

NAVIGATING LOVE IN CONFINEMENT: A LOVE STORY OF LGBTQIA IN PRISON

NAVEGANDO PELO AMOR EM CONFINAMENTO: UMA HISTÓRIA DE AMOR LGBTQIA NA PRISÃO

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Abstract

This qualitative study explores the dynamics of romantic relationships among LGBTQIA+ individuals in prison, highlighting how love adapts and endures under conditions of separation, surveillance, and institutional constraint. Using thematic analysis, five incarcerated participants who identified as LGBTQIA+ and maintained romantic relationships were interviewed. Data collection involved semi-structured interviews, transcription, and iterative coding following Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach. Five themes emerged: (1) Love Beyond the Walls — the role of letters, calls, and visits in sustaining relational continuity; (2) Entanglements and Unspoken Love — the weakening of outside ties and the emergence of new attachments within the facility; (3) Ghosts of the Past — resurfacing of pre-incarceration relationships complicating present attachments; (4) Silent Sacrifices and Hidden Desires — concealment of identity and unspoken affection under hypermasculine prison culture; and (5) The Plot Twist — overlapping romantic histories generating betrayal and emotional conflict. Findings reveal that while incarceration intensifies relational strain, it also fosters resilience, adaptation, and the renegotiation of intimacy. Consistent with previous scholarship, mediated communication sustained continuity (Licoppe & Smoreda, 2005), while proximity and deprivation facilitated new bonds (Jewkes, 2005). This study contributes to filling the gap in literature on LGBTQIA+ incarcerated individuals, offering implications for policies that address stigma, support psychosocial well-being, and promote inclusive correctional systems.

Resumo

Este estudo qualitativo explora a dinâmica das relações românticas entre indivíduos LGBTQIA+ na prisão, destacando como o amor se adapta e perdura em condições de separação, vigilância e restrições institucionais. Por meio da análise temática, foram entrevistados cinco participantes encarcerados que se identificavam como LGBTQIA+ e mantinham relações românticas. A coleta de dados envolveu entrevistas semiestruturadas, transcrição e codificação iterativa, seguindo a abordagem de Braun e Clarke (2006). Cinco temas emergiram: (1) Amor Além das Paredes — o papel de cartas, ligações e visitas na manutenção da continuidade relacional; (2) Enredos e Amor Não Dito — o enfraquecimento dos laços externos e o surgimento de novos apegos dentro da instituição; (3) Fantasmas do Passado — o ressurgimento de relacionamentos pré-encarceramento que complicam os apegos atuais; (4) Sacrifícios Silenciosos e Desejos Ocultos — ocultação da identidade e afeto não expresso sob a cultura carcerária hipermasculina; e (5) A Reviravolta — histórias românticas que se sobrepõem, gerando traição e conflito emocional. Os resultados revelam que, embora a prisão intensifique a tensão relacional, ela também promove resiliência, adaptação e a renegociação da intimidade. Em consonância com estudos anteriores, a comunicação mediada sustentou a continuidade (Licoppe & Smoreda, 2005), enquanto a proximidade e a privação facilitaram novos laços (Jewkes, 2005). Este estudo contribui para preencher a lacuna na literatura sobre indivíduos LGBTQIA+ encarcerados, oferecendo implicações para políticas que



Keywords: LGBTQIA+. Prison Relationships. Resilience. Thematic Analysis. Intimacy.

abordem o estigma, apoiem o bem-estar psicossocial e promovam sistemas correcionais inclusivos.

Palavras-chave: LGBTQIA+. Relacionamentos na Prisão. Resiliência. Análise Temática. Intimidade.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Rationale

Love and intimacy are often portrayed as freedoms exercised in an open society, but for incarcerated individuals, they unfold within the restrictions of steel bars and rigid schedules. For LGBTQIA+ prisoners, these challenges are compounded by stigma, silence, and the hypermasculine culture of prisons (Donohue *et al.*, 2021). Yet, even in confinement, love persists—reshaped, hidden, or reinvented.

Studies on incarceration largely focus on heterosexual relationships, often neglecting the realities of LGBTQIA+ individuals who experience marginalization both inside and outside correctional systems (Carr *et al.*, 2020). In the Philippine context, research on LGBTQIA+ prisoners is especially scarce, despite their growing visibility in communities and movements.

