decide the levels of ethical and scientific safety my research can warrant. (Quynh, Vietnam)

Publication outlets and other knowledge-sharing platforms (e.g. conferences, symposiums) are also not grounded in local communities (Nopas, 2025; Tan & Liow, 2024). Combined with limited resources and support, SEA researchers face even greater barriers to accessing high-ranking journals. Studies exploring the publishing experiences of SEA LGBTQ+ scholars revealed systemic gatekeeping, with participants reporting harsh, unconstructive feedback or reviewers prioritizing English-language proficiency over the quality of their content (Nopas, 2025; Tan & Liow, 2024). Many higher-impact journals are helmed by editors who are "white people who have no lived experience or cultural understanding of SEA complexities" (Jun Wei, Malaysia). Inadvertently, they become gatekeepers who bar LGBTQ+ research manuscripts from SEA, deeming such research unnecessary or of inferior quality. These gatekeepers measure SEA researchers and their research against Western-centric epistemological and methodological standards. Hence, SEA researchers, such as ourselves, frequently need to justify their decisions to conduct research in their own countries. Studies about and for predominantly WEIRD societies are more readily welcomed and enjoy a smoother publication route. Expressing their frustration at this reality, Kyle details their situation:

> [. . .] we have had to seek out international journals and adapt our findings to fit an international context, as we reasoned 'why is this Malaysian study needed?' to editors who are primarily based in North America. While this may be seen as the standard route to academic publishing, Malaysian early-career scholars rarely receive the mentorship, funding, and support needed to succeed in this process. I was perplexed by the contrasting treatment of my New Zealand-based and Malaysian-based submissions, with the latter receiving more desktop rejections and fewer papers being sent out for peer review. (Kyle, Malaysia)

### *Theme 3: Struggling betwixt and between trust, representation and identity with our LGBTQ+ communities*

This theme highlighted the struggles that we experienced while working with LGBTQ+ communities in our home countries. These challenges included facing distrust from our LGBTQ+ communities, feeling unappreciative of the work and effort to help give voice to our communities, as well as facing difficulties in accessing queer spaces and resources for our research. The tension between researcher and community expectations becomes apparent, as some LGBTQ+ groups perceived academics and researchers as merely theorizing in ivory towers (Wijaya, 2025). Some of us also recalled the complex process of establishing trust with LGBTQ+ community groups, who questioned the research team's intentions despite our insider experience as queer scholars. These were further exacerbated by the lack of institutional incentives for LGBTQ+ researchers in academia to cultivate long-term, meaningful engagement with our respective LGBTQ+ communities and organizations. This means that LGBTQ+ community involvement in research is minimally compensated, if at all (Ng, 2018). Below, Kyle illustrates the challenge he faced in establishing relationships with LGBTQ+ community groups in Malaysia.

> However, scholars involved in LGBTQ+ research typically receive minimal institutional incentives to cultivate relationships with community groups, which may result in these groups feeling disempowered when relationships end after data extraction. The increase in lackluster research that fails to produce meaningful outcomes for LGBTQ+ communities, or worse, employs a cis/heterosexist lens, has led to a high level of distrust towards academic researchers within the community. When our team first reached out to local community groups, I recall undergoing a series of 'interviews' in which we were interrogated about our research objectives, intended outcomes, and the benefits for community groups. (Kyle, Malaysia)

A few key challenges in accessing LGBTQ+ spaces and resources were also highlighted. Firstly, oppressive laws and policies hinder LGBTQ+ members from participating meaningfully in research. Secondly, we noted the diversity and fragmentation within our respective communities, countering assumptions that there is a singular "LGBTQ+" identity. This, in turn, presented challenges for inclusivity in our research. The inability to access specific segments of our LGBTQ+ communities meant that we were worried about only including certain views and voices. Jun Wei (Malaysia) argued that "without a comprehensive sampling of different voices, we have merely created an illusion that we present as 'science' which risks further marginalizing the voices within these segments of our LGBTQ+ communities." Others like Htike (Myanmar) highlighted the ways in which the enforcement of Penal Code Section 377 made it difficult for him to access certain LGBTQ+ community groups or gatekeepers, as they were either on the run, hiding or had been arrested by Myanmar's military junta.

> The most significant barrier is Myanmar's restrictive legal system, particularly Penal Code Section 377, which criminalizes homosexuality and dates back to colonial times. This rule reinforces long-standing stigma, discrimination, and fear in the LGBTQ+ community, greatly limiting their willingness to participate openly in research. Individuals are concerned about severe social consequences, family rejection, police harassment, or possible arrest. Such ubiquitous hazards raise serious ethical concerns and significantly limit community engagement and the collection of authentic data. The 2021 military coup exacerbated existing issues by significantly increasing security concerns. Increased military soldiers' surveillance, targeted violence, arbitrary arrests, and intense scrutiny aimed specifically at LGBTQ+ activists significantly limit researchers' ability to engage communities securely and productively. Many community members, who have fled or are in hiding, are unable to participate safely, severely limiting researchers' ability to conduct thorough, inclusive, and meaningful studies. (Htike, Myanmar)

