



(Un)Gendering Bullying in Academic Spaces: The Case of Queer Resistance and Identity Assertion

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Received: 17/10/2025	Abstract
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Keywords: Bullying, Queer Research, Gender Performativity, Sociolinguistics	<p>This study examines how queer students in University of Southern Mindanao, Cotabato, experience, negotiate, and resist gendered bullying within academic settings. Using discourse analysis of questionnaires, interviews, and focus group discussions, the research addresses three central questions: the linguistic features of gendered bullying, the strategies queer students use to resist it, and the ideologies that shape both bullying and resistance. Findings show that gendered bullying relies heavily on language, including slurs, religious moralizing, metaphors tied to purity and masculinity, and labels that enforce a rigid gender binary. These linguistic acts reflect broader cultural and religious ideologies that define gender as fixed, morally evaluated, and publicly policed. In response, queer students employ a range of resistance strategies that emphasize both safety and agency. These include silence, off-record language use, humor, code-switching, calm assertion, and deliberate educational dialogue. A significant form of resistance that emerged is excellence-driven resilience: many queer students strategically cultivate academic excellence, leadership, and intellectual competence to assert worth, reclaim dignity, and reduce their vulnerability to bullying. By anchoring their social position in demonstrated merit, they lessen their vulnerability to bullying and neutralize gender as the basis for discriminatory treatment. By combining Butler's performativity lens with sociolinguistic theory, this study demonstrates how queer students actively negotiate identity, challenge rigid gender norms, and transform academic spaces into arenas of empowerment. The study finds that ideologies shaping bullying are rooted in patriarchal norms, community expectations, and faith-based interpretations that privilege conformity. However, queer students reinterpret these same cultural and religious values to promote empathy, inclusivity, and spiritual resistance. By combining linguistic strategies with academic performance as symbolic capital, they create new forms of identity assertion that challenge traditional norms. A key finding of this study is that queer Cotabateño students navigate the university as a contested space where identity is continuously negotiated through performance, scrutiny, and the pursuit of symbolic capital. By strategically leveraging academic merit, they reshape how others perceive them, resist gendered bullying, and create alternative pathways to recognition. This form of academic-based queer resistance underscores how language, achievement, and personal performance collectively serve as tools of empowerment, enabling students to challenge gendered oppression and redefine belonging in academic settings.</p>

1. INTRODUCTION

Bullying has long been recognized as a behavioral concern, often examined through psychological frameworks. Studies such as Menken et al. (2022) show that being bullied is

associated with increased behavioral problems, including heightened aggression. While these findings highlight the individual consequences of bullying, they risk overlooking the broader social and cultural dimensions that shape both the behaviors and responses to bullying. A cultural perspective positions bullying as a socially mediated phenomenon, influenced by power structures, norms, and the ongoing negotiation of identity, underscoring the need to study it as a practice embedded within particular social contexts rather than as isolated psychological disturbances.

Building on this perspective, Cosma et al. (2022) frame bullying as a reflection of society's gender norms, identity expectations, and inequalities. Patterns of bullying vary across cultures and are shaped by entrenched stereotypes and societal attitudes toward gender. In contexts with rigid gender roles, bullying often becomes highly gendered, whereas more egalitarian environments produce more varied expressions of resistance and aggression. This literature foregrounds the link between gender norms and bullying, but studies remain concentrated in Western settings, leaving a gap in understanding how these dynamics unfold in the Global South, particularly in Southeast Asian countries such as the Philippines.

Through a gendered lens, bullying is deeply intertwined with power, identity, and social norms. This study situates bullying among Cotabato youth as a culturally embedded and linguistically mediated phenomenon, reflecting and reproducing gendered power dynamics. Rather than treating bullying as a series of isolated incidents, it is approached here as a social performance, a space in which gender norms, cultural values, and identity boundaries are enacted, contested, and reimagined. Within this framework, the concept of (un)gendering bullying is introduced to examine how queer students actively challenge the use of gender as a rationale for harassment. The parentheses in “(un)gendering” highlight the tension between the enforcement of normative gender expectations and resistance that seeks to undo them, emphasizing how queer youth assert agency and construct identities beyond binary categories of masculinity and femininity.