This study addresses this gap by exploring the lived experiences of five LGBTQIA+ prisoners, focusing on how they sustain, renegotiate, and adapt love under restrictive conditions. By documenting their narratives, this research not only highlights resilience but also interrogates how prison culture reshapes relationships.

This study also carries important implications for Gender and Development (GAD) understanding and policymaking. The Philippine GAD framework emphasizes inclusivity, gender equality, and the recognition of diverse sexual orientations and identities as part of human rights and social development. However, correctional facilities often remain blind spots in GAD discourse, with LGBTQIA+ persons facing institutional neglect, stigma, or erasure. By foregrounding the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ inmates, this study provides empirical evidence that can inform inclusive correctional policies, psychosocial support programs, and rights-based prison reforms. It underscores

the need for prison systems to be integrated into GAD agendas, ensuring that love, intimacy, and emotional well-being of LGBTQIA+ persons are recognized as part of holistic human development.

a. Statement of the Problem/Objectives of the Study

How do LGBTQIA+ individuals in prison sustain and experience romantic relationships despite conditions of separation and institutional constraint?

b. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1969) and Relational Resilience Theory. Symbolic Interactionism explains how LGBTQIA+ individuals in prison construct and negotiate meanings of love, identity, and intimacy within constrained environments. Through mediated communication (letters, calls, visits) and interactions within the facility, participants continuously interpret and adapt their relational experiences.

Relational Resilience Theory highlights how relationships endure and transform under adversity, emphasizing coping, adaptation, and renegotiation of intimacy when faced with separation, institutional constraints, and stigma. The five emergent themes—Love Beyond the Walls; Entanglements and Unspoken Love; Ghosts of the Past; Silent Sacrifices and Hidden Desires; and The Plot Twist—illustrate how participants sustain emotional bonds, navigate conflicts, and reconstruct romantic identities in prison. By combining these perspectives, the study frames LGBTQIA+ romantic relationships as dynamic processes shaped by both structural constraints and personal agency, offering insights for policies that support psychosocial well-being and inclusivity in correctional settings.

c. Conceptual Framework

The study examines how LGBTQIA+ individuals in prison maintain and adapt romantic relationships under institutional constraints. Mediated communication (letters, calls, visits) sustains connections, while proximity and social dynamics within the facility shape new bonds and relational challenges. The interplay of separation, surveillance, and stigma influences emotional resilience, coping strategies, and the renegotiation of intimacy, ultimately determining how love endures and transforms in incarceration.

d. Review of Literature and Studies

Communication technologies and mediated channels help maintain relational continuity. Dainton, (2003) argue that letters, phone calls, and other forms of mediated communication sustain relational “longingness,” enabling couples to remain connected despite physical separation . Attachment Theory In Psychology Explained, n.d. add that attachment bonds can provide psychological strength in restrictive environments, serving as a lifeline for both partners.

When outside ties fray, new attachments often emerge inside correctional facilities. Proximity and deprivation foster intimacy, with companionship sometimes developing into romantic or sexual relationships. (Carr *et al.*, 2020) described how the “pains of imprisonment” produce reliance and interdependence, while Catanuso (2018) highlighted that these bonds are negotiated within hypermasculine and surveilled spaces where disclosure carries stigma.

Closeted desire and hidden identities are also prevalent in prison contexts. Lu *et al.*, (2019) observed how hegemonic masculinity enforces silence around same-sex intimacy, while Fanene & Serrano, (2025) showed that disclosure of orientation can undermine authority and safety inside. Yet, despite these challenges, LGBTQIA+ prisoners demonstrate resilience and adaptation, turning vulnerability into strength.

This study contributes to existing literature by focusing on LGBTQIA+ incarcerated individuals in the Philippines, an under-researched context. It adds depth by highlighting how overlapping past relationships, silence, and entanglements shape the bonds of love inside prison.

2 METHODOLOGY

2.1 Research design

This study employed a qualitative design using thematic analysis (Braun *et al.*, 2022) to explore the lived experiences of LGBTQIA+ prisoners.

