'The Library is open': creating safe working environments for LGBTQ+ library employees and marketing supportive LGBTQ+ services

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Engaging Ourselves in Library Work: A Narrative Inquiry on Employee Engagement and Performance of LGBTQ+ Library Employees

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Abstract:

This study aims to investigate the professional experiences of LGBTQ+ library employees, focusing on their work engagement and performance. It further examines how job resources, leadership, inclusion, management support, work-life balance, coworker support, recognition, and reward affect the work engagement, disengagement, and performance of LGBTQ+ library employees. The qualitative study employs a narrative approach to data collection and analysis, using in-depth interviews to elicit rich, detailed narratives of LGBTQ+ library employees' experiences. The findings of this study can benefit libraries by enhancing the engagement and performance of their LGBTQ+ employees, thereby adding to their success, productivity, and growth as an institution. This study has a managerial implication for creating a supportive and inclusive work environment that fosters engagement and performance among LGBTQ+ library employees.

Keywords: LGBTQ+ people, employee performance, employee engagement, librarians

Introduction

Libraries are valuable cultural institutions that give universal access to knowledge, information, and resources. They play a crucial role in society by promoting literacy, supporting lifelong learning, and fostering inclusivity and diversity. They depend on their employees' expertise, abilities, and dedication to offer top-notch, inclusive services and resources. As with any other service institution,

employee engagement is essential to the success of libraries, as it impacts employee and organizational performance as a whole. Nevertheless, despite progress made toward LGBTQ+ rights and inclusion, challenges still persist, leading to concerns about the engagement, disengagement, and performance of LGBTQ+ library employees.

Employee engagement theory holds that motivated workers are more likely to be creative, devoted, and productive (Kahn, 1990). They are more inclined to put in more effort and feel more engaged in their work if they feel valued and invested. Work engagement was defined by Kahn (1990) as physical participation in tasks, cognitive attentiveness, and emotional connection to others while tasks are being carried out. Therefore, employees are more likely to be engaged when they perceive it to have psychological significance. In addition, poor confidence decreases a person's psychological availability (i.e., the capacity to utilize physical, emotional, and cognitive resources at work), hence diminishing work engagement (Kahn, 1990). Work engagement theory believes that organizational leaders have an impact on the psychological factors that provide employees with a sense of meaningfulness, safety, and accessibility at work, hence fostering positive engagement (Kahn, 1990).

Several studies have examined the link between employee engagement and work performance (Adnan et al., 2022; Banihani et al., 2013; Christian et al., 2011; Kahn, 1990; Lyons, 2023; Martin, 2020), as well as the work engagement of LGBTQ+ employees (Kutch, 2017; Lloren & Parini, 2017; Opall, 2021; Webster et al., 2018; Wicks, 2017; Wright et al., 2006). However, research on the work engagement and performance of LBGTQ+ library employees is limited. Although few studies have addressed the professional lives of LGBTQ+ librarians (Kester, 1997; Wexelbaum, 2011), no research has been conducted on the work engagement and performance of Filipino LGBTQ+ library employees. This study will fill this research gap by investigating the professional experiences of LGBTQ+ library employees, focusing on their work engagement and performance. It also examines the factors that impact work engagement, disengagement, and performance of LGBTQ+ library employees and ascertains the reasons why LGBTQ+ library employees become disengaged at work.

Although there has been extensive research on the significance of employee engagement and job performance in various workplaces, more studies must be conducted to understand the professional lives of LGBTQ+ employees, including those working in libraries. Understanding their experiences and examining the factors that influence their level of engagement and performance at work can inform library managers to develop strategies and policies that promote a more inclusive, supportive, and safe work environment. With this, LGBTQ+ library employees may feel valued, supported, and empowered to strive in their chosen careers. The findings of this study can benefit libraries by enhancing the engagement and performance of their LGBTQ+ employees, thereby adding to their success, productivity, and growth as a service institution.