The University of Southern Mindanao in Cotabato provides a compelling site for this research. As a culturally diverse province home to multiple ethnolinguistic groups, including Maguindanaon, Iranun, Cebuano, and Ilonggo speakers, and intersecting religious communities, the region presents a complex environment where gender norms, school policies, and cultural expectations converge. Indigenous traditions, Islamic and Christian values, and national education policies intersect to shape social interactions, creating fertile ground for examining how gendered bullying is both enacted and resisted within academic spaces.

Emerging literature increasingly emphasizes resistance as a dynamic and generative process, particularly among marginalized youth. Rather than portraying bullied students solely as victims, recent studies explore how they exercise agency, reclaim voice, and reconstitute selfhood in the face of gendered aggression (Munjiah & Aziz, 2023). School climate, cultural norms, and religious teachings significantly influence bullying behaviors and conformity pressures, shaping how youth navigate complex social landscapes.

Language plays a central role in this negotiation, functioning both as a tool of compliance and a site of resistance. Kerswill (1996) and Pitts (2012) demonstrate that marginalized youth employ linguistic creativity to challenge dominant norms and construct alternative identities. Within bullying contexts, linguistic practices, alongside humor, code-switching, academic performance, and peer alliances, enable queer students to resist harassment and assert identities that transcend traditional binaries. Through these strategies, academic spaces become arenas where power is contested, identities are reimagined, and entrenched social hierarchies are challenged and reshaped.

This study addresses a critical gap in the literature by examining how queer students in the Philippine Global South resist gendered bullying and assert their identities within academic spaces. By foregrounding the interplay of cultural norms, language, peer networks, and institutional structures, this research contributes to understanding how marginalized youth actively negotiate identity, agency, and resilience in educational contexts, extending current scholarship beyond Western-centric frameworks.

1.1. Research Questions

The main purpose of this study is to determine how the queer students resist to gendered bullying. Specifically, this sought to answer the following questions:

- (1) What linguistic expressions shape gendered bullying among queer students within the academic space?*
- (2) What strategies do queer students use to resist gendered bullying and assert their identities in academic spaces?*
- (3) What ideologies shape gendered bullying and resistance among queer students?*

2. THEORETICAL LENS

This study is primarily grounded in *Judith Butler's (1990) theory of Gender Performativity*, which conceptualizes gender as a set of repeated acts, gestures, and speech that produce and

reinforce the illusion of stable gender identities. From this perspective, bullying can be understood as a performative act that enforces normative gender expectations, while queer students' responses, through humor, code-switching, calm assertion, or academic performance, constitute performative disruptions that challenge these norms. Butler's framework allows for an examination of how gendered power relations are enacted, contested, and reimagined within academic spaces.

Complementing this, *Sociolinguistic Theory* provides a lens to analyze the verbal, cultural, and communal practices that shape bullying and resistance. Pioneered by *Dell Hymes (1972)* through the ethnography of communication and expanded by Norman Fairclough (1992) with critical discourse perspectives, sociolinguistics situates language within its social and cultural contexts. Practices such as slurs, derogatory terms, local metaphors, body- and appearance-based teasing, religious or behavioral policing, code-switching, multilingual bullying, and forms of resistance like humor and sarcasm are all communicative acts that both reflect and reproduce social hierarchies. At the same time, these linguistic practices serve as tools for resistance and identity assertion, enabling queer students to negotiate and reshape the gendered expectations imposed upon them.

By integrating Butler's theory of performativity with sociolinguistic perspectives, this study examines bullying not merely as a behavioral issue but as a culturally and linguistically mediated phenomenon. This theoretical combination allows the research to explore how gendered bullying is enacted, how queer students resist and assert their identities, and how underlying ideologies both constrain and enable acts of agency in academic spaces. It positions language and performative acts as key sites where power, culture, and identity intersect, providing a comprehensive framework for understanding the experiences of queer students navigating complex social and academic environments.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Materials and Methods

This study employs a qualitative research design with a focus on understanding the lived experiences of queer students who encounter gendered bullying in academic spaces. Guided by the principles of sociolinguistic theory and Butler's concept of gender performativity, the research explores both the enactment of bullying and the strategies of resistance and identity assertion employed by participants.

