

# Altar-ed States: Navigating the Intersection of Catholic Dogma and Queer Identity in Contemporary Filipino Cinema

<sup>1</sup>Darryl Imperial<sup>ORCID</sup>, <sup>2</sup>Sophia Kryss Alexandrova Longhas<sup>ORCID</sup>, <sup>3</sup>Monica Jane E. Gerolaga<sup>ORCID</sup>

St. John Paul II College of Davao

<sup>1</sup>[darrylimperial@sjp2cd.edu.ph](mailto:darrylimperial@sjp2cd.edu.ph), <sup>2</sup>[sophiakryssalexandrova\\_longhas@sjp2cd.edu.ph](mailto:sophiakryssalexandrova_longhas@sjp2cd.edu.ph),

<sup>3</sup>[monicajane\\_gerolaga@sjp2cd.edu.ph](mailto:monicajane_gerolaga@sjp2cd.edu.ph)

## Article Details:

Received: 24 April 2026

Revised: 3 May 2026

Accepted: 13 May 2026

Published: 31 May 2026

Corresponding Email:

[darrylimperial@sjp2cd.edu.ph](mailto:darrylimperial@sjp2cd.edu.ph)

## Recommended Citation:

Imperial, D., Longhas, SKA., Gerolaga, MJ. E. (2026). Altar-ed States: Navigating the Intersection of Catholic Dogma and Queer Identity in Contemporary Filipino Cinema. *The International Review of Multidisciplinary Research*. 1 (6), 612-620.  
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.20545349>

## Index Terms:

Catholic Dogma; Filipino Cinema; Identity Conflict; LGBTQ+ Representation; Queer Identity

**Abstract.** This study examines how contemporary Filipino cinema portrays the intersection of Catholic dogma and queer identity within a society shaped by strong religious values and heteronormative expectations. It addresses the limited research on how queer characters negotiate faith, identity, and belonging in Catholic-influenced environments. Using a qualitative content analysis design, the study analyzed two Filipino films, *Sakristan: The Movie* (2020) and *The Boy Foretold by the Stars* (2020), selected through purposive sampling. Dialogues, narratives, and visual elements were examined through coding guided by Cognitive Dissonance Theory and Moral Panic Theory to identify patterns of internal conflict and societal pressure. Findings reveal that queer characters experience psychological conflict as they attempt to reconcile religious teachings with personal identity, often responding through concealment, compartmentalization, withdrawal from religious spaces, or reinterpretation of faith. Catholic schools and ministries are portrayed as sites of moral regulation that frame queerness as a threat to moral order, reinforcing shame, fear, and self-censorship. However, the films also present moments of resistance where characters redefine spirituality and interpret God's love as inclusive rather than conditional. The study highlights Filipino cinema as a cultural space for questioning rigid religious norms and presenting alternative understandings of faith, identity, and belonging.

## Introduction

Representation of LGBTQ+ in Filipino cinema has grown progressively more relevant as the dialogue around gender, sexuality, religion and identity grows within a society that is strongly shaped by Catholic beliefs and traditional values (Purcia et al., 2018). Cinema is not only a form of entertainment, but also a cultural document wherein social fears, ethical standards, self-definitions are visible. Queer films in a Philippine context tend to work in a moral framework which is steeped in Catholic values and norms where acceptance, shame, family, devotion and social belonging are inextricably linked.

Scholarly work in recent years has demonstrated that Filipino films and media texts often reflect, challenge or (re)negotiate the dominant Catholic and heterosexist values. As for mainstream films with Vice Ganda, they include the performance of camp, humor, family values, social critique, and religious and familial elements (like pre-meal prayers) that contain queer-coded performances, demonstrating the possibility of queer-coded performances alongside religious and familial expectations (Capul et al., 2025). Likewise, Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros (2005) depicts a young lad who is effeminate who grapples with love, identity and identity in a culture and community where moral expectations are set and Catholicism influences the lives of the people. (Gaihe et al., 2025) Research also indicates that television and streaming media still have a way to go before they are more representative of LGBTQ+ communities, with cisgender gay and lesbian characters being more prevalent than others, such as bisexual, transgender, nonbinary, and older queer people (Yuan & Ma, 2025).

Media representation is not the only factor in the way that LGBTQ+ students and teachers navigate Catholic spaces, as studies of the actual spaces of Catholic education and institutions also suggest that LGBTQ+ students and teachers often

navigate their identities carefully to ensure safety, acceptance, and belonging within Catholic educational and institutional spaces. In Catholic universities, this situation can be likened to “threading the needle”, a process in which queer people have to cope with the pressures of two complex identities, said Wedow et al. (2017). These studies offer valuable insights on queer religious experience, but with a narrower focus on the internal psychological dynamics of queer identity and the external pressures of the Catholic institution, there are fewer studies that have investigated this phenomenon in Filipino films.