2.2 Participants

Five participants, all of whom identified as LGBTQIA+, were purposively selected. Pseudonyms were assigned to ensure confidentiality.

Table 1

Profile of Participants

Name (Pseudonym)	Age	Length of Relationship	Years in Prison
Ariel	25	2 years	3 years
Cinderella	37	9 months	4 years
Snowwhite	47	1 year	5 years
Beauty	45	2 years	5 years
Jasmine	35	1 year	4 years

2.3 Materials and Methods

Thematic analysis is employed to identify and analyze recurring themes and patterns within participants' narratives, facilitating a comprehensive examination of the resilience and adaptation mechanisms utilized in their romantic relationships. This approach is particularly effective for capturing the nuanced, personal experiences of individuals navigating love in the restrictive and often hostile environment of prison.

Inclusion Criteria: To ensure a focused and relevant sample, participants were selected based on specific criteria:

1. Identification as LGBTQIA+: Participants must identify as part of the LGBTQIA+ community, including but not limited to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual individuals.
2. Current Incarceration: Participants must be currently incarcerated in a prison facility to provide insights into the contemporary conditions of prison life and their impact on romantic relationships.
3. Romantic Relationship: Participants must have been involved in a romantic relationship during their imprisonment. This criterion ensures that the study captures direct experiences related to maintaining romantic connections in the prison context.

These criteria are designed to focus on individuals who have direct, relevant experiences with romantic relationships while incarcerated, providing a rich and authentic basis for exploring the study's central themes.

2.4 Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Ilonggo and later translated into English. Interviews focused on experiences of love, intimacy, and resilience while incarcerated.

2.5 Ethical considerations

Participants gave informed consent, and anonymity was preserved. Sensitive topics such as sexual orientation and intimate relationships were approached with care, ensuring participants' safety. The presence of a BJMP psychologist was also present to assist the researcher during the interview.

2.6 Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to generate codes, categories, and themes. An audit trail was maintained to ensure transparency.

Table 2

Audit Trail of Themes

Participant	Narrative (English Translation)	Key Idea / Code	Theme
Ariel	"Through letters and calls, the love is still there."	Love sustained by communication	Love Beyond the Walls
Cinderella	"My partner is outside, but I don't think I can handle it anymore."	Weak outside ties, new bonds inside	Entanglements & Unspoken Love
Beauty	"I'm the leader; I can't show that I breathe the same air."	Hidden feelings, fear of disclosure	Silent Sacrifices & Hidden Desires
Snowwhite	"I loved him even before you knew him."	Past resurfacing, shared partners	Ghosts of the Past
Jasmine	"He's happy again, and I'm not."	Silent love, sacrifice	Silent Sacrifices & Hidden Desires

Ariel (plot twist)	“It feels like all of you had a part in his life.”	Shock, betrayal, interconnected pasts	The Plot Twist
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To ensure transparency, a coding framework was developed.

Table 3

Coding Framework / Codebook

Code	Description	Example Quote	Assigned Theme
Love sustained by communication	Efforts to maintain intimacy with outside partners	“Through letters and calls, the love is still there.” (Ariel)	Love Beyond the Walls
Weakening outside ties	Loss of contact with partners outside	“My partner is outside, but I don’t think I can handle it anymore.” (Cinderella)	Entanglements & Unspoken Love
Hidden orientation	Suppression of sexual identity due to fear of stigma	“I’m the leader; I can’t show that I breathe the same air.” (Beauty)	Silent Sacrifices & Hidden Desires
Past resurfacing	Previous relationships re-emerging	“I loved him even before you knew him.” (Snowwhite)	Ghosts of the Past
Silent love	Unspoken affection, sacrifice	“He’s happy again, and I’m not.” (Jasmine)	Silent Sacrifices & Hidden Desires
Shock and betrayal	Discovery of overlapping relationships	“It feels like all of you had a part in his life.” (Ariel)	The Plot Twist

3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Results

A pool of eight potential participants was initially identified through consultations with prison administration and staff, who were familiar with the inmates and their backgrounds. This process was conducted with careful consideration of ethical guidelines, ensuring that the selection process respected the privacy and confidentiality of the individuals involved.