The respondents of this study are students from the University of Southern Mindanao (USM) who identify as queer and have experienced gendered bullying within academic spaces.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, ensuring that only those with lived experiences relevant to the study's focus were included. This approach allows for a concentrated examination of bullying and resistance within the queer student community.

Data were collected using a two-phase process:

- (1) Questionnaire: Identified participants were first given a structured questionnaire designed to gather demographic information, experiences of gendered bullying, and preliminary insights into coping and resistance strategies. The questionnaire included open-ended items to allow participants to describe their experiences in their own words.*
- (2) Focus Group Discussions (FGDs): After completing the questionnaire, respondents were invited to participate in focus group discussions to provide deeper insights into their experiences. The FGDs encouraged participants to elaborate on the verbal, cultural, and communal practices associated with bullying, as well as the strategies they employ to resist harassment and assert their identities. Discussions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.*

Given the sensitive nature of the topic, the study followed strict ethical protocols. Participants were fully informed of the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any time. Confidentiality and anonymity were ensured by using pseudonyms and securely storing all data. Special care was taken to create a safe and supportive environment during FGDs, recognizing the vulnerability of participants discussing experiences of gendered harassment.

3.2.Data Analysis

Data collected from the questionnaires and focus group discussions (FGDs) were analyzed using thematic analysis, which allows for identifying patterns, meanings, and ideologies embedded in participants' experiences. The analysis followed a systematic process to ensure rigor and depth:

Transcription and Familiarization: All FGD sessions were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to capture the participants' exact words. Questionnaire responses, particularly open-ended items, were compiled alongside the transcriptions. The researcher carefully read through all data multiple times to become fully familiar with the content and context of participants' experiences.

Initial Coding: Responses were coded using a combination of inductive and deductive approaches. Inductively, codes emerged directly from participants' language, highlighting

specific verbal, cultural, and communal practices, as well as strategies of resistance and identity assertion. Deductively, codes were guided by the study's theoretical frameworks, Butler's Gender Performativity and Sociolinguistic Theory, to identify performative acts, power dynamics, and language-based mechanisms of bullying and resistance.

- (1) *Categorization and Theme Development*: Initial codes were grouped into broader categories reflecting the main phenomena under study:
- (2) *Practices of gendered bullying*: slurs, local metaphors, teasing, religious or behavioral policing, code-switching, and communal reinforcement.
- (3) *Forms of resistance and identity assertion*: humor, calm assertion, academic performance, indirectness, and peer-based support.
- (4) *Underlying ideologies*: beliefs about gender, religion, tradition, and social norms that shape bullying and influence responses.

Through constant comparison and iterative refinement, these categories were synthesized into themes that captured both the patterns of bullying and the strategies participants used to navigate or contest these practices.

- (5) *Interpretation and Linking to Theory*: Once themes were established, the data were interpreted in light of Butler's performativity, showing how bullying and resistance constitute repeated acts that enforce or subvert gender norms. Simultaneously, sociolinguistic theory was applied to analyze how language functions as both a tool of oppression and a mechanism for asserting identity. Ideologies underlying bullying and resistance were extracted from recurring patterns in participants' narratives, demonstrating how cultural, religious, and social norms influence the enactment of gendered harassment and the responses to it.

This systematic approach allowed the researcher to move from raw responses to an in-depth understanding of how queer students experience, resist, and interpret gendered bullying, highlighting both the practical strategies and the broader sociocultural ideologies that shape these experiences.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Communicative Practices Used in Gendered Bullying

This section presents the verbal, cultural, and communal practices that shape gendered bullying among queer students in academic spaces, highlighting how language both enforces and challenges gender norms. Table 1 summarizes participants' experiences, categorizing patterns of language use: including slurs, metaphors, code-switching, and culturally specific

expressions, showing how these communicative practices reflect power dynamics while also offering avenues for resistance and identity assertion in Cotabato's mixed sociocultural environment.