Although there is an increasing interest in studying images of LGBTQ+ people in media, there are still limited critical studies on Filipino films that depict queer people in Catholic settings that struggle with living in the shadows. While existing works have been written about queer visibility in general, or on the topics of stereotypes or media representation, the focus is not so much on how the tension between Catholic doctrine and queer selfhood is dramatized in selected contemporary Filipino films through the use of character dialogue, religious setting or moments of resistance. In addressing this gap, this study explores the representation of queer characters who are grappling with their identity and the teachings of God's word in Catholic schools, ministries and faith-based communities in the films, *Sakristan: The Movie* (2020) and *The Boy Foretold by the Stars* (2020).

The study argues that Filipino cinema is an important cultural site which reproduces and critiques dominant religious norms, using qualitative content analysis. By bringing together the theory of cognitive dissonance and the moral panic theory, the research investigates how internal dissonance and external moral regulation overlap in the film portrayal of queer Catholic experience. By doing so, the paper makes a significant impact to queer media studies, Philippine film studies, and religion-and-sexuality scholarship by revealing how the themes of faith, identity, concealment, and resistance are negotiated in the context of the Filipino screen narratives of the present.

#### *Research Questions*

1. How do the queer characters reconcile their identities with doctrinal teachings?
2. How do religious settings in the Philippines represent broader societal pressures to conceal queer identity?

## **Methodology**

#### *Research Design*

This study used a qualitative research design based on qualitative content analysis that is suitable to examine the manifest and latent meanings of cultural texts (Creswell, 2014). The design allowed the researchers to identify the ways in which the selected Filipino films develop the relationship between Catholic teaching and queer identity through the use of dialogue, story development, characterization, and the use of religious settings. Due to the focus of the study on meaning making, the qualitative content analysis was employed to enable a systematic, yet interpretive analysis of the portrayal of identity conflict, moral regulation, concealment, and resistance in film.

We used purposive sampling technique to choose the research corpus. The following criteria were used to select *The Movie Sakristan* (2020) and *The Boy Foretold by the Stars* (2020): they are Filipino films; they feature LGBTQ+ youth as main characters; they feature Catholic or explicitly religious settings like schools, ministries, and retreats; and they depict struggles between faith, identity, and social belonging in a modern Philippines context. The purposive sampling method was employed as it enables the researcher to select materials that will provide information-rich and enable the scope of the study to be directly linked to the aims (Sibona et al., 2020).

The unit of analysis comprised scenes, dialogues, character actions and religious spaces of the text that directly or indirectly addressed the negotiation of queer identity and Catholic doctrine. The films were watched numerous times to find the speech excerpts that were relevant and to make sure that stories could be told from the selected scenes in the context of the story. Coded categories were derived from commonalities and patterns apparent in the data, such as concealment, compartmentalization, shame, withdrawal, religious judgment, doctrinal discipline, peer policing, and reinterpretation of God's love. These codes were then further distilled and categorized under the two research questions: reconciling queer identity and doctrinal teachings; and religious spaces as areas of control.

Theoretical coding was based on Cognitive Dissonance Theory and Moral Panic Theory. When religious values and queer identity seemed to be antithetical, as described by Harmon-Jones and Mills (2019), Cognitive Dissonance Theory was used to interpret all the inner struggles of characters. The analysis was guided by Moral Panic Theory as described by Rohloff and Wright (2010), which offered an analysis of the way Catholic institutions and communities produce queerness as a moral danger that has to be controlled or hidden. The researchers used repeated viewing, a coding log, comparison of

interpretations across selected scenes, and going back to the film excerpts to ensure that the themes were based on the film evidence to enhance trustworthiness.

## Results and Discussion

We summarize the findings below for the two research questions. The analysis reveals that there are both internal and external conflicts for the characters who are queer in the chosen films. Internally, they try to reconcile their queer identity with religious beliefs and teachings by concealing, compartmentalizing, confronting and reinterpreting religion. Catholic schools and ministries can be externally seen as places of moral discipline where queerness is treated as a danger to doctrinal and institutional discipline. The selected film excerpts are presented as key evidence to support the discussion, which builds upon Cognitive Dissonance Theory and Moral Panic Theory.

Film No.	Title	Director	Year of Release	Setting	Queer Identities
F1	Sakristan The Movie	Darryl Yap	2020	Campus Ministry	Queer adolescent in religious role
F2	The Boy Foretold by the Stars	Dolly Dulu	2020	Catholic School	Gay adolescent identity

Table No. 1. Corpus Profile

### Reconciliation of Queer Identity and Doctrinal Teachings

Queer people of faith employ diverse tactics to negotiate, challenge, and/or resist teachings that reject their identities. Queer people of faith engage with religion in a variety of ways to live with, change, or defy religious beliefs that reject them. All these strategies can be hurtful, destructive, re-spiritualizing, or integrating. Official teachings which devalue and pathologize queer identity and ask for silence, celibacy, and denial can deepen shame, fear, and exclusion (Wedow et al., 2017). The results reveal that both films portray this struggle by using protagonists who initially experience a religious and sexual conflict between their identities through concealment and compartmentalization, and then confront and reinterpret their faith.