Research Methods

In this qualitative study, we employed a narrative inquiry for data collection and analysis by conducting one-on-one interviews to elicit rich, detailed narratives of LGBTQ+ library employees' experiences. Narrative inquiry is an approach that focuses on narratives and connections, which is suitable for an exploratory study focusing on personal experience to draw conclusions (Berry et al., 2022). Moreover, the subjects of this study can express their identities, tell their stories, and have their experiences validated and recognized, providing a more nuanced and holistic understanding of their lived realities. We developed semi-structured interview questions, focusing on LGBTQ+ library employees' work engagement before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic, available job resources, leadership impact on engagement, management support, recognition and reward, and coworker support. We selected the participants using purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The participants of this study were licensed librarians and support staff working in academic libraries who identified themselves as members of the LGBTQ+ community. We interviewed them online through Zoom for over one week. The data analysis was guided by Kahn's work engagement theory (1990), which highlights the value of establishing a supportive and inclusive workplace to increase employee

engagement and productivity. Moreover, we used an interpretative approach and thematic analysis in analyzing the narratives, emphasizing the context and the experiences of LGBTQ+ library staff. In contrast to many qualitative studies, in which only fragments are coded, participants' stories were combined and evaluated holistically.

Findings and Discussion

The participants

The participants for this study are composed of practicing librarians and support staff working in academic libraries who identified themselves as members of the LGBTQ+ community. They have been working at their respective institutions for four to ten years. When they start their careers, most, if not all, of them are anxious and hesitant to start their careers in an academic library setup. Eventually, they enjoyed their work, particularly the reference service, where they mainly dealt with patrons. The participants also cited having a competitive salary, proximity to home, and a diverse working environment as reasons why they like their current jobs.

Level of work engagement

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, a typical day for participants was ordinary and routine. It would involve assisting patrons with their research needs, overseeing the technical processing of library materials, and spearheading library activities. When the lockdown began, participants continued working from home. Admittedly, only a limited number of library tasks can be done with this arrangement. They mentioned purchasing electronic resource collection, strengthening their online presence for their patrons, as well as learning and, at the same time, teaching their senior colleagues about technology solutions that help them cater to the needs of their community. When schools gradually return to normal, most participants in this study are excited to provide services to their patrons face-to-face, catch up on their backlogs, and be enthusiastic about holding new activities inside the library. This suggests that, in terms of the level of engagement before, during, and after the pandemic, most participants felt more engaged after the pandemic since they realized that being in a service-oriented profession, the two years of working from home limited their interaction with their patrons, particularly students.

Although they have learned to adapt, multitask, and find new ways of delivering their services online, participants still prefer working onsite where they can interact physically. Despite the imposition of new norms, as reference service providers, they feel more engaged in face-to-face interactions with the patrons. One participant even mentioned that, as a gay man, he could deliver better services because he expressed himself fully during face-to-face encounters. For example, most of the cases shared by the participants when they were deeply engaged and passionate about their jobs were student-centered activities that they organized. According to them, they were able to express their personality both as a boy and a girl through their library activities. They stated that they enjoy moderating activities, conducting outreach, leading library tours, ushering at events, serving on gender and development committees, and heading big projects in the library. Most participants also cited that being jolly and friendly makes their job look easier because they love talking to people. They also shared that they find most enjoyable library assignments involving reference service, i.e., answering queries, conversing with the patrons, and customer service. This quote from one of the participants captures the engaged feeling of the rest,

> *"As a gay man, I am more inclined to reference service because my confidence gets esteemed when I deal with people, especially when we collaborate with them."*

Leadership and coworker impact work engagement

Regarding job resources, the participants still feel engaged with their work because they were given enough support from the administration—technical resources and equipment—and even highlighted the moral support they get from bosses and colleagues. However, they also emphasized that there are times when they have to be resourceful because they have activities that cannot be funded or are out of budget. There is this quote from one of the participants:

> "I am lucky that the administration gives us what we need. But I have to admit there are times that if my activity is out of budget, I have to be resourceful. Good thing being gay makes it easier for me to find ways to talk and deal with people whenever I need help."