Queer students in Cotabato encounter a variety of bullying practices that reinforce traditional gender expectations. Slurs and derogatory terms such as "bakla" (gay), "bayot" (gay), "buring" (prostitute), "salot" (menace), and "bobo" (stupid) are frequently employed to target those who do not conform to prescribed gender roles. These are often paired with animal metaphors like "Pig," "Carabao," "Tarsier," and "walis ting-ting" (stick broom), which mock physical traits and promote body-shaming. Ethnic slurs such as "Manobo" are also used to marginalize students across intersecting identities, demonstrating how bullying operates at both gendered and ethnic levels. Religious slurs like "kafir" (nonbeliever) appear in contexts where gender expression is deemed morally or culturally unacceptable, further policing behavior according to conservative norms.

Cultural and local metaphors reinforce gendered humiliation. Expressions like "Nagutek sa pudit" (brain is in the buttocks) or "Amaika dala katagan nin na nyatumo isabud sa patyogal/manok" (a man's genitals are only fit for animal feed) sexualize and emasculate targeted individuals. Casual remarks such as "sayang ka, gwapo kapa naman" (what a waste, you're actually handsome) subtly shame those who diverge from expectations, often disguising the insult as concern or sarcasm. These expressions collectively uphold rigid gender roles within academic spaces.

Language choices also serve as strategic tools. Code-switching between local dialects, Filipino, and English can conceal bullying from authority figures, enhance perceived power, or create solidarity among peers. Gay lingo and locally coded expressions allow queer students to resist oppression, reclaim identity, and communicate in ways less intelligible to aggressors. Thus, linguistic practices operate both practically and ideologically, demonstrating the dual functions of power enforcement and resistance.

Bullying often targets behaviors that challenge cisnormative expectations: boys expressing emotion or sensitivity may be deemed weak or feminine, while girls asserting independence or dressing boldly may face shaming. These practices enforce a binary understanding of gender, limiting fluidity and self-expression.

Despite these pressures, queer students actively resist through language. Strategies include calm confrontation, humor, reclamation of slurs, and code-mixed or creative expressions that

challenge norms. Some even respond with retorts targeting class or appearance, highlighting how language functions both as a tool of oppression and a means of resistance. Overall, the linguistic, cultural, and communal practices observed among queer students in Cotabato reveal a dynamic process of identity negotiation, where language mediates both marginalization and empowerment.

Table 1. Communicative Practices Used in Gendered Bullying Among Queer Students

Category	Examples Observations	/	Function Effect	/	Relation to Gender Norms
Slurs and Derogatory Terms	“ <i>Bakla</i> ” “ <i>Bayot</i> ” “ <i>Buring</i> ” (prostitute), (menace), (stupid), “ <i>Carabao</i> ,” “ <i>Manobo</i> ”	(gay), (gay), “ <i>Salot</i> ” “ <i>Bobo</i> ” “ <i>Pig</i> ,”	Humiliate, label, othering.		Enforces binary gender expectations (e.g., boys must be masculine); stigmatizes nonconformity and femininity in boys
Cultural and Local Metaphors	“ <i>Nagutek sa pudit</i> ” (brain is in the buttocks), “ <i>Amaika dala katagan...</i> ” (a man’s genitals are only fit for animal feed) “ <i>Sayang ka, guapo kapa naman</i> ” ” (what a waste, you’re actually handsome)		Symbolic emasculation, ridicule, moral judgment		Reinforces heteronormative ideals and “functional” masculinity (e.g., men must reproduce, be strong)
Body- and Appearance-based Teasing	“ <i>Tarsier</i> ,” “ <i>ting-ting</i> ” (broom), shaming	“ <i>walis</i> ” (stick fat/skinny	Physical ridicule, character judgment		Upholds beauty standards; girls expected to be modest, boys to be