Once the eight potential participants were identified, a more detailed screening process was conducted to determine their eligibility based on the inclusion criteria.

3.1.1 LGBTQIA+ identification

During the screening process, it was discovered that three of the eight potential participants did not fully meet the inclusion criteria. One participant had recently ended their romantic relationship, another was not currently involved in a romantic relationship but had been in the past, and the third did not self-identify as LGBTQIA+ despite initial assumptions. These factors led to their exclusion from the study.

Ultimately, five participants were selected who fully met the inclusion criteria. These individuals were actively involved in romantic relationships while incarcerated, identified as LGBTQIA+, and were willing to share their personal experiences for the study. This final group of participants provided the necessary depth and diversity of experiences needed to explore the research questions comprehensively.

3.1.2 Theme 1: love beyond the walls — continuity through mediated ties

In the hard architecture of confinement, incarcerated couples often rely on mediated communication—letters, supervised visits, and restricted phone calls—to preserve continuity in their relationships. Ariel’s account illustrates this:

Antes pa ako nadakpan, kami na ya sang akon partner. Duwa na kami katuig, kag bisan layo-ay na subong, padayon ya gihapon. (“Even before I was arrested, my partner and I were already together. We’ve been two years now, and even with this distance, we’re still going strong.”)

“Pinaagi lang gid sa sulat kag tawag, ara gihapon ya ang gugma. Daw gapasahay lang ya namon ang kusog.” (“Through letters and calls, the love is still there. It’s like we keep passing strength back and forth.”)

Scholars have argued that communication technologies and mediated channels help maintain relational “ongoingness,” allowing partners to sustain intimacy despite separation (Walker, 2022). This mediated continuity reduces relational rupture and serves as an emotional lifeline for incarcerated persons and their partners outside (Garcia & Vella, 2025).

Interpretation / implication: The effective use of these media is a resilience strategy: partners actively reconstruct shared time and identity through messages, which

buffer against loneliness and support mental health. Programs that improve access to affordable and regular communication for prisoners can therefore strengthen relational supports that aid rehabilitation.

3.1.3 Theme 2: navigating challenges together — overlapping ties and in-cell intimacy

Cinderella's experience shows the emotional drift that occurs when outside communication is mediated by third parties:

Sa gwa ya ara ang partner ko, pero daw indi ko na gid makaya. Wala na communication, iya bayaw na lang ang naga kontak sa akon. (“My partner is outside, but I don’t think I can handle it anymore. We don’t talk anymore; only his brother-in-law reaches out to me.”)

When outside ties fray, new attachments inside the facility often emerge. Prison environments intensify proximity and interdependence, and intimate bonds that begin as companionship can become romantic or sexual relationships. Research on prison social organization describes how inmate relationships are negotiated within a hypermasculine, surveilled setting, where disclosure of sexual identity can entail severe social costs (Bates, 2011)

Interpretation / implication: Entanglements in confined settings are not merely “substitutes” for external relationships; they reflect adaptive social practices that fulfill emotional and material needs. Policies addressing inmate welfare must recognize these dynamics to reduce harm (e.g., preventing exploitation, ensuring confidentiality in health services).

3.1.4 Theme 3: the reality of love in confinement and the ghosts of the past

Snowwhite's confession that Ariel's outside partner had once been his lover highlights how pre-incarceration histories resurface and complicate present-day attachments.

Ginhigugma ko man na sia antes ka pa ya kilalahon. Dugay man nga panahon, pero indi ko sya mapanas

(“I loved him even before you knew him. It was a long time ago, but I can’t erase it.”)

Classic prison sociology emphasizes that closed settings concentrate relationships and re-activate earlier social ties; overlapping romantic histories can therefore create intense emotional conflict (Chantraine, 2004).

Interpretation/implication: This theme shows the need for trauma-informed psychosocial support inside facilities—counselling that recognizes intersecting histories can help inmates process jealousy, betrayal, and grief without escalating conflicts.

