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Full Research Report

**“Making Do With Things We Cannot Change”: An Interpretive Phenomenological  
Analysis of Relationship Resilience Among Gay Men in Singapore**

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### Abstract

Despite evolving social and political attitudes, many countries, including Singapore, still do not recognize couples in same-sex relationships. Much remains to be understood about the processes and strategies that help these couples maintain their relationships, especially in Asian societies. This study explored the ways in which gay men in intimate relationships safeguarded their relationships and remained resilient in Singapore. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with nine gay men in long-term relationships. The data were analyzed using interpretive phenomenological analysis. The analysis generated three superordinate themes, a) Making do with things we cannot change, b) Remaining resilient through social and financial capital, and c) Our love is stronger than the challenges we face. The emergent themes pointed to the ways in which participants coped with or shielded themselves against socio-political stressors that negatively impacted their relationships in the Singapore context. While some participants sought solace in families of choice, many learned to accept socio-political situations beyond their control. Most participants made do with implicit recognition as they were unwilling to disrupt social harmony. Others used their financial security to overcome structural barriers such as obtaining legal elements of heterosexual marriage. Findings may further current understanding of the ways in which gay couples remain resilient despite the relational challenges in different cultural contexts.

*Keywords:* coping, gay couples, IPA, resilience, Singapore, socio-political stressors

**“Making Do With Things We Cannot Change”: An Interpretive Phenomenological  
Analysis of Relationship Resilience Among Gay Men in Singapore**

Social and political attitudes towards lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) individuals have evolved in recent decades. In their analysis of the World Values Survey, Ayoub and Garretson (2017) highlighted a global shift towards the acceptance of homosexuality between the 1980s and 2010s. In 2014, approximately 40% of respondents from the United States (US) found homosexuality to be “always wrong” as compared to over 50% in 2008 (Glick et al., 2015). Similarly, public approval of gay marriage in the US increased from 11% in the 1980s to nearly 50% in 2010 (Baunach, 2012). This shift has also been observed in numerous Asian societies. Between 1995 and 2012, Cheng et al. (2016) revealed an increase of more than 50% in liberal attitudes towards homosexuality in Taiwan, China, Japan and South Korea. In 2015, Vietnam decriminalized consensual same-sex activities and passed a law that enabled the protection of transgender people (Ariffin, 2018). In 2018, India repealed Section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, which decriminalized consensual same-sex activities (Paulo & Mukherjee, 2018).

Despite the increasing acceptance towards non-heteronormative identities and same-sex relationships, many countries remain relatively conservative and unsupportive of these minority segments of their population. An examination of the data collected by Human Dignity Trust (2020) found 72 countries still criminalize consensual, private same-sex activities. Of these, 44 countries continue to punish consensual sexual activities among women, while 11 countries impose the death penalty for private and consensual same-sex activities. These countries are predominantly from The Middle East and jurisdictions from Commonwealth nations such as those in Asia and Africa (Masci & Desilver, 2019). Among the 35 countries that recognize same-sex unions, an overwhelming majority are Western countries (Goh, 2008; Poushter & Kent, 2020). Only a handful of Asian and Latin American

countries, such as Taiwan and Costa Rica, have recognized same-sex marriage in the past decade (Masci & Desilver, 2019; Poushter & Kent, 2020).

As compared to Western countries, the recognition of same-sex couples remains lacking in many Asian, African and Middle Eastern societies (Masci & Desilver, 2019; Paulo & Mukherjee, 2018). Without legal recognition, same-sex couples cannot access the structural support and resources that would enable their long-term relationships to flourish (Applewhite & Littlefield, 2016; Baker & Elizabeth, 2013; Balsam et al., 2008; Rostosky et al., 2016). These structural support systems include various legal protections and financial benefits granted to married heterosexual couples (Riggle et al., 2010; Thomeer et al., 2017). Moreover, legal recognition provides relational benefits for same-sex couples. Studies have shown the ways in which legally formalized couples typically scored highest on measures of relationship satisfaction and commitment (Lannutti, 2008; Lehmler & Agnew, 2006). These couples also scored lowest on relationship instability. Consequently, they were less likely to dissolve their relationships than same-sex couples who were either socially formalized or did not attain any form of recognition (Haas & Whitton, 2015).