			strong or neutral in appearance
Religious/Behavioral Policing	“ <i>Kafir</i> ” (<i>nonbeliever</i>), shaming of public dating, fitted clothes, lack of hijab	Enforce moral conformity	Controls especially girls’ gender expression through religious-cultural codes
Code-Switching and Multilingual Bullying	Use of English, Filipino, Cebuano, Maguindanaon, gay lingo	To assert dominance, hide intent, exclude or include, protect self	Language choice reflects power dynamics, social positioning; codes act as tools of resistance or domination
Resistance through Calm Assertion	“He’s not hurting anyone,” “Please stop,” explaining oneself	De-escalation, appeal to empathy	Challenges norms by humanizing self, refusing to accept inferiority
Resistance through Humor or Sarcasm	Using gay lingo to insult bullies; mocking them back	Subversion, covert attack	Reverses power; reframes marginalized identities as empowered
Aggressive Retaliation	Name-calling, cursing back, “broke-shaming”	Power assertion, emotional defense	Challenges double standards, exposes hypocrisy of bullies
Community-based Learning of Bullying	Children copying elders, casual slurs from adults	Normalization of violence	Reinforces gendered expectations early; discourages deviation or queerness

4.2. Resistance Strategies of Queer Students During Gendered Bullying

Queer students in Cotabato experience bullying through slurs, metaphors, body-shaming remarks, and strategic code-switching. These communicative practices both reflect and reinforce dominant gender norms. At the same time, these young people creatively use language to resist and challenge such norms, transforming everyday interactions into spaces of

empowerment as well as vulnerability. This underscores the critical role of language in shaping, negotiating, and reimagining gender identities within a culturally diverse and socially conservative context.

Queer students in Cotabato employ a range of linguistic and interactional strategies to resist gendered bullying and assert their identities within academic spaces. One commonly used approach is strategic silence or withholding a response. This may stem from fear of escalation, emotional exhaustion, or cultural beliefs such as kifara (karma). Yet silence also functions as an intentional act of self-protection, allowing students to maintain dignity, avoid public embarrassment, and refuse to give aggressors the reaction they expect. Others rely on indirect or deflective responses, using humor, calm reasoning, or subtle defiance to shift the power dynamic without provoking further conflict. Phrases like “Let them see who I truly am” show how they reframe the situation, centering their own identity rather than the bully’s expectations.

Linguistic creativity is another key tool of resistance. Students use code-switching, local dialects, and gay lingo as protective strategies that place them outside the bullies’ linguistic reach. By choosing languages their aggressors do not understand, or by responding with coded humor or double meanings, they turn everyday speech into a form of covert defiance. Even when comebacks contain criticism, these remain off-record, allowing students to challenge harmful remarks while preserving social harmony. Others take a more direct but still controlled approach, using calm and assertive statements such as “Please stop, your words are hurtful.” These acts of boundary-setting demonstrate identity assertion while minimizing conflict, balancing self-respect with cultural expectations of politeness.

Academic identity also plays a role in their resistance. Many participants shared that being perceived as intelligent or high-performing influences how others treat them, with academic competence becoming a form of protection or, in some cases, a source of envy. Regardless, their intellectual performance becomes a resource for self-definition, allowing them to present identities grounded not only in gender expression but also in capability and achievement. Overall, these strategies reveal how queer students use language as a means to resist gendered bullying, reclaim agency, and assert who they are amid complex cultural and social pressures within the academic environment.

Table 2. Resistance Strategies of Queer Students During Gendered Bullying

Politeness Strategy	Examples	Function in Bullying Context	Effect on Identity/Resistance
Silence	/ Staying quiet, “ <i>kifara</i> ”	Avoid escalation,	Preserves dignity;
Withholding	(<i>karma</i>), belief	emotional safety	passive resistance
Speech			
Off-Record	“He’s not hurting	Subtle challenge;	Maintains moral high
Indirectness	anyone,” showing true	avoids direct	ground; reframes
	self instead of arguing	conflict	narrative
Humor & Gay Lingo	Coded language to curse/playfully resist	Clandestine empowerment, confusing bully	Reclaims identity; fosters in-group solidarity
Code-switching	Using Maguindanaon, Filipino, or English selectively	To assert, conceal, or bond	Positions speaker socially; shields from retaliation
Calm Assertion / Soft Confrontation	“Stop bullying me, your words are hurtful”	Challenges behavior respectfully	Asserts boundary while maintaining face
Academic Identity Performance	Smart students treated with caution or envy	Uses intellect to shape perception	Redefines worth beyond gender; may trigger jealousy