3.1.5 Theme 4: embracing the future- silent sacrifices and hidden desires

Beauty’s account shows how being a respected cell leader and being queer can force self-erasure:

Indi dapat nila mabal.an nga amo ko sini. Ako ang lider, indi ko ya pwede ipakita nga pareho kami hangin nga ginaginhawa. (“They can’t see that I feel this way. I’m the leader; I can’t show them I breathe the same air as you.”)

Qualitative reviews of LGBTQ+ experiences in custody show that stigma, harassment, and the threat of violence push many to conceal their sexual orientation; disclosure can threaten social standing and safety (Vestlie, 2022)

Interpretation/implication: Programs that reduce stigma (staff training, anti-discrimination policies, safe reporting mechanisms) are essential. In the absence of institutional protection, closeted leaders will continue to sacrifice personal authenticity for safety and authority.

3.1.6 Theme 5: the plot twist

The web of relationships reached a breaking point when Ariel discovered that his outside partner was not only connected to Snowwhite in the past but had also once been with Cinderella.

Daw ginapanan.aw ko ya nga tanan kamo may bahin sang iya kabuhi,” Ariel muttered in disbelief. (“It feels like all of you had a part in his life.”)

This revelation shocked the group and intensified feelings of betrayal and entanglement. Yet, it also highlighted how love inside prison is never isolated; it is interwoven with past histories, reshaped by the present, and tested by silence and survival. The plot twist showed how overlapping romantic ties among inmates created both tension and solidarity, forcing participants to confront not only their affections but also the realities of confinement.

3.1.7 Ending narrative

In the end, despite the tangled web of love that once pulled them apart, the five PDL found themselves woven together by something deeper than romance—friendship. What began as misunderstandings, silent rivalries, and hidden pains slowly transformed into compassion, acceptance, and mutual respect. Within the walls that confined their bodies, they discovered a freedom of another kind: the freedom to forgive, to grow, and to care for one another without condition.

Their stories—marked by heartbreaks, missteps, and hopes—eventually converged into a shared understanding that love inside prison is complicated, but humanity does not disappear behind bars. Over time, laughter returned to the spaces once filled with tension. Small gestures of empathy replaced old wounds. And the five PDL learned that while love may shift and fade, the bonds of true friendship can endure even the harshest circumstances.

In the end, they walked forward not as rivals, but as companions—carrying with them the quiet truth that in a place built on isolation, they chose connection. And in choosing each other, they proved that even in confinement, the heart can find its way home.

3.2 Discussion

The findings reveal that love endures under confinement through processes of adaptation, strategic silence, and resilience (*Navigating the New Normal: An in-Depth Study of Adaptation and Change in Filipino Family Structures Postpandemic* - Jeffrey R. Ballaret, 2024, n.d.). Ariel's narrative, for example, aligns with Wang *et al.*, (2025)

research on mediated communication, demonstrating that digital or indirect modes of interaction can sustain relational continuity even across physical barriers. For Ariel, the use of letters, phone calls, or coded messages functions as a lifeline, allowing attachment to persist despite the isolating structures of prison.

Cinderella's experience, by contrast, shows how incarceration can erode existing social ties while simultaneously creating new relational opportunities within the prison environment (Folk *et al.*, 2019). Her weakening connections outside and emerging attachments inside illustrate Jewkes' (2005) observation that intimacy in prison is a negotiated practice, shaped by the hypermasculine and often precarious social hierarchies of correctional settings (Iwamoto *et al.*, 2012). These relationships are complex: they may provide emotional support, yet they also require careful management to avoid conflict or exploitation.

Snowwhite's reflections in "Ghosts of the Past" underscore the intensification of unresolved emotional and relational issues caused by confinement. Consistent with Cunha *et al.*, (2023), imprisonment amplifies latent tensions, unresolved conflicts, and lingering attachments, forcing inmates to confront emotional histories in ways that are rarely possible outside prison walls. Snowwhite's experiences reveal how confinement can both constrain and magnify emotional processes, making the negotiation of love more fraught *yet also* more deeply felt.

Beauty's silent leadership struggle exemplifies the dynamics of power and authority in prison through the lens of Grindstaff & West, (2011) concept of hegemonic masculinity. Her decision to withhold personal disclosures highlights how self-restraint becomes a strategy for maintaining authority within a rigid social hierarchy. In this sense, silence is not passive but a form of relational and social management, demonstrating how love and care often coexist with strategic self-regulation.