When it comes to support coming from their immediate supervisors, participants feel more productive and committed to doing their best when they know they are being entrusted with major library activities and their pitches are approved. This is also supported by the findings of Lyons' study (2023), which indicates that managers may affect employees by directly influencing the impact of job resources on their well-being and guiding employees by entrusting important tasks to them. They feel a sense of belongingness and ownership whenever they lead an activity, especially when they are fully involved in the planning and execution of these activities. Macey et al. (2009) suggest that high trust and fairness is the key to creating and sustaining an engaged workforce, which also leads to building confidence, resiliency, and social support network. Furthermore, they appreciated that their leadership teams supported their work-life balance and assigned tasks that fit their personality. This result is consistent with research by Martin (2020), who found that organizations that promote work-life balance and put a premium on someone's welfare report a higher level of work engagement. They are more at ease and more likely to do effectively when not pressured to execute duties that make them uncomfortable. The participants, on the other hand, expressed their desire to participate in additional training sessions and workshops that would help them advance their careers and simultaneously have a chance to interact with their fellow professionals on the field. One of the participants remarked

> "I think they can still improve by providing training and allowing us to attend seminars. We are so focused on our day-to-day tasks that we forget to attend professional activities. We are not being exposed to outside organizations. Hopefully, they can give us that kind of support."

The participants said that the moral support they received from coworkers had helped them feel more engaged in their work. They admitted that they enjoy being around others and value their supporting and understanding coworkers at the library. It matters greatly to them that their coworkers tolerate and accept them for who they are and that they do not have to pretend in their presence. In fact, the majority, if not all, participants viewed their coworkers as friends. In addition, they noted that job advantages such as free hospitalization, help with graduate education, and the workplace provide them with several possibilities to feel connected with their work.

Management support and work-life balance

The participants talked about how they balanced their personal life as LGBTQ individuals with their professional life and responsibilities. Notably, participants from Catholic academic institutions feel restricted in expressing their gender and sexuality. They stated that even though their institutions are beginning to tolerate members of the LGBTQ+ community, full acceptance, such as how they dress, speak, and act, is somehow being restricted. Some employees were even somewhat wary of their presence. One participant shared,

> "Working as a librarian at a Catholic university still remains controversial."There are times that I have to act more masculine because some of my colleagues call for me to act more "professional." For them, being "professional" means that you must act and speak manly. I believe this hinders me and my potential to be more open and realistic at work. "I am a jolly person, so there are times when I speak that it tends to be more effeminate."

On the other hand, other participants from non-secular academic institutions are more likely to express themselves both inside and outside of their work. They even commended their institutions for having inclusive policies that promote safe spaces and gender sensitivity in the community. They enjoyed the freedom to wear the clothes they wanted without worrying about being reprimanded, speak their mind, and even pitch ideas promoting LGBTQ+ rights, such as "Gay Pride." They also expressed gratitude to their institutions for educating the whole community about gay rights, respecting other people's choices, and empowering them through programs and activities that promote gender awareness. Consider this quote from one of the participants:

> "I am now in that stage of exploring my gender and sexuality. I am starting with the way I dress and put on make-up. Now I am allowed to wear not too manly, and I can even wear shocking colors."

The diverse responses and experiences of the participants regarding their work-life balance in relation to their gender suggest that religious teachings and practices are still holding institutions back. However, some progressive institutions are somewhat receptive to the idea that a person's gender does not affect his or her ability to work. Instead, those who express themselves freely tend to be more productive, imaginative, and creative in their employment. Even when some of them are being called out for their behavior, the participants are more optimistic because they understand and appreciate the principles and teachings of their organizations. Those who work in institutions that are inclusive report being more engaged, motivated, and content because they feel supported and appreciated. While those working in inclusive institutions expressed that they are more engaged, motivated, and happy because they feel supported and accepted. Lloren and Parini (2017) stated that employees working for companies implementing LGBTQ-supportive policies felt better at work.