The findings show that queer youth in Cotabato use a range of politeness strategies to manage and resist gendered bullying in academic spaces. These include silence, off-record indirectness, humor, code-switching, and calm, measured assertion. Rather than functioning merely as reactions to aggression, these strategies become tools for identity management, dignity preservation, and subtle resistance. Through these forms of linguistic navigation, students avoid direct confrontation while quietly reclaiming agency and challenging gendered expectations imposed on them. Academic competence also emerges as a protective resource, allowing individuals to assert their value beyond restrictive norms. Overall, these strategies demonstrate a careful negotiation of safety, resistance, and self-affirmation, highlighting how language serves as a crucial means for queer students to navigate Cotabato’s complex cultural and social environment.

4.3. Ideologies of Queer Students in Gendered Bullying

(Un)Gendering Bullying in Academic Spaces: The Case of Queer Resistance and Identity Assertion

The findings show that gendered bullying and resistance among queer students in Cotabato are shaped by intertwined cultural, religious, and social ideologies that uphold the gender binary as natural, moral, and unquestionable. Dominant beliefs emphasize strict expectations of masculinity and femininity, where boys must appear strong, disciplined, and morally upright, and girls are expected to be modest, compliant, and sexually restrained. These ideals, reinforced by community norms, patriarchy, and selectively applied religious teachings, legitimize ridicule and exclusion of anyone who deviates from binary gender expression. Language becomes a vehicle for policing these norms, as slurs, metaphors, and moralizing expressions frame nonconformity as shameful or impure.

At the same time, resistance emerges from competing ideological currents. Some queer students draw from alternative readings of cultural and religious values that emphasize compassion, dignity, and plurality. Others challenge generational beliefs by rejecting binary labels and calling out contradictions in how moral teachings are applied. These counter-narratives show that while dominant ideologies empower gendered bullying, they also provoke forms of linguistic and identity-based resistance. Through questioning, reframing, and reclaiming meaning, queer youth actively negotiate and reshape the ideological landscape that governs gender in their academic and community environments.

Table 3. Ideologies Among Queer Students In Gendered Bullying

Theme		Key Observations	Examples	Language Use
Binary Gender Expectations		Belief in only two genders is dominant; deviation is pathologized or ridiculed.	“A boy should be a leader”; “Girls must be modest and silent”	Labels (e.g., “real boy”), religious justifications, moralizing metaphors
		Reinforces conformity, invalidates nonbinary expressions		
Religious Reinforcement of Bullying	of	Religion is cited to justify binary roles and expectations.	“There are only two genders in the Qur’an”; “Being gay is haram”	Verses, Friday sermons, religious idioms used to police behavior

	Justifies exclusion and mockery of LGBTQ+ youth	
Silencing and Shame	Suppresses identity, leads to internalized shame and bullying	“Girls can’t express love”; “Boys can’t be soft” Teasing, indirect insults, religious metaphors like <i>zina</i> (sexual sin)
	Fear, suppression, and self-censorship are common.	
Generational Transmission	Bullying is often justified using cultural or religious terms.	“Elders curse, so children curse too” Normalized bullying language from parents/ustadz
	Sustains gender norms and bullying cycles	
Emerging Resistance and Counter-narratives	Some youth challenge norms and demand change.	“Culture dictates people”; “These ideas are bullshit” Use of informal, direct, critical language to challenge norms
	Emerging identity assertion and social critique	

Queer youth in Cotabato navigate a tension between rigid cultural–religious expectations and their own emerging identities. Dominant ideologies uphold the gender binary as natural and morally required, and these beliefs are reinforced through everyday language, especially gendered slurs, moralizing expressions, and religiously framed judgments. At the same time, language also becomes a tool for resistance. Some youth challenge these norms through critical commentary, subtle questioning, or by reclaiming religious values grounded in compassion rather than exclusion. Their choices, whether staying silent, selectively expressing themselves,

or openly confronting dominant ideas, show how they continually negotiate between the pressures of tradition and the possibilities of change.

