

# Students' Sexual Orientations, Self-Esteem, and Problems

**JEREMIAS L. CONVOCAR**

<http://orcid.org/000-0002-6489-5881>

[jeremiasconvocar@gmail.com](mailto:jeremiasconvocar@gmail.com)

West Visayas State University-Lambunao Campus  
Lambunao, Iloilo

**MYRNA L. PIOS**

<https://orcid/0000-0002-7349-0800>

[myrnapios1973@gmail.com](mailto:myrnapios1973@gmail.com)

West Visayas State University-Lambunao Campus  
Lambunao, Iloilo

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## ABSTRACT

Creating a safe and supportive learning environment for all students regardless of their sexual orientations is especially important. This descriptive study determined the extent of sexual orientations, level of self-esteem and problems of 664 randomly selected senior college students of a certain state university in the Philippines. The online Epstein Sexual Orientation Inventory (Epstein, McKinney, Fox, & Garcia, 2012), Rosenberg (1989) Self-esteem scale, and Mooney (in Tian & Heppner, 2018) Problem Check Lists were employed in the study. The findings revealed that of 664 college students, 56 % were “straight,” 38 % were “bisexual,” 6 % were “homosexual”; of 300 males, 57 % were “straights”, 33% were “bisexuals”, and 9% were “gays”; of 364 females, 55% were straights, 42% were “bisexuals”, and 4% were “lesbians”. They had “high”

self-esteem regardless of their sexual orientations; male-bisexuals had significantly better self-esteem than male-gays. Generally, they need concentration in studying academics and enough rest, worried about how to get a job after graduation and economic condition of their parents, personal financial needs, social leadership qualities, and spiritual assurance. However, gays and lesbians need more freedom and most obsessed with emotional and sexual life. Thus, higher education institutions should provide to all students a wholesome and supportive learning environment responsive to students' individual needs and well-being regardless of sexual orientations.

**Keywords** – Sexual Orientations, Self-esteem, Problems, College Students, HEI, Philippines

## INTRODUCTION

The college student years can often be very difficult in general, but for homosexual, Lesbian, and Bisexual (GLB) students their problems can turn out to be more than they can deal with. Being GLB for some individual is something that they cannot divulge with because society, most of the time, says that deviating from being sexually straight is wrong and degrade one's personality or dignity. Despite positive messages they received from significant achievements and accomplishments in the community and school yet they received many blatant or subtle negative messages about their sexuality and how well they did or did not conform to gender expectations (GLSEN, 2003).

Previous research has demonstrated that sexual minority youth report greater levels of school-related problems, including a weaker sense of attachment to school and more trouble with teachers and peers (Pearson, Muller, & Wilkinson, 2007). Gay and lesbian individuals may be subject to negative outcomes following self-disclosure, such as verbal and physical abuse, poor academic performance, substance abuse, and suicide attempts, which may lead to elevated psychological distress (Savin-Williams, 1989).

Other salient factors that may contribute to depression in gay and lesbian individuals include increased stress, low social support, perceived discrimination, victimization, bullying, and rejection (Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar, & Azrael, 2009; Corrigan & Matthews, 2003).

Furthermore, internalized homophobia (sometimes called internalized homonegativity) as a result of being socially stigmatized by society (Lock, 1998) can lead to psychological distress, such as depression (Williamson, 2000) also

linked to low self-esteem and loneliness (Szymanski, Chung, & Balsam, 2001) may relate to a broad range of mental disorders and social problems (Mann, Hosman, Schaalma, & De Vries, 2004).

As affirmed, higher education institutions are legally, ethically, and morally obliged to provide equity to educational opportunities and protection under the law for all students.

In observance of its mandates the academe is expected to create a safe, supportive, and nondiscriminatory environment for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and even transgender students. Appropriate and adequate guidance and counseling programs and activities may be provided to help students on their problems including sexuality (Akerlof & Kranton, 2002; Snyder & Broadway, 2004). Such negligence may fuel the level of prejudice, harassment, and discrimination that deny sexual minority students of their basic rights to quality education.

This study was anchored on Weiler (2003) position that sexual minority students faced challenges in their social, physical and emotional growth and development however most often they may encounter extreme problems on social isolation, self-doubt, and fear.

As such, schools have a major role and responsibility in preparing adolescents for the transition to adulthood not only to impart skills and knowledge but to convey social norms and values (Akerlof & Kranton, 2002; Snyder & Broadway, 2004) responsive to individual needs regardless of their sexual orientations.