Finally, in this theme, we also recounted feeling how we had to "reinvent the wheel" every time we conducted LGBTQ+ research due to limited resources. Some described having to start their studies from scratch due to uncharted territory, resulting in considerable time and effort wasted. Others felt the absence of visible mentors, supervisors, and colleagues in LGBTQ+ research further compounded these challenges. Here, Timo, who grew up in Finland and migrated to Thailand in 2005, speaks about the lack of recent psychological scholarship on LGBTQ+ issues in Thailand when he started working on his Master's thesis:

> There was no recent scholarship on LGBTQ+ psychology in Thailand–what existed was outdated and mostly pathologizing. So, my Master's thesis was an open-ended exploration of mental health service providers' and their gay or transgender clients' experiences and views of providing or receiving mental health services. Reviewing Thai research involved finding printed copies of Thai-language master's theses from other fields. [. . .] in the beginning, there was no research on counselling with LGBTQ+ people in Thailand, and no professional organizations for psychological practice with LGBTQ+ clients. My thesis advisors in my master's and doctoral programs were supportive, but not experts in LGBTQ+ psychology. I've had to find resources and expertise from abroad and from people in fields other than psychology. [. . .] Had I been in a country like the US, I might have developed more expertise in LGBTQ+ specific counselling and conducted more advanced research. In Thailand, sometimes I felt like I was trying to reinvent the wheel. (Timo, Thailand)

### *Theme 4: Facing threats to physical, psychological and emotional safety as LGBTQ+ researchers*

Over and above the external challenges that we encountered with the broader society, within academia, and as part of our interactions with our LGBTQ+ communities, we also faced various threats to our physical, psychological and emotional safety while conducting LGBTQ+ research work in and around SEA. Compared to the rising disinformation, personal attacks, and

discrimination targeting LGBTQ+ communities overseas (Billard, 2023), the level of threats faced by SEA LGBTQ+ communities is even more pronounced, particularly in countries where LGBTQ+ identities are criminalized. For researchers, these threats come from the community, colleagues, and institutions when we position ourselves as the public face of LGBTQ+ research.

Throughout the reflection pieces, we expressed a passion for fighting for social justice and equality for our LGBTQ+ communities. However, such efforts and commitment also took a toll on our lives and health. One such example involved the emotional toll from gathering and analyzing the traumatic narratives as part of understanding the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ communities within SEA. Maintaining one's neutrality or setting aside one's feelings while reading such stories remains a complex (and often impossible) task for all researcher-participants in this study, as illustrated by Junix and Lita.

> . . . given the kinds of experiences and narratives within the LGBTQ+ community, doing research in this area can be emotionally heavy, especially when dealing with stories of trauma, violence, or erasure. Researching minoritized communities while being part of that community entails deep emotional labor. This includes managing the weight of stories I hear, expectations of the community, and my own lived experiences. My closeness to the community sometimes blurs boundaries and increases the weight of care. (Junix, the Philippines)

> Firstly, [older transgender women in Indonesia] are marginalized because of their status as a gender minority, and second, their position as elderly people is fraught with physical and psychological degradation. Unlike cisgender older people, who have children or relatives to support them in old age, older transgender women mostly live alone. Family members may not accept them. Society still holds strong heteronormative beliefs . . . and the state does not yet have adequate regulations to meet their needs. Transgender women, as part of the LGBTQ+ community, are often misunderstood as rejecting their destiny and deliberately 'becoming women.' Some even associate them with the cause of natural disasters. Positioning oneself as a researcher in LGBTQ+ studies while maintaining neutrality can be challenging. (Lita, Indonesia)

For others, they recounted the physical threats they received while conducting their research with LGBTQ+ communities or disseminating their study findings to the public. Here, Jun Wei illustrated the fear he experienced conducting LGBTQ+ research in a Muslim-majority country. To the broader religious and conservative society, Jun Wei was viewed as encouraging "immoral and deviant lifestyles." While he was passionate about fighting for social justice for Malaysia's LGBTQ+ community, he also felt the need to balance this with his personal safety.

> My top challenge concerns my personal safety. I have conducted all of my research in Malaysia and engaged many LGB participants in highly sensitive topics. As I volunteer at LGBTQ+-focused organizations, I am well aware of hate crimes in the country. I know I am putting myself in the same danger. It feels like walking into a lion's mouth and

> hoping to walk off unscathed. I was intimidated on social media. People demanded that I stop "spreading LGBTQ+ norms" and "encouraging immoral and deviant lifestyles." The threats were serious as my name and my university were printed on research flyers, making me an easy target for hate crimes, especially when I am physically present in Malaysia . . . which is a terrifying experience. Also, within Malaysia's passionate process of Islamization, my case can be framed as a challenge to Islam and being killed under Jihad. Unlike my quantitative counterparts, my qualitative and clinical intervention research brought me closer to the public but made me more vulnerable to hate crimes. The fear gets to me . . . I experience nightmares whenever my research is published. (Jun Wei, Malaysia)