Jasmine, on the other hand, embodies resilience through quiet sacrifice, prioritizing others' well-being above her own. This aligns with Egan *et al.*, (2024) conception of resilience as the capacity to adapt to stress while preserving relational and emotional integrity. Her story illustrates how acts of care, even when invisible or unacknowledged, can sustain relational bonds and foster a sense of purpose within the constraining environment of prison.

Collectively, these narratives demonstrate that while incarceration imposes severe limitations on expression, proximity, and choice, it also cultivates creative forms of intimacy. The entanglements and overlapping relationships observed are not merely sources of conflict or strain; they are mechanisms of survival and resilience. Inmates must navigate emotional landscapes that are simultaneously restrictive and generative, where love persists through adaptation, negotiation, and selfless endurance. These findings suggest that prison relationships are both fragile and resourceful, revealing the human capacity to sustain attachment under extreme constraint.

These findings also have important implications for correctional policy and practice. Recognizing that love and relational bonds serve as sources of resilience suggests the need for reforms that facilitate safe and meaningful connections for inmates (Rocque *et al.*, 2010). Policies could include expanded visitation rights, access to mediated communication, and structured support groups that acknowledge diverse relationship dynamics, including same-sex partnerships (Kyalo, 2024). For prison counselors and social workers, understanding the nuanced ways inmates adapt, exercise silence, and prioritize relational well-being can guide interventions that strengthen coping mechanisms, reduce conflict, and promote mental health. By integrating relational and emotional support into rehabilitation programs, correctional institutions can not only mitigate the isolating effects of incarceration but also foster environments where inmates' social and emotional capacities are preserved and nurtured.

From a policy perspective, this finding points to a blind spot in correctional systems: relationships among LGBTQIA+ inmates are often treated as discipline or security issues rather than as legitimate psychosocial concerns (Donohue *et al.*, 2021b). Instead of acknowledging the emotional significance of these bonds, institutional responses often rely on punitive measures such as separation, surveillance, or reprimand. Such practices neglect the reality that relationships, however complicated, serve as coping mechanisms that help inmates endure the harshness of imprisonment.

The entangled relationships of Ariel, Cinderella, and Snowwhite illustrate that ignoring or pathologizing LGBTQIA+ intimacy does not prevent such bonds—it merely drives them underground, increasing secrecy and emotional strain (Ben Hagai & Zurbruggen, 2022). Recognizing and addressing these relationships within a Gender and

Development (GAD) framework could help shift prison culture away from repression toward inclusivity and psychosocial support.

3.3 Implication

This study demonstrates that LGBTQIA+ prisoners sustain and reshape love through communication, silence, and resilience. While incarceration amplifies relational strain, it also fosters adaptation, overlapping affections, and unique forms of intimacy. The narratives of Ariel, Cinderella, Snowwhite, Beauty, and Jasmine reveal that even in environments marked by surveillance and hypermasculinity, love remains a critical force for emotional survival. Relationships inside and outside the prison serve not only as coping mechanisms but also as affirmations of identity and dignity in a system that often denies such recognition.

The findings underscore that prison relationships among LGBTQIA+ persons are not trivial or deviant, but deeply human responses to deprivation, separation, and stigma. Love, whether sustained through letters, silenced through sacrifice, or complicated by entanglements, emerges as a site of resilience and identity preservation. These insights extend existing understandings of intimacy under constraint and emphasize the necessity of integrating LGBTQIA+ perspectives into correctional and social development policies.

Policy:

1. Correctional reforms should explicitly integrate Gender and Development (GAD) frameworks into prison systems. This includes recognizing the existence of LGBTQIA+ relationships, ensuring that visitation rights are inclusive, and addressing institutional practices that marginalize same-sex partnerships.
2. Policies must also provide psychosocial support services tailored to LGBTQIA+ inmates, creating safe spaces for expression while reducing stigma. Such policies align with the Philippines' commitment to gender equality and human rights under national and international law.
3. Training correctional staff on SOGIESC (Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, Expression, and Sex Characteristics) sensitivity will promote an inclusive environment and reduce discrimination.

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