Hence, study to identify factors related to GLB self-esteem and problems and developing programs to address these factors for at-risk gay and lesbian students is vital for such purpose. This study will look into prevailing problems and self-esteem of sexual minorities among college students.

Since problems and needs of gays, lesbians and bisexuals could be one of the major concerns to be attended by guidance and counseling office of the higher education institution; hence students' sexual orientation, self-esteem, and problems do deserve the merit for the investigation.

Do gay, lesbian, and bisexual students were predominant had low self-esteem? What are their common prevailing problems? This question must be answered. Hence this study was conducted.

## **FRAMEWORK**

The association of Self-esteem to one's sexual orientation has been an area of focus because of the implications it has on overall well-being. For instance, Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger, and Vohs (2003) has found that in general,

individual with high self-esteems fare better in the face of adversity, performed better in a group, and tend to be happier than people with low self-esteem. Furthermore, low self-esteem is a general risk factor for depression (Orth, Robins, & Roberts, 2008). Particular aspects of the coming out process are related to higher self-esteem, such as positive attitude towards homosexuality, involvement in gay and lesbian activities and reported self-disclosure of sexual identity (Rosario, Hunter, Maguen, Gwadz, & Smith, 2001). Conversely, concealing one's sexual identity, that is, "being in the closet," can have a negative impact on self-esteem and life satisfaction (Bos, Sandfort, De Bruyn, & Hakvoort, 2008) which illustrates the importance of acknowledging one's sexual orientation.

On the other hand, Jones and Patulin (in Guimba, Alico & Taib, 2015) mentioned the problem areas affecting students' college lives such health and physical hindrances, home and family relationship, leisure time, personality, financial, religious life and church affiliation, school, social including moral and civic, and vocational. Exploring self-esteem and problems confronting college students may bridge the gap of what college education is all about.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objectives of the study are: (1) to determine the profile of students' sexual orientations in a state university; (2) to ascertain the self-esteem among straight, lesbian, gay, and bisexual students grouped according to their sex, and (3) to identify the common problems among SLGB students.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

The data were collected from the self-administered survey of 661 randomly selected college students of one of the campuses of a certain university in the province of Iloilo, Philippines. Descriptive-inferential research was selected to test the hypotheses and to answer the current status of students' sexual orientation, self-esteem, and problems. A survey of the respondents' sexual orientation, self-esteem, and problems using a set of the questionnaire were employed.

### Participants

In this study, 664 randomly selected college students in predetermined higher education institutions in the province of Iloilo, Philippines. The respondents were classified as to their sex. There were 300 (45.18%) males and

364 (54.82%) females.

The researchers obtained an Ethics Clearance from the Ethics Review Committee and also got signed informed consent from the respondents. All participants were over 18 years of age and were properly informed about the purpose and nature of the study. Further, they were advised that their participation was voluntary of which their consent was asked prior to their acceptance as respondents. They were also were guaranteed the privacy and confidentiality of the data gathered. Pseudonyms were used in reporting research to protect the anonymity of the participants.

**Instrumentation**

**Sexual Orientation Inventory.** To find out the “sexual orientation” of the students, the investigator utilized the 18 items electronics Epstein Sexual Orientation Inventory (ESOI), a test of sexual orientation designed by Robert Epstein (in Epstein, McKinney, Fox, & Garcia, 2012), one of America’s most distinguished research psychologists. The test has been empirically validated with a sample of nearly 18,000 people in more than 40 countries.

Permission to utilize the instrument for the study was secured From Dr. Epstein. The response authorized the use of the test and access to electronic processing of data and analysis regularly.

To hard copy of the test was reproduced and administered directly to the respondents and likewise, their retrieved individual responses were entered in ESOI electronic questionnaire for data processing and analysis.

The results of computer processed scores were interpreted as follows:

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13
Heterosexual			Sexual Orientation Continuum						Homosexual				

The range from lowest score to highest score is the *Sexual Orientation Range (SOR)*. The lower your scores, the more *heterosexual the* orientation. The higher your scores, the more *homosexual the* orientation. The wider the range, the greater the sexual *flexibility* and the more *choice* have about how to behave sexually. The center point of the SOR is *Mean Sexual Orientation (MSO)*.

**Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (SES).** The test was adopted from Rosenberg (1989) Self-Esteem Scale (RSES) is made up of 10 items that refer to self-respect and self-acceptance rated on a 4-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 4 (*totally agree*). The Scale is a brief and unidimensional measure of

global self-esteem. The test has demonstrated good reliability and validity across a large number of sample groups with both male and female adolescent, adult and elderly population.

For scoring, the computation of the ratings assigned to every item after reverse scoring the positively worded items with a scoring range from 10 to 40, with higher scores indicating higher self-esteem. The test was scored by adding and interpreted by means of the scale as follows: Very high self-esteem, 22.60 – 30.00; High self-esteem, 16.00 – 22.59;

Low self-esteem, 7.60 - 15.09; Very low Self-Esteem, 1.00 -7.59.

***Mooney's Problem Checklist.*** To gather the data for the students' common prevailing problems, the researcher adopted the Mooney's (in Tian & Heppner, 2018) Problem Checklists. The checklist consists of seven problem areas and number of problem checklists as follows: academic (25), career (7), family (14), health (16), social (14), personal (20) and religion (5). The questionnaire consisted of identified problems and the respondents will be requested to check the problem which troubles them most. An open-ended question is provided in the later part for other problems not included in the list. Their score from each problem was totaled and ranked to determine the most prevailing problems.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

The data gathered for the study were subjected to a certain computer analysis using the statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software. The percentage analysis, mean, standard deviation and rank were used for descriptive statistics, and the Kruskal Wallis H Test was employed in inferential statistics with probability level set at 0.05 alpha.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSION**

Initially, the extents of sexual orientations among selected college students were determined in this research. The obtained frequencies, percentages, mean scores, and corresponding standard deviations were used in the analysis.

**The extent of sexual orientations among college students.** Of the 664 college students, 372 (56.01%) were "straights," 251 (37.81%) were "bisexuals," and 41 (6.18%) were "homosexuals." Figure 1 shows the overall profile of students' sexual orientation.

However, when their sex was considered, of 300 males, 172 (57.33%) were “straights”, 100 (33.33%) were “bisexuals”, and 28 (9.33%) were “gays”; and of 364 females, 200 (54.95%) were straights, 151 (41.48%) were “bisexuals”, and 13 (3.57%) were “lesbians”.

These findings imply that a majority or 55% of the students were straight, and the minority consisting of 40 % bisexuals and 5 % homosexuals.

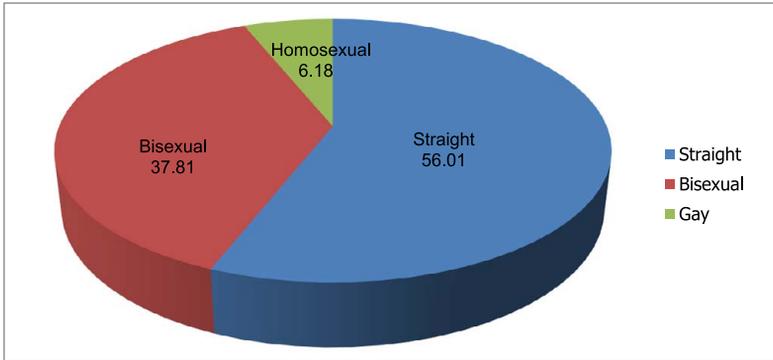


Figure 1. Profile of Students' Sexual Orientation

However, when homosexuality was considered, gays were more prevalent (9%) among males than their lesbians (3%) female counterpart. This profile of gays among males and lesbians among females supports Burri, Cherkas, Spector, and Rahman (2011) contentions that homosexuality appears to be a constant sexual phenotype in humans when measured as exclusive same-sex “feelings” (e.g., homosexual attractions and fantasies). The distribution of same-sex attraction in the case of present study is generally bimodal and this is stronger for men than it is for women.

### Students' self-esteem grouped as to their sexual orientation

Data revealed that as an entire group ( $M=17.83$ ,  $SD=3.09$ ), and when classified as to sexual orientations (straight,  $M=18.10$ ,  $SD=3.18$ ; bisexual,  $M=17.65$ ,  $SD=2.99$ ; homosexual,  $M=16.40$ ,  $SD= 2.51$ ) the college students in this study had “high” self-esteem.