This tension is representative of Cognitive Dissonance theory, which describes the internal dissonance felt when people have conflicting beliefs, values or identities (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 2019). In the films that have been chosen, queer film characters are dissonant in that their religious practices and institutional demands seem to clash with their new or self-acknowledged queer identities. But the movies never show these characters being passive victims of doctrine. Instead, they negotiate, resist, and reinterpret faith in a gradual manner that helps them achieve identity coherence.

*"To escape... Escape from reality! Tuwing nandito kasi ako wala akong ibang iniisip kundi mga participants lang." - Dominic ( F1\_The Boy Foretold by the Stars TIME: 44:13 - 44:18 )*

*English translation: "To escape... to escape from reality! Whenever I'm here, I don't think about anything else except the participants." - Dominic ( F1\_The Boy Foretold by the Stars TIME: 44:13 - 44:18 )*

Dominic's involvement in the Journey retreat begins as a sort of compartmentalization. He puts his faith into practice and he distracts himself from the conflicting emotions of unresolved identity as a queer and as a believer. The retreat is now where he can stay active in a Catholic setting without facing off with the struggle in his mind. This is an example of avoiding the psychological discomfort that would occur if the contradiction were resolved by altering one of the beliefs, rather with separation of the religious and queer identities, which is the essence of Cognitive Dissonance Theory. However, Fernandes et al. (2021) also concluded that in other contexts, LGB individuals might divide religious and sexual identities as a way to cope with internal conflict. Some gay Catholics also try to increase their religious practice or compartmentalize their identity so as to maintain a sense of coherence, as noted by Pietkiewicz and Kołodziejczyk-Skrzypek (2016), though many of these strategies are incomplete and are found to be emotionally burdensome.

*"So 'yun ang problema, akala ko pa naman iba ka sa kanila. I thought you were better than this, akala ko pa naman secure ka sa pagkalahake mo, na okay lang sa'yo na magkaroon ng kaibigan na tulad ko. Na kaibigan na bakla. But I guess I was wrong. Luke wala tayong ginagawang masama and you know it. Goodbye." - Dominic (F1\_The Boy Foretold by the Stars TIME: 1:09:09 - 1:09:50 )*

*English translation: "So that's the problem—I thought you were different from them. I thought you were better than this. I thought you were secure in your masculinity, that you'd be okay having a friend like me... a gay friend. But I guess I was wrong. Luke, we're not doing anything wrong, and you know it. Goodbye." – Dominic (F1\_The Boy Foretold by the Stars TIME: 1:09:09 - 1:09:50)*

This one is an avoidance to confrontation transition. Dominic no longer tries to deal with his dissonance through hiding or bracketing out his identity. Rather, he upsets Luke's unease and claims that their relationship is not sinful. Dominic is unable to accept this friendship that asks him to give up his self. His statement reveals how religious and heteronormative notions are enacted in interpersonal judgment, even if that judgment is not a statement of doctrine. Block (2023) points out that in conservative Christian contexts, LGBTQ+ people are typically excluded by being cast aside, treated as if they aren't part of the community, and condemned as if they are guilty of sin. Dominic's confrontation then becomes a stance of asserting identity; a rejection of what he sees as an acceptance based on erasure of queerness.

*"I welcome everybody dito sa Journey. Before we all go to our rooms, I just wanna say na dito you're free to be who you are. No need to hide, no need to pretend. We're all the same in God's love" – Dominic (F1\_The Boy Foretold by the Stars TIME: 1:10:01 - 1:10:19)*

*English Translation: "I welcome everybody here to Journey. Before we all go to our rooms, I just want to say that here, you're free to be who you are. No need to hide, no need to pretend. We're all the same in God's love." – Dominic (F1\_The Boy Foretold by the Stars TIME: 1:10:01 - 1:10:19)*

Later, when Dominic says this, he has a more holistic knowledge of faith and identity. He does not make the condition of Catholicism for it being possible to hide, but redefines the space of retreat as a space where it is possible to be authentic. His message "No need to hide, no need to pretend" is the inverse of the logic of compartmentalization that had been used earlier. By redefining, Dominic is able to dissolve dissonance by redefining faith as inclusive and not punitive. This is in line with Block's (2023) reflections that queer Christians can journey from silence and avoidance to personal faith. Theological interpretations of God's love are also possible to be universal and not restricted by human circumstances, as Timotius (2025) also suggests. The film is a representation of this forgiving understanding – it is the road towards reconciliation for Dominic.