4.4.(Un)Gendering Bullying in Academic Spaces: Excellence as a Form of Resistance

A key finding emerged from this research: queer and gender-diverse Cotabateño youth are consistently using academic merit as a strategic tool to navigate gendered bullying within the university. In a context shaped by cultural, religious, and institutional pressures, the campus becomes a space where students must continuously manage and negotiate how they present themselves. Building on Judith Butler's view of gender as performative, queer and nonbinary students express their identities through deliberate acts, such as gesture, voice, clothing, and social presence, that resist fixed gender expectations. These expressions, however, unfold under constant scrutiny from peers, school policies, and lingering normative beliefs, making visibility both empowering and precarious.

Drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) concept, queer youth understand academic merit as a form of symbolic capital. For Bourdieu, symbolic capital encompasses the prestige, honor, and legitimacy an individual gains within a particular social field. Within the context of Cotabato universities, where gendered bullying is prevalent, academic achievement becomes a deliberate and strategic resource. By excelling in coursework, participating successfully in debates and competitions, or assuming leadership roles in campus organizations, queer students accumulate symbolic capital that is both recognized and valued by their peers, faculty, and the broader academic community.

This capital becomes a protective mechanism, a form of power that counters the stigma associated with their gender expression. Because achievement is socially rewarded, it enables peers, teachers, and institutions to see them not primarily through gendered stereotypes, but through competence, intelligence, and leadership. In this sense, symbolic capital allows them to “*ungender*” how others treat them, shifting attention away from the traits that provoke bullying and toward forms of legitimacy that command respect. Academic success thereby becomes a mode of resistance: a deliberate performance of worth that unsettles the cultural scripts used to marginalize them.

However, this merit-driven form of resistance is not without limitations. While symbolic capital empowers those who can consistently perform well, it may unintentionally exclude students dealing with emotional, financial, or academic burdens. The expectation to continually “prove oneself” through achievement can produce internal pressure, silence

experiences of discrimination, and reinforce subtle hierarchies even within queer groups. Symbolic capital protects, but it also demands labor, constant visibility through excellence.

Cultural and religious norms intensify this landscape. Ideas of morality, propriety, and “acceptable behavior,” shaped by Cotabato’s distinct sociocultural milieu, influence how students interpret and respond to queer identities. Bullying often arises from perceived violations of these expectations. Yet, some queer students engage in what can be described as spiritual or cultural reinterpretation, reframing these same values to cultivate dignity, compassion, and resilience. This aligns with the broader logic of symbolic resistance: reclaiming systems that once marginalized them.

Overall, the experiences of queer Cotabateño students show that identity in the university is negotiated through performance, scrutiny, and the pursuit of symbolic capital. By leveraging academic merit as a strategic form of power, they reshape how others perceive them, resist gendered bullying, and create alternative pathways to recognition. This directly supports the research framework by illustrating how symbolic capital enables youth to negotiate, neutralize, and ultimately *ungender* discriminatory treatment within educational spaces. Through excellence, they carve out spaces of dignity and belonging, challenging the power structures that attempt to confine them.