Finally, we also reflected on the potential negative impact of our research on our respective LGBTQ+ communities. Some of us were worried about the expectations of representing the entire LGBTQ+ community in our respective countries when invited to serve as LGBTQ+ expert advisors on a project. Although it can be personally rewarding (e.g., enhancing one's CV) and potentially beneficial for the community (e.g., increasing a project's LGBTQ + competency), cultural labor can be emotionally draining (Waitoki et al., 2024). While cognizant of the responsibility to give voice to the stories and struggles of our respective communities, we were also keenly aware that being an LGBTQ+ scholar does not mean one can represent the entire LGBTQ+ community in our respective countries. Yet, we felt this expectation to do so when speaking at events or presenting at academic conferences. This constant tension of being perceived as "queer or academic enough" to represent our entire LGBTQ+ communities is illustrated by Junix:

> Being both an early-career scholar and a bakla makes it harder to gain credibility in academia, especially since the Philippines is still predominantly conservative and heteronormative, which also shapes cultures in academic spaces. I often feel the weight of proving the legitimacy of my work more than my counterparts, who do not study LGBTQ+ topics. I constantly wrestle with the tension of being perceived as 'queer enough' or 'academic enough.' Being a bakla early-career scholar, I fear that if I [am perceived to] own my identity too much, it could lead to being pigeonholed or being expected to ONLY work on LGBTQ+ issues and topics. There are times when I grapple with the burden that comes with being openly bakla, which makes me the token minority or sometimes expected to represent the entire LGBTQ+ community. It feels unfair and unrealistic because I believe that no single voice can fully capture the complexity of our diverse experiences. (Junix, the Philippines)

## Conclusion

As the first study to bring together a group of SEA early-career researchers conducting LGBTQ+ research, we employed a Collaborative Autoethnography to generate novel narratives about the multitude of challenges we face as emerging researchers. Through our reflections, we provided a focused, introspective entry point for engaging with the research question.

While the word limit may have constrained some reflections, subsequent debriefings created a more expansive and culturally resonant space for elaboration. Through collective resonance and joint reflection, we were able to contextualize and deepen our narratives, enriching the findings. From navigating institutional cis/heteronormativity that manifests in policy and interpersonal prejudice, to neoliberal pressures and unrealistic Eurocentric academic expectations, the dominance of Western theories and scholarship, distrust from communities, and threats to personal safety, our findings reveal the contrasting challenges that LGBTQ+ scholars in SEA face compared to those in the West. These challenges occur within a region still impacted by colonialism and imperialism, and striving to decriminalize and depathologize LGBTQ+ identities. By illuminating these unique and shared experiences across SEA, we aim to draw the attention of funders, policymakers, and relevant stakeholders to identify opportunities, spaces, and sites for intervention and transformation: whether at the individual level, through mentorship and allyship; at the institutional level, by addressing cis/heteronormative cultures within faculties and promoting equity-based funding for LGBTQ+ communities; or at the policy level, by collaborating with SEA scholars to reform discriminatory laws and practices.

It should be noted that this initial part of our analysis specifically focused on challenges rather than on acceptance, inclusion, or enabling factors in our lives. These also exist in SEA contexts, which we will examine in a subsequent analysis. For example, at the time of writing, Timo worked at an academic institution that was inclusive toward LGBTQ+ concerns. His faculty would participate in annual Bangkok Pride parades and regularly conduct LGBTQ+ research and advocacy projects funded both domestically and internationally. The LGBT Special Interest Group of the Psychological Association of the Philippines is another example of institutional support that enables LGBTQ+ staff and students to connect and develop collective advocacy strategies. These examples suggest that inclusion of LGBTQ+ issues is possible in the region and should become the norm rather than an exception.

Finally, it is vital to interpret our findings in light of the following caveats. The study does not claim to present a representative account of the realities of scholars conducting LGBTQ+ research in SEA. Our sampling method meant we were more likely to recruit individuals with shared identities, such as being cisgender, being migrants to Western countries, and having a training background in psychology. These shared characteristics may limit our discussion of challenges specific to trans and non-binary scholars (e.g., the "glass ceiling" created by the inability to present identity documents that reflect their preferred names and genders; Chiam et al., 2019). Although all of us have lived experience researching LGBTQ+ issues in our respective SEA contexts, some of us possess the socioeconomic privilege to relocate to countries that are more accepting of LGBTQ+ identities and to access critical LGBTQ+ scholarship, including works by Indigenous scholars (e.g., Smith, 2017;

Sullivan & Day, 2021). Processes of assimilation, cultural blending, and coping with the challenges of being racialized migrants have undoubtedly influenced how we see and interpret the social world (Quah & Tang, 2022).

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## Data and materials availability

The data and materials used in this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

## Ethical approval

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Faculty of Māori and Indigenous Studies, University of Waikato, New Zealand (Approval number: FMIS_25/2_2, 17 March 2025).

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