*Alam kong hindi ako maipagmamalaki ng ministry dahil sa desisyon ko, pero sa mga sinasabi mo sa tingin mo ba 'yan dapat ang lumalabas sa bibig ng isang kristiyano?" – Christian (Sakristan) "Naks! Daming alam sa bibig ah? Magquit ka lumayas ka sa ministry, 'wag mo kaming kaladkarin sa kababuyan mo. Ulol! Ang mga gaya mo hindi dapat minamahal. Bakla." – Wolf (F2\_Sakristan Ep 3 TIME: 12:20 - 12:44)*

*English Translation: "I know the ministry won't be proud of me because of my decision, but with the things you're saying, do you really think that's what should be coming out of a Christian's mouth?" – Christian (Sakristan) "Oh wow, you've got a lot to say about mouths, huh? Quit—leave the ministry. Don't drag us into your filth. Idiot! People like you don't deserve to be loved. Faggot." – Wolf (F2\_Sakristan Ep 3 TIME: 12:20 - 12:44)*

Christian's experience of dissonance in Sakristan: The Movie is in a ministry space that is supposed to be a place of compassion, but becomes a place of verbal violence. While it's likely to offend the ministry, Christian is aware that his choice may have a negative impact on it, but he doubts the morality of Wolf's condemnation. In his reply, he refocuses the moral question from queerness to the lack of Christian compassion. This is important because Christian does not give up on faith, but rather, restates what it means to be a Christian. Negative religious convictions regarding sexual minorities have been shown to affect social quality of life by Killian et al. (2025); and Cubita (2021) notes the challenge of being at a personal crossroads between religious and queer identities. Christian's question illuminates the impetus for moral criticism, which is not based on hateful speech, but on compassion.

*Christian move toward resolution by implicitly redefining what it means to be a true Christian, emphasizing compassion over condemnation. Accepting the fact that the Church's teachings do not align with his queer identity and might bring damage to the image of the ministry, thus choosing to leave rather than tarnish the reputation of the ministry.*

*"Problema? Wala pa. Pero bukas gagawa na ako ng problema ko. Mahal kasi kita eh, hindi ko kayang hindi." – Christian (F2\_Sakristan Ep 3\_ TIME: 16:05 - 16:29)*

*English Translation: "Problem? Not yet. But tomorrow, I'll create my own problem. Because I love you—I can't not love you." – Christian (F2\_Sakristan Ep 3\_ TIME: 16:05 - 16:29)*

By stating that he knows love personally and socially, Christian is demonstrating his grasp of love. His comment says, "I'll make my own problem" which indicates that he's conscious that he can be in conflict with the ministry if he chooses a queer love. But the phrase "I can't not love you" turns love into something you do, not something you cannot not do, and makes it a good, rather than bad or sinful, thing. This is a step toward acceptance from dissonance. People who grow up in a society that stigmatizes homosexuality often feel ashamed and conflicted about their homosexuality (Gerena, 2019). Christian's response is a response that does not succumb to this shame, because it is a response that focuses on loving – loving as an act of selfhood.

This reflects cognitive dissonance theory, since Christian is fully aware of the clash between his faith and his emotions. Instead of relying on compartmentalization, he confronts the tension directly by accepting the "problem" as a result of his love, signaling a shift toward resolving dissonance through acknowledgment rather than avoidance. This aligns with Gerena (2019), who explains that individuals raised in environments that devalue same-sex desire often internalize shame and experience moral self-conflict.

As the conflict develops, Christian's declaration that he "can't not love" marks a movement toward redefining his understanding of faith and morality. By embracing love as something natural and valid, he aligns himself with a more inclusive interpretation of God's love, contrasting with the rigid, prohibitive stance imposed by the religious institution.

*"Kailan mo ba balak sabihin? Kailan mo ba balak sabihin na wala ka na sa simbahan? Kailan mo balak sabihin sa akin na hindi ka na sakristan? Kailan?...Ano mo 'yung Zach? May boyfriend ka?... Saan ka nahihya? Nahihya ka dahil bakla ka o nahihya ka dahil iniisip mo na hindi kita maiintindihan o nahihya ka dahil hindi mo kayang ipagmalaki ang sarili mo o kung sino man yang Zach na 'yan?" - Christian's Mother (F2\_Sakristan Ep 5 TIME: 7:44 - 9:42)*

*English Translation: "When do you plan to tell me? When do you plan to tell me that you're no longer in the church? When will you tell me that you're not a sacristan anymore? When? ...Who is Zach to you? Do you have a boyfriend? ...What are you ashamed of? Are you ashamed because you're gay, or because you think I won't understand? Or are you ashamed because you can't be proud of yourself—or of whoever that Zach is?" - Christian's Mother (F2\_Sakristan Ep 5 TIME: 7:44 - 9:42)*