Furthermore, individuals in these societies are typically expected to conform to societal norms, fulfil social roles, and prioritize their in-group's needs above their own (Basabe & Ros, 2005; Kitayama et al., 2000). For example, LGBTQ individuals may conceal their identities and intimate relationships to avoid burdening or upsetting members from their social networks (Hu et al., 2013). Otherwise, such individuals are often perceived as bringing dishonour to their families by rejecting expected social roles and violating the traditional cultural norms of putting the needs of others before their own (Ohnishi et al., 2006). The inability to garner acceptance and support from their social networks impacts the ways in which same-sex couples access emotional and instrumental support (Lau, 2012; Lyon & Frohard-Dourlent, 2015; Reczek, 2015). This lack of support systems, in turn, increases the

likelihood of relationship dissolution as couples can neither cope with nor overcome the challenges in their relationships (Connolly, 2005; Graham & Barnow, 2013).

### **Situation in Singapore**

Since gaining independence in 1965, Singapore has rapidly developed into a globalized, economically competitive city (Oswin, 2014). However, this rapid transformation was not without significant sacrifice to the Singapore society. To become a first-world cosmopolitan nation, Singapore embraced the principles and values of communitarianism, materialism, meritocracy and pragmatism (Ortmann, 2009; Oswin, 2012; Tan, 2012). These, in turn, led to the promotion of a national identity, the need for racial and religious harmony, the prerogative of the heterosexual family as the basic unit of the Singapore society as well as the importance of putting the needs of the nation and society above individual needs (Prankumar et al., 2020). Therefore, economic and social policies were implemented to privilege these goals and prevented LGBTQ individuals and same-sex couples from receiving social and legal recognition and forming their own families through adoption or surrogacy (Chang, 2003; Tan & Lee, 2007). These hegemonic narratives considered homosexuality a threat to Singapore in postcolonial times, leading to the continued suppression of sexuality and gender expression until the late 1990s (Yue & Zubillaga-Pow, 2012).

In the early 2000s, the Singapore government sought to remodel its authoritarian image to keep up with the evolving global economy and cultivate its creative and entrepreneurial industries (Yue & Leung, 2017). Hence, efforts were made to publicly express support for homosexuality and welcome LGBTQ talents into the country. These included outrightly supporting homosexuals within the civil service and marketing Singapore as a top gay destination in Asia (Oswin, 2014; Tan, 2012).

In spite of this, homosexuality remains illegal in the developed Southeast Asian nation through the continued existence of Section 377A of the Penal Code. Section 377A was

introduced in 1938 during the British Colonial Rule and was subsequently inherited when Singapore gained its independence in 1965 (Goh, 2008; Lazar, 2017). Thus, gay and bisexual men in Singapore remain under persecution with the continued existence of Section 377A, which states, “Any male person who, in public or private, commits [...] any act of gross indecency with another male person, shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to two years” (Government of Singapore, 2020).

Despite the LGBTQ community’s persistent messages for love and inclusiveness in the past decade, the Singapore government has remained adamant in its position in not repealing Section 377A, stating that it “does not support the formation of families by gay and lesbian parents” (Au-Yong, 2019). Even when faced with the increasing social acceptance of its LGBTQ population over the past decade, the Singapore government reasoned that the country needs to remain pragmatic (Geddie, 2020). This pragmatic stance meant attempting to balance economic pursuits and creative capital with the perceived Asian cultural norms and traditional Confucian values underpinning Singapore society (Lazar, 2017; Tan, 2015).

Through these strategies of illiberal pragmatism and electoral secularism, LGBTQ individuals are, therefore, tolerated for their contribution to the Singapore economy but otherwise discriminated against and prevented from attaining full benefits of citizenship in Singapore (Abdullah, 2019; Yue & Zubillaga-Pow, 2012). Such examples include the continued lack of positive LGBTQ representations in education and mainstream media, as well as the lack of legal recognition for same-sex couples. These contradicting efforts and strategies have consequently sacrificed some of Singapore’s international legitimacy but enabled the Singapore government to maintain its existing power (Chua, 2012).