In addition, participants discussed instances in which their jobs were acknowledged in a manner that was more significant to them as LGBTQ employees. Most responsibilities include conducting seminars and workshops, hosting school activities, resolving patron requests successfully, and developing published materials. In addition, the participants underlined that they will be unable to perform these activities effectively if they are limited in their ability to express themselves freely. Gichohi (2014) argued that creativity and innovation cannot be imposed or driven by disengaged employees. When asked about the incidents in their current institutions that have made them feel disengaged or less interested in their work, the participants cannot recall any. However, some of them had encountered this in previous employment. They noted that in those instances, they tend to be reluctant to work and do not feel like the best version of themselves at work. One participant shared,

> "I tend to be quiet, especially when they think I am too gay, even when they throw it as a joke. But then, I just brush it off because I am afraid that if they noticed that I felt bad, it might continue all throughout to the point that I am no longer comfortable working with them."

The participants were also asked to describe instances in which they believed their work engagement and job performance suffered due to their colleagues' lack of inclusivity and support. None of them remembered this type of occurrence. They even disclosed that most of their coworkers appreciate and tolerate them. Generally, they do not feel discriminated against or left out because of their gender. Most of their coworkers support their careers and how they express themselves through their work. One even shared,

> "No. I don't feel that way. I believe the workplace is very inclusive, regardless of your gender preference and orientation, as long as expressing yourself would help you do your tasks. Actually, they appreciate it (being gay) when you give comments and suggestions because they know that you are engaged and part of the team. "I believe that being part of the LGBTQ+ community is not a hindrance to your job here at the institution."

Additionally, the participants felt that their coworkers accept them and viewed them as team members regardless of their gender orientation. As long as individuals can contribute to achieving the group's objectives and providing results, they are treated equally and fairly.

Conclusion, Implications, and Limitations

The results of this study affirmed Kahn's work engagement theory, which states that employees integrate themselves into their work roles, infusing personal energy and experiencing emotional connection with their work. The LGBTQ+ participants expressed their thoughts, feelings, and lived experiences toward their work and how they deal with their supervisors, colleagues, and the policies and resources of the institutions. The results indicated that LGBTQ employees feel fully engaged and motivated with their jobs, provided that the institution shows inclusivity and support in the workplace and that their colleagues express tolerance and acceptance.

The sharing and anecdotes of the participants about their experiences imply that fostering a positive and welcoming workplace culture is crucial to making them more engaged in their work, therefore more creative and innovative, and adding more value to their work performance. It is also noteworthy that members of the LGBTQ+ library staff enjoy and are more confident in tasks that involve interacting with patrons. They could express themselves and actively participate in tasks dealing with people. On that note, they feel reluctant to perform whenever policies and encounters with their colleagues or supervisors restrict them from expressing their personalities through their work. In addition, the study also found out that despite the tolerance and acceptance of LGBTQ+ as members of the workforce, colleagues, and friends, there are still remarks, scenarios, and prejudices (wittingly or unwittingly) that make them a little bit uncomfortable in the workplace. This may be due to practice, institutional policies, and a lack of awareness of inclusion and diversity.

The findings of this study can benefit libraries by enhancing the engagement and performance of their LGBTQ+ employees. Promoting policies and activities and showing equal respect, fairness, and tolerance to LGBTQ employees may result in highly engaged, motivated, and satisfied employees, thereby increasing their success, productivity, and growth as an institution. This study has managerial implications for creating a supportive and inclusive work environment that fosters engagement and performance among LGBTQ+ library employees. This study may also deepen the understanding of management's role in fostering a more supportive and inclusive work environment that promotes engagement and better job performance among LGBTQ employees. Furthermore, it provides recommendations for future research, which can deepen our understanding of the experiences of LGBTQ+ library employees in the workplace and offer more thorough recommendations for management practices.

This study has some limitations. It was limited to a few gay men working in an academic library. Further studies may include more members of the LGBTQ+ community, such as lesbians, transgender people, queers, etc. Other researchers may also explore including LGBTQ materials from different types of libraries. This study implored narrative inquiry to explore more about the participants' lived experiences. Others may use other research methods to elicit more data from the participants.

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