The clash between the mother of the child and the Christian brings the battle over to the realm of family. In her questions, she uncovers the entangled nature of religious identity, family expectations and queer disclosure. She not only criticizes him, but also calls him out on his shame and asks if it is because he is gay, he fears rejection, or he can't take pride in himself. This scene makes it more difficult to portray religiously-influenced families - it means that there is the potential for understanding and affirmation. As described by Wedow et al. (2017), conflict between sexual and religious identities may lead to stress and to shedding of religion from involvement. Mills-Koonce et al. (2018) also note that parental reactions is a significant factor in the emotional distress and identity expression of SGM youth. Christian's journey of reconciliation is not only one of reconciliation with the doctrine, but also one in which family love can be more inclusive than institutional judgment.

This moment pushes Christian toward resolution, as the pressure to be honest challenges him to reconcile his identity with his relationships. It opens the possibility for redefining acceptance and love—not as conditional upon religious roles or conformity, but as something that can align with a more inclusive and personal understanding of God's love, in contrast to rigid institutional expectations.

## 2. Religious Spaces as Sites of Control

The second key finding is that religious places in the films discussed in this paper are ideological institutions rather than simply physical ones, which reflects the notion of Moral Panic Theory, and regulate queer identity. It is the construction of a group as a threat to social values and moral order that is what constitutes moral panic (Rohloff & Wright, 2010). In the movies queer characters are not always sanctioned through formal institutional measures, but are sanctioned in the classroom, by the expectations of the ministry, by judgment from peers, by claims to Scripture and by the fear of being an "issue." The teachings of religion, rules of the community, therefore, serve as an instrument of moral regulation (Sumi et al., 2025).

In both *The Boy Foretold* by the Stars and *Sakristan: The Movie*, Catholic schools and ministries tend to depict queerness as something that needs to be explained, defused, concealed, fixed or eliminated from the eyes of the institution. The metaphor of "folk devils" (Cornelio & Raffin, 2009) is used to describe the symbolic image of threats to moral order which are represented by groups that are marginalized. But the films are also revealing of the diversity of religious places. They have moments of interpretive resistance and a regulatory voice.

*"Sir, diba considered evil naman talaga ang homosexual acts?" - Kevin (F1\_The Boy Foretold by the Stars TIME: 42:18- 42:21 )*

*English Translation: "Sir, aren't homosexual acts really considered evil?" – Kevin (F1\_The Boy Foretold by the Stars TIME: 42:18- 42:21)*

In *The Boy Foretold by the Stars* the classroom is the setting for Catholic education to be a place of doctrinal discipline. In Kevin's question, however, he uses the term "evil" to characterize homosexual acts, and this demonstrates the internalization and reproduction of moral condemnation by students. The religious classroom thus becomes a place for peer dialogue to be influenced and controlled by doctrinal authority, and in which specific understandings of sexuality are approved or disapproved. In terms of Moral Panic Theory, the question creates as a moral threat that has to be called out and condemned. Cornelio and Raffin (2009) provide an explanation that when Catholic institutions advocate for moral order, they can be a source of moral panic in the Philippines when they defend moral order against perceived threats. This scene doesn't feature an outside social change movement but rather the queer identity of a classmate who is being morally questioned.

As a result, this environment compels queer individuals to conceal their identities to avoid judgment and exclusion. When queerness is labeled "evil," it creates fear of moral condemnation and social rejection. Characters are pressured to suppress their desires and conform to heteronormative expectations. This shows how religious spaces regulate identity expression, often forcing self-sacrifice in exchange for acceptance and belonging.

*" Well hindi naman siya evil, okay?. Although some theologians may argue that yes it is a sin, pero there are other interpretations to that already." - Mr. Fortunato (F1\_The Boy Foretold by the Stars TIME: 42:24 - 42:31)*

*English Translation: "Well, it's not really evil, okay? Although some theologians may argue that it is a sin, there are already other interpretations of that." – Mr. Fortunato (F1\_The Boy Foretold by the Stars TIME: 42:24 - 42:31)*

Mr. Fortunato comes up with a counter-discourse, discards the word "evil," but his reply continues to maintain that queerness is still a discourse of sin. This gives an impression of being religious, though not overly so. To understand more comprehensive interpretations, some theologians offer interpretations which are more inclusive by reading traditional teachings in cultural and historical context (Zaharin, 2022). On the other hand, Owoeye (2024) supports the more traditional theological views and denounces inclusive readings as misreading of doctrine. This tension is reflected in Mr. Fortunato's answer: he defends some of the strong condemnations, but at the same time maintains some moral uncertainty. The scene therefore suggests that there is still a need for queer people to be under surveillance in the context of partial acceptance.