These findings may imply healthy self-esteem prevailing among students regardless of their sexual orientations. In other words, they believed in their self-worth and confident for themselves. According to Donnellan, Trzesniewski,

Robins, Moffitt, and Caspi (2005), a student with high self-esteem have a positive outlook of their life, feel confident, view difficulties as challenges, and can be assertive. It is important to have healthy self-esteem because it gives one the courage to try new things and the power to believe in and value their selves even when they make mistakes (Olson, Fazio, & Hermann, 2007).

### **Self-esteem of male students grouped as to their sexual orientations**

As an entire group ( $M=17.31$ ,  $SD=2.70$ ) and when classified as to straight ( $M=17.51$ ,  $SD=2.89$ ), bisexual ( $M=17.23$ ,  $SD=2.42$ ) and gay ( $M=16.28$ ,  $SD=2.31$ ), the male college students had “high” self-esteem. Although generally, the subjects found their self-esteem “high,” a closer look at the means in terms of sexual orientation, the gays (16.68) perceived their the self-esteem “lower” than did their bisexual (17.10) and straight (17.51) counterparts.

The findings suggest that the high self-esteem enjoyed by male students in this study regardless of their sexual orientation imply social support or acceptance (Cruse, 2004; Savin-Williams, 1989). However, the low perceived self-esteem among male-gays may be attributed to their identity problems.

### **Self-esteem of female students grouped as to their sexual orientations**

As an entire group ( $M=18.26$ ,  $SD=3.33$ ), and when classified as to straight ( $M=18.62$ ,  $SD=3.33$ ), bisexual ( $M=18.01$ ,  $SD=3.26$ ) and lesbian ( $M=15.42$ ,  $SD=2.78$ ), the female college students had “high” self-esteem.

Although generally, the subjects found their self-esteem “high,” a closer look at the means in terms of sexual orientation, the lesbians (15.42) perceived that their self-esteem is “lower” than their bisexual (18.01) and straight (18.62) counterparts.

The high self-regard of students in this study seemed to attribute to some factors like self-perceived competence, self-acceptance, and sense of support of others regardless of their sexual orientation.

According to Harter (1986), competence and social support, together provide a powerful explanation of the level of self-esteem. Harter’s in research on self-perceived competence, explains that every child experiences some discrepancy between what he/she would like to be, the ‘ideal self,’ and his/her actual perception of him/herself, ‘the real self.’ When this discrepancy is large and it deals with a personally relevant domain, this will result in lower self-esteem. Moreover, the overall sense of support of significant others (especially parents, peers and teachers) is also influential for the development of self-esteem.

Children's who feel that others accept them, and are unconditionally loved and respected, will report a higher sense of self-esteem (Bee, 2000).

Thus, students with a high discrepancy and a low sense of social support reported the lowest sense of self-esteem. These results suggest that efforts to improve self-esteem in students require both supportive social surroundings and the formation and acceptance of realistic personal goals in the personally relevant domains (Harter, 1986).

On the other hand, "lower" self-esteem among lesbians may suggest feelings of non-acceptance or fear of disclosure of their sexual orientation. According to Russel (2015), the disclosure of sexual orientation or gender identity in school will develop self-esteem than those who hide. Thus, non-acceptance or fear of disclosure among sexual minorities may lead to lower self-esteem or depression.

## **Difference in the male and female students' self-esteem grouped as to their sexual orientation**

### **Male students' self-esteem grouped as to their sexual orientation**

A Kruskal-Wallis H test showed that there was a statistically significant difference in the self-esteem scores of male students between the gays and bisexuals,  $X^2(2)=12.219, p<0.05$ , with a mean rank score of 17.23 for bisexuals and 16.28 for gays. However, there were no significant differences in the self-esteem between gays and straight,  $X^2(2)=11.058, p>0.05$ , and between straights and bisexuals  $X^2(2)=13.91, p>0.05$ .

The findings suggest that male-bisexual students had better self-perceived image or esteem than the male-gay counterpart. This may be since exposure or non-exposure of one's true status of sexual identity may affect the level of their self-esteem. This finding was supported by Corrigan and Matthews (2003), that the status of identity development is likely related to the level of self-esteem and proneness to anxiety or psychological distress.

Perhaps, the low level of self-esteem among gays is attributed to the conflicts over their sexual identity, were verbally and physically assaulted by family members, most often by their mothers (Pilkington & D'Augelli, 1995), peer harassment (Isay, 1991) being called "homosexuals" (or pejorative variations) as the worst harassment (Remafedi, 1994), can increase the likelihood of poor self-image or low self-esteem.