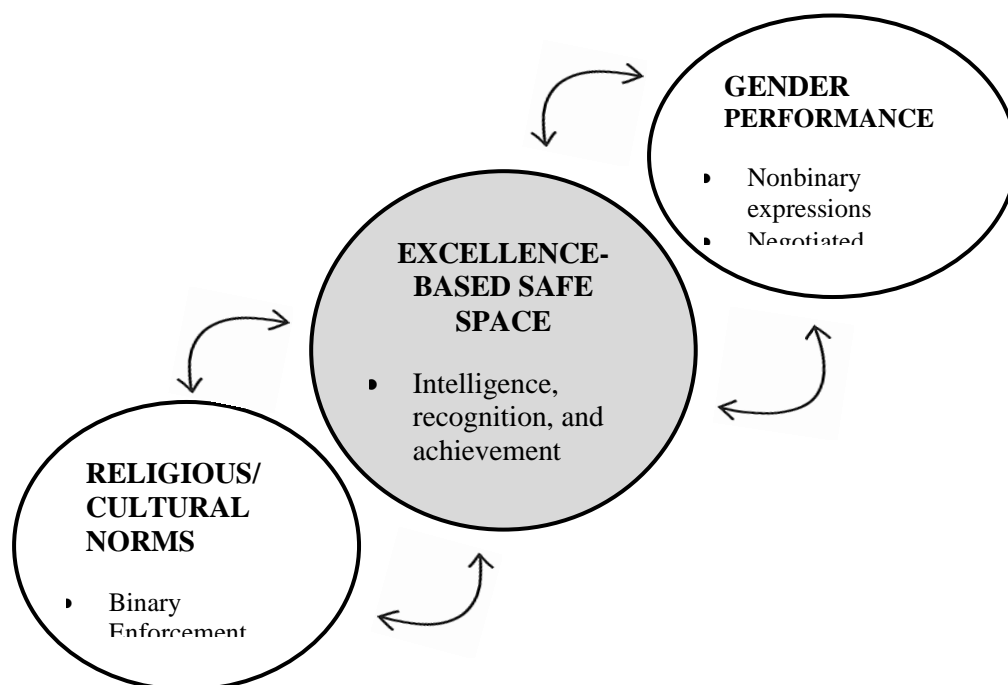


Figure 3. (Un)Gendered Bullying: Excellence as Form of Queer Resistance

5. CONCLUSION

The experiences of queer students in Cotabato reveal how deeply cultural, religious, and gender ideologies shape both bullying and the forms of resistance that emerge in response. Dominant expectations, rooted in binary gender roles, moral evaluations, and community surveillance, produce linguistic and social practices that police nonconforming identities. Bullying often takes the form of slurs, moralizing language, religious references, and body-based ridicule that reinforce norms about how “real” boys and girls should act. These ideologies circulate across homes, communities, peer groups, and academic institutions, creating an environment where queer youth must constantly negotiate visibility, safety, and legitimacy.

Yet the findings show that queer students do not simply endure these pressures; they respond strategically. Language becomes both a tool for survival and an instrument of defiance. Some students remain cautious or silent in hostile moments, while others use critical humor, reframing of religious values, and open self-definition to challenge imposed categories. A central pattern that emerged from the analysis is the use of merit-driven resistance: many queer students cultivate academic excellence, leadership roles, and intellectual competence as deliberate forms of empowerment. In Bourdieuan terms, these achievements function as symbolic capital, defined as socially recognized forms of legitimacy and prestige that grant students power within institutional and peer hierarchies. Through this accumulation of symbolic capital, students reshape how others perceive them, reduce vulnerability to bullying, and assert dignity and belonging. The university thus becomes a space where identity is defended not only through language but through the performance of competence, achievement, and recognized merit.

However, excellence-driven resistance also exposes tensions. While it provides visibility, respectability, and access to symbolic capital for some, it can marginalize students who struggle academically or emotionally. The imperative to “prove oneself” reflects the persistent influence of hierarchies shaped by cultural and religious ideologies that privilege conformity and measurable accomplishment. Nevertheless, the persistence of queer students in reinterpreting faith, questioning norms, and excelling on their own terms demonstrates how resistance is continuously crafted and re-crafted within the constraints of social and institutional pressures.

Overall, the analysis illustrates that (un)gendered bullying among queer youth is rooted in powerful ideological structures, but resistance is equally shaped by creativity, strategy, and the pursuit of symbolic capital. Whether through language, reinterpretation of values, or the

deliberate cultivation of academic merit, queer students carve out ways to exist, thrive, and challenge the normative structures that seek to contain them.

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