Although the framing is more inclusive, queer individuals remain in moral uncertainty without full assurance of acceptance. The continued reference to homosexuality as sin maintains moral scrutiny and regulates identity expression. This leads to strategic concealment and self-management, showing how softened interpretations still produce self-regulation and partial self-sacrifice. However, this ambiguity can also enable resistance through internal questioning and the redefinition of moral labels.

*"Pero Sir nabasa ko pa sa Bible 'yun eh, kasalanan talaga ang maging bakla." - Kevin (F1\_The Boy Foretold by the Stars TIME: 42:32 - 42:35)*

*English Translation: "But Sir, I even read it in the Bible—being gay is really a sin." – Kevin (F1\_The Boy Foretold by the Stars TIME: 42:32 - 42:35)*

Kevin's second claim in the moral policing adds to the moral discipline through the use of a scriptural basis that becomes a norm of absolute law. The concept "kasalanan talaga" etymologically excludes the possibility of 'queerness' being a matter of interpretation, instead making it a moral truth. This is a good example of how religious rhetoric can be used to endorse stigma and derail alternative interpretations. Some Christians have found a way to distinguish between identity and acts, but at the same time consider same-sex relations to be sinful (Nel 2025). Similarly, Owoeye (2024) demonstrates how scriptural justifications help to create and regulate sexual moralities. In the classroom, this creates an environment where queer students are compelled to hide their identity as they fear self-expression could lead to moral condemnation, social rejection or spiritual condemnation.

As a result, this discourse encourages queer individuals to hide their identities to avoid being labeled sinful. When queerness is framed as a violation of religious truth, self-expression risks moral rejection and exclusion. This pressure leads to strategic concealment, where individuals manage or suppress their identity to fit accepted norms. In this way, religious spaces regulate behavior as well as belief, often requiring self-sacrifice to maintain belonging within the community.

*"Ang sabi ko masyado kong mahal ang ministry, kaya gaano ko man kagustong maglingkod bilang sakristan kung mailalagay ko lang man din sila sa alanganin. Ako nalang ang aalis."* - Christian (F2\_Sakristan Ep 1 TIME: 3:38 - 3:52)

*English Translation: "I Said I love the ministry so much, that no matter how much I want to continue serving as a sacristan, if I will only put them in a difficult position, I will be the one to leave."* – Christian (F2\_Sakristan Ep 1 TIME: 3:38 - 3:52)

The institutionalization of control is reflected in Christian's withdrawal from the ministry. Here it is not actually his queerness that will expel him from the Church, but rather his own removal from it because he thinks it might put the ministry in a "difficult position." This is something that happens even without overt punishment, a demonstration of moral surveillance. The Ministry turns into a space where queering is perceived as risking the reputation. In their study, Hollier et al. (2022) suggest that when LGBTQ+ individuals are presented as a spiritual or moral threat in evangelical and religious contexts, it could be traumatic for them. The authors of this study, Anderson and Koc (2020), continue to say that an integrated identity can help alleviate religious gay men's feelings of guilt and shame, while non-affirming contexts can worsen those feelings. Christian's withdrawal reveals the price of belonging when it comes at the price of "self-erasure."

*"Ako ang concern ko lang ay baka magdala ka ng issue sa ministry, alam mo naman hindi naman mapanghusga ang mga brothers, lalo na si Father pero may ginagalang tayong aral at batas ng simbahan diba."* - Paps (F2\_Sakristan Ep 3 TIME:10:03 - 10:15)

*English Translation: "My only concern is that you might bring issues into the ministry. You know the brothers aren't judgmental, especially Father, but we do have to respect the teachings and laws of the Church, right?"* – Paps (F2\_Sakristan Ep 3 TIME:10:03 - 10:15)

In Paps' statement there is a subtle degree of moral control. He says the brothers and priest are not judgemental, but rather Christian is a possible "issue", and suggests that the teachings and laws of the Church are boundaries. This language is conditional, a language of caring for Christian personally, but not the queer thing that concerns institutional order. A number of times, gay clergy and religious workers have to face difficult conflict between vocation, identity, and institutional expectation, as Conell and Yates (2020) demonstrate. In the movie, the ministry is more concerned with Christian's potential than his welfare.