These findings support Lamke (1982) study on the relationship between sex-role orientation and self-esteem in early adolescence junior high school

students which revealed that androgynous individuals had higher levels of self-esteem than feminine and indifferent individuals.

Conversely, being bisexual as were not devolved, disclosed, or unconsciously recognized by some students as to their age, were not issue that may greatly affect their self-image or self-esteem.

### **Female students' self-esteem grouped as to their sexual orientation**

A Kruskal-Wallis H test showed that there were no significant differences in the self-esteem scores of female students between the lesbian and bisexual,  $\chi^2(2)=3.374$ ,  $p>0.761$ ; between the lesbians and straights,  $\chi^2(2)=11.058$ ,  $p>0.05$ ; and between bisexuals and straights,  $X^2(2)=13.911$ ,  $p>0.05$ .

The findings imply that self-esteem among female college students is not an issue of sexual orientations. In other words, sexual orientations among female students did not influence their self-esteem.

According to Harter (1986), girls are more likely to have internalizing symptoms than boys; boys are more likely to have externalizing symptoms; and that girls appear to be better than boys in positive self-evaluation in the domain of behavioral conduct. Self-perceived behavioral conduct is assessed as the individual view on how well behaved he/she is and how he/she views his/her behavior in accordance with social expectations (Harter, 1986). Negative self-perceived behavioral conduct is also found to be an important factor in mediating externalizing problems (Reda-Norton, 1995). Thus, the findings suggest that by nature, female students in their positive self-evaluation have that ability to mediate externalizing problems that do not significantly affect their self-esteem regardless of their sexual orientations.

### **Prevailing problems among straight, bisexual, and homosexual college students grouped as to their sex**

#### **I. Male Students**

**Prevailing problems of straight male students.** From each problem area the straight male students mostly encountered "lacking in concentration" in academic; "needing to know how to get job after graduation" for career; "parents sacrificing much" in family, "lacking sleep" in health; "lacking leadership qualities" in social aspect, "lacking money" for personal need, and "wanting to understand bible" in religion as their most common prevailing problems.

The results indicate that the socio-economic status of the sexually straight oriented students in this study seems to affect their learning abilities, emotional

stability, health, and social conditions. Likewise, the students were anxious about their eternal security for the salvation of their soul in their desires to know the truth in the Holy Scriptures.

**Prevailing problems of bisexual male students.** From each the bisexual male students had “lacking in concentration” in academic, “worried about future” for their career, “parents sacrificing much” in the family, “lacking sleep” for health, “lacking leadership qualities” in social aspect, “lacking money” for personal need (45, 45%), and “wanting to understand bible” in religion (38, 38%) as their most common prevailing problems.

Likewise, the findings imply that the bisexual students in this study were physically, mentally, and emotionally affected by their socio-economic conditions. They were very much concerned about the economic plight of their parents who sacrificed much for their studies and for them to have a better future. Due to such life predicaments, the students were more concerned about finding a job after graduation to help out their families from the difficulties of underprivileged life.

**Prevailing problems of gay male students.** From each problem area the gay male students mostly encountered “lacking in study habits” in academics, “needing to know how to get a job after graduation” for their career, “needs freedom” for their family life, “toothache” for their health, “too aggressive” in social aspect, “in love” in personal, and “wanting to understand bible” in religious aspect as the most common prevailing problems.

The findings suggest that the male-gays students were more preoccupied with their health, mental and social problems as influenced by their sexual orientation. According to Erikson’s (1965, 1968) theory on the stages of psychosocial development in children, adolescents, and adults and Herbert’s (1987) flow chart focus on the vicissitudes of identity and the development of unhealthy mental and social problems. According to these theories, when a person is enduringly confused about his/her own identity, he/she may possess an inherent lack of self-reassurance which results in either a low level of self-esteem or in unstable self-esteem and feelings of insecurity. However, low self-esteem—likewise inflated self-esteem—can also lead to identity problems. Under circumstances of insecurity and low self-esteem, the individual evolves in one of two ways: he/she takes the active escape route or the passive avoidance route (Herbert, 1987). The escape route is associated with externalizing behaviors: aggressive behavior, violence, and school dropout, the seeking of reassurance in others through high-risk behavior, premature relationships, cults or gangs. Reassurance and security may also be

sought through drugs, alcohol or food. The passive avoidance route is associated with internalizing factors: feelings of despair and depression. Extreme avoidance may even result in suicidal behavior. According to Chakraborty, McManus, Brugha, Bebbington, and King (2011), homosexual people tend to experience more mental health problems than heterosexual people on the ground of sexual orientations discriminations.

Thus, the gay aggressiveness in this study might be associated with some frustrations.

## **A. Female Students**

### **Prevailing problems among “straight” female students**

From each problem area the straight female students mostly encountered “lacking in concentration” in academics, “needing to know how to get a job after graduation” for their career, “parents sacrificing much” in family life, “lacking sleep” for their health, “lacking leadership qualities” in social aspects, “lacking money” for personal need, and “afraid to hell” for religious aspect as the most common prevailing problems.

Likewise, the results indicate that that the straight female students in this study were physically, mentally, and emotionally affected by their socio-economic conditions. They were very much concerned about the economic situation of their parents who sacrificed much for their studies and to have a better future. Due to such life predicaments, the students were concerned about how to land a job after graduation to help their parents and alleviate their economic conditions.

### **Prevailing problems among bisexual female students**

From each problem area the bisexual female students mostly encountered “lacking study habits” in academic, “needing to know how to get job after graduation” for their career, “parents sacrificing much” in family, “lacking sleep” for their health, “lacking leadership qualities” in social aspects, “lacking money” for personal need, and “afraid to hell” in religious aspect problems.

### **Prevailing problems among “lesbian” female students**

From each problem area the lesbian female students mostly encountered “lacking study habits” in academics, “worried about future” for their career, “need more freedom” in the family, “lacking sleep” in health, “lacking leadership qualities” in social aspect, “in love” in personal aspect, and “afraid to hell” in religious aspect as the most common prevailing problems.

The result indicates that lesbians were more preoccupied of their personal, health, family, and career problems. They need social support and understanding of their emotional, social, and financial problems associated with their unique sexual orientation. As argued, lesbian youths experienced social isolations due to lack of support systems at home, in the community, and the educational system (Mercier & Berger, 1989), and contributes to their high-risk status (Elia, 1993). Thus, the findings suggest social support at home, community, and educational system for them to live normally with a majority of heterosexuals students.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Stereotyping of the profile of sexual orientations is true also college students. The majority had a straight sexual orientation, bisexuals at the middle and homosexuals belonging to the sexual minority.

The prevailing wholesome, nondiscriminatory atmosphere and supportive learning environment develop the positive self-image and self-esteem among students regardless of their sexual orientations. They become more resilient despite the challenges and difficulties they encountered in school and their personal life due to the existence of social support at home, community, and educational system.

The better self-esteem among bisexuals than gays among male students was attributed to the non-disclosure of their sexual orientation. On the other hand, the lower level of self-esteem among gays was attributed to the conflicts and confusions arising from their sexual identity.

The students of the public higher education institutions in the Philippines were predominantly affected by the socio-economic conditions of their family. As a consequence of their adverse economic conditions, some of them cannot eat regularly, cannot concentrate on their study, prone to illnesses, and very much worried about their future.

Enduringly confusion about one's sexual identity develops unhealthy mental, emotional, and social problems among homosexuals that result to over preoccupation of their love life, bothering about sex, spiritual insecurity, aggressiveness and longing for more freedom from family.

## **TRANSLATIONAL RESEARCH**

Additionally, this study may help curriculum developers and guidance and counseling program planners in addressing the needs and concerns of students

regardless of their sexual orientation. From the foregoing findings, it is concluded that most of the sexual minorities were deprived of the guidance and counseling services responsive to their unique sexual identities. Supports provided by the family, community, and academe were only limited to address the general concerns of students, but fail to look into the special needs of sexual minorities. Hence, the current status of self-esteem and prevailing problems across students' sexual orientation may help in the diagnosis and remediation of the physical, emotional, social and spiritual problems of college students. The self-esteem and problems of students determined in this study could be useful to high school and college guidance counselors, instructors and their students. It will also enlighten their understanding of students sexual orientations and preferences and factors that may affect their physical, emotional, social, and spiritual development. This will also help education planners and policymakers to develop various programs and activities that are more responsive or sensitive to the needs of sexual minorities. Finally, the findings of the present study were very useful to the researchers who plan to further investigate on the issues concerning the why and how of the factors that affect the self-esteem and problems of gay and lesbian students.

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