*"Bakla. Bading...Brother, brother, chupa! Baboy! Buhay ka pa nasusunog na kaluluwa mo sa impyerno... Di mo na inisip ang ministry, napakamakasarili mo".* - Wolf (F2\_Sakristan Ep 3 TIME: 11:28 - 11:55)

*English Translation: "Gay. Queer... Brother, brother... disgusting! You're a pig! You're still alive but your soul is already burning in hell... You didn't even think about the ministry. You're so selfish."* – Wolf (F2\_Sakristan Ep 3 TIME: 11:28 - 11:55)

In the case of Wolf, he's personally using verbal attacks to act as a religious policeman. His insults include homophobic slurs and disgust, condemnation and threats of damnation. Wolf's assertion that Christian's soul is already burning in hell not only makes queerness a social difference, it is also a spiritual corruption. The Christian language is built to create a Christian as a "folk devil" who threatens to contaminate and mar the purity and reputation of the ministry. As reported by Hollier et al. (2022), Religious contexts can depict LGBTQ+ people as dangerous or deviant and as explained by Killian et al. (2025) negative messages about sexual minorities in religious contexts can be considered spiritual harm. In the film, Wolf's ability to be aggressive reveals the non-institutional nature of moral regulation—moral regulation is carried out horizontally, by peers who internalize and reproduce religious stigma.

This level of hostility creates a climate of fear that pressures individuals to hide or suppress their identity. When queerness is met with ridicule and threats of damnation, openly expressing oneself becomes risky. As a result, individuals may engage in strategic concealment or withdraw from the ministry altogether to avoid further harm. This demonstrates how religious spaces can enforce conformity not only through doctrine but also through peer-driven exclusion and intimidation.

The two scenes, both from the classroom and from the ministry, make it clear that religious spaces are a site of both religious doctrine and daily practice that constructs the queer identity. Catholic schools reinforce moral categories (through teaching and debating with peers) and belonging through expectations of purity, reputation and obedience (through regulation). But the movies also illustrate rebellion: there are teachers who are complicating complete condemnation, mothers who are questioning what shame feels like, and queer characters who are redefining love as a love that is all-inclusive of God. As such, Filipino cinema is a space that is simultaneously religious, a space in which control and resistance can be found.

The results indicate that there are reinforcing relationships between internal reconciliation and external control. The queer characters are also suffering from cognitive dissonance: the Catholic teachings are in conflict with their sense of self, as are the expectations of the institutions. Religious sites, however, amplify that dissonance, when queerness is interpreted as a

moral danger, an institutional problem or a spiritual danger. The characters' reticence and retraction and self-censorship, then, are not just personal decisions, but reactions to more general moral control. But the movies also reveal a possibility for reconciliation when the characters read their faith in a way that is infused with love, authenticity, and inclusion. This study will add to queer media studies as it shows how modern Filipino cinema not only represents Catholic dogma as an outside control but also as a claustrophobic internalization of the latter which influences the notion of queerness. The study uses a combination of the theories of Cognitive Dissonance Theory and Moral Panic Theory to demonstrate how psychological conflict and institutional moral control are intertwined in cinematic depictions of queer Catholic experience.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

In this paper, we show the potential of selected Filipino contemporary films as spaces for exploring the intersection of Catholic dogma and queer identity. Whether it's queer characters in *The Boy Foretold* by the Stars wrestling with religious belief, institutional belonging, or queer selfhood, or queer characters in *Sakristan: The Movie*, the internal struggle is apparent as they attempt to reconcile religion, belonging, and queer selfhood. The research also reveals that Catholic schools and ministries are figured as locations of moral control. Religious settings construct queerness as a moral issue and one that needs to be controlled or concealed through the use of classroom discourse, scriptural appeals, ministry expectations and peer judgment. The movies, however, aren't just about the oppression of religion. They also show situations at which characters question beliefs and re-imagine these beliefs in terms of a loving God who is inclusive. In this way, the Filipino cinema is a space of questioning religion and a space where a queer identity can be realized without the threat of shame, silence, and exclusion.

### Limitations

The findings of this study cannot be generalized to all Filipino queer cinema as there are only two contemporary Filipino films being used in this study. The analysis is textual and interpretive, so this excludes audience responses, interviews with the filmmakers and data from ethnographic research from LGBTQ+ Catholics. The study also concentrates mainly on Catholic environments, and will not compare representations as they might be found in other religious contexts or secular contexts. The limitations imply that the results should be viewed as an interpretive narrative of films chosen from the Philippine queer cinema instead of a complete narrative of the Filipino queer cinema.

Future research can broaden the scope of this research by researching a larger sample of Filipino films, TV programs, and streaming stories of queer religious experience. Audiences can also be studied to gain an understanding of the audience reception, which will provide insights into the meaning that might be given to these representations by LGBTQ+ viewers, Catholic educators, and religious communities. Comparative studies can study the representation of queer identity in multiple religious backgrounds, in different geographic areas or in different genres of film. Last but not least, future studies could use the texts and conduct interviews or focus group discussions to gain a deeper insight into the impact of cinema representations on in-reality discussions of faith, sexuality, and belonging.

## Funding

This research received no external funding from any public, commercial, or not-for-profit funding agency, and no organization provided financial support for the conduct of the study, authorship, or publication of this article.

## Competing Interests Statement

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this article.

## Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study; all data used were obtained from previously published sources as cited in the reference list.

## References

Anderson, J. R., & Koc, Y. (2020). Identity integration as a protective factor against guilt and shame for religious gay men. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 57(8), 1059–1068. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2020.1767026>

- Block, K. (2023). Complicit silence, fluid identities and a shift to personalized faith: LGBTQ+ experiences in conservative Christian communities. *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses*, 52(2), 234–254. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00084298221128883>
- Capul, C. N., et al. (2025). Behind the lens: A deconstruction of the role of Filipino films in shaping Philippine culture. *Psychology and Education: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, 46(6), 742–755. <https://doi.org/10.70838/pemj.460607>
- Connell, A., & Yates, J. (2020). Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free: An interpretative phenomenological analysis of the career experiences of gay clergy in the Church of England. *Sexuality & Culture*, 25(2), 482–502. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-020-09779-5>
- Cornelio, J. S., & Raffin, A. (2009). The Catholic Church and education as sources of institutional panic in the Philippines. *Asian Journal of Social Science*, 37(5), 778–798. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156848409x12474536440627>
- Creswell, J. W. (2014). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approach* (4th ed.). SAGE Publications.
- Cubita, N. F. (2021). *Navigating the crossroads*. <https://doi.org/10.17760/d20413976>
- Fernandes, M., et al. (2021). Conflict between religious/spiritual and LGB identities in Portugal: How is it related to coming out experiences, LGB identity dimensions and well-being. *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/rel0000455>
- Gerena, C. (2019). Conflict between religious beliefs and sexuality: An autoethnography. *The Qualitative Report*. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2019.2978>
- Harmon-Jones, E., & Mills, J. (2019). An introduction to cognitive dissonance theory and an overview of current perspectives on the theory. In *Cognitive dissonance: Reexamining a pivotal theory in psychology* (2nd ed., pp. 3–24). <https://doi.org/10.1037/0000135-001>
- Hollier, J., et al. (2022). Mechanisms of religious trauma amongst queer people in Australia’s evangelical churches. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 50(3). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10615-022-00839-x>
- Killian, T., et al. (2025). From desecration to disconnection: Connecting negative religious beliefs about sexual minorities to social quality of life. *Pastoral Psychology*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-025-01235-1>
- Mills-Koonce, W. R., et al. (2018). The significance of parenting and parent–child relationships for sexual and gender minority adolescents. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 28(3), 637–649. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12404>
- Nel, M. (2025). Romans 1:24–28 and same-sex practice: Some exegetical remarks. *Religions*, 16(1), 61. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16010061>
- Owoeye, E. A. (2024). A theological reflection of “Imago Dei” as a response to “LGBTQ” advocates. *Pharos Journal of Theology*, 105(2). <https://doi.org/10.46222/pharosjot.105.223>
- Pietkiewicz, I. J., & Kołodziejczyk-Skrzypek, M. (2016). Living in sin? How gay Catholics manage their conflicting sexual and religious identities. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 45(6), 1573–1585. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-016-0752-0>
- Purcia, E., et al. (2018). Transcontextualizing contemporary Filipino gay-themed movies: Its message to the LGBT community. *Asian Conference on Language Learning Proceedings*.
- Rohloff, A., & Wright, S. (2010). Moral panic and social theory. *Current Sociology*, 58(3), 403–419. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392110364039>
- Sibona, C., et al. (2020). A guide for purposive sampling on Twitter. *Communications of the Association for Information Systems*, 537–559. <https://doi.org/10.17705/1cais.04622>
- Sumi, A. A., et al. (2025). Investigating the function of religion and social capital in shaping sustainable social development. *Discover Sustainability*, 6(1). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43621-025-01622-x>
- Timotius. (2025). An exploration of God’s love in John Calvin’s theology: Does God love everyone or only the elect? *MAHABBAH: Journal of Religion and Education*, 6(1), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.47135/mahabbah.v6i1.105>
- Uys, M. J., & Romylos, S. (2025). More sins were committed than anticipated: Analysing the threat of religious zealotry in Winterson’s *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (1985). *Proceedings of the International Conference on LGBT Studies*, 2(1), 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.33422/lgbtconf.v2i1.1329>
- Wedow, R., et al. (2017). I’m gay and I’m Catholic: Negotiating two complex identities at a Catholic university. *Sociology of Religion*, 78(3), 289–317. <https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srx028>
- Yuan, G., & Ma, A. A. G. (2025). LGBT representation in film and media: Social impact and future development: A literature review. *International Journal of Education and Social Development*, 2(3), 132–138. <https://doi.org/10.54097/kr2wj51>

## Appendices

No appendices are attached to this study.