### **Research Gap**

The debilitating effects of socio-political stigma and discrimination on same-sex couples have been extensively studied (Dudley et al., 2005; Lannutti, 2008). Despite these



stressors, LGBTQ individuals continue to form and maintain intimate relationships throughout their lives. Much remains to be understood about the ways in which same-sex couples cope with, overcome, and positively adapt to these relationship challenges. It is imperative to understand the strategies that keep same-sex couples flourishing, especially in societies where such relationships remain socially and legally unrecognized. This study aimed to explore the processes, resources and strategies that gay couples utilize to safeguard their relationships in the Asian society of Singapore. The research questions were:

- 1) How do social and political stressors impact gay men in long-term relationships?
- 2) How do gay men in long-term relationships cope with these stressors?
- 3) How do gay men in long-term relationships overcome these stressors?

### **Method**

An exploratory qualitative research study was conducted utilizing interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA). IPA is a qualitative research methodology underpinned by three theoretical principles: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography. The methodology aims to examine how people understand, make sense, and create meaning out of, their major life experiences (Smith et al., 2009).

### **Participants**

Empirical studies utilizing IPA as a methodology typically have small, homogenous groups of participants as IPA is primarily concerned with the detailed analysis of individual lived experiences (Smith et al., 2009). For this study, the participants were purposively sampled and recruited from Singapore's LGBTQ community with the assistance of three LGBTQ non-governmental organizations through their respective Facebook group pages. Potential participants were provided with the study information sheet when they contacted the researchers via email. An appointment was made for the interview if they agreed to take part in the study.

Participants were recruited based on the following inclusion criteria: cisgender men who identified as gay, above 21 years of age, and Singapore citizens or permanent residents. Only cisgender individuals were recruited to maintain the homogeneity of the participants and their lived experiences. Participants were also required to be in a relationship of at least five years. This inclusion criterion was based on studies that found relationships of less than three years were likely to be unstable, leading to an increased likelihood of dissolution (Brown, 2003; Rosenfeld, 2014). Furthermore, couples who remained together for five years or more were likely to stay together due to various couple-specific investments, which made relationship dissolution more costly (Kurdek, 1998; Rosenfeld, 2014).

### **Materials and Procedures**

One-to-one interviews were conducted in small, quiet interview rooms that were approved by the ethics review committee. These rooms allowed interviews to be conducted in a safe and private setting while maintaining participants confidentiality and minimizing any undue intrusion. A semi-structured interview guide was purposively developed using existing literature to explore participants' long-term relationship experiences in Singapore. Informed consent and participants' demographics were obtained before the commencement of each interview. No personal identifiers were collected due to the sensitive nature of the study. Participants were assigned pseudonyms for use throughout the study duration. Interviews lasted approximately 90 minutes, were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants were also invited to participate in the member checking process, where they reviewed their transcripts and clarified further questions that arose from the analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were analyzed using IPA, an inductive and iterative six-step process (Smith et al., 2009). Transcripts were read and re-read to ensure the first author was familiar with the interview data. The first author subsequently made comprehensive notes on one transcript

that were descriptive, linguistic and conceptual in nature. Initial themes were generated utilizing the provisional notes from the previous stage. These initial themes were subsequently categorized and sorted based on their similarities, which represented various parts of the participant's lived experience. This idiographic process was repeated with each transcript. The final step of the analysis entailed looking for similar themes across all transcripts and generating superordinate themes to reflect the processes and strategies that participants undertook to maintain their relationships in the presence of socio-political stressors in Singapore. NVivo 12 software was used for qualitative data management and analysis.

### **Credibility and Trustworthiness**

The study utilized the credibility and trustworthiness guidelines set out by Mays and Pope (2000). To foreground the participants' experiences, the researchers practised bracketing to set aside any preconceptions and biases. The first author undertook continuous journaling as part of the reflexivity process to ensure awareness of personal and intellectual biases throughout the study. The first author also undertook investigator triangulation with the second author at various stages of data analysis to ensure a holistic understanding of the participants lived experiences. Through the member checking process, the study also ensured that participants lived experiences remained central to the research process. Additionally, the analysis was further refined by highlighting negative or deviant cases to contrast the main narratives highlighted in the generated themes. Finally, the first author documented and kept detailed records of all relevant aspects of the research, i.e., an audit trail, to ensure the transparency of the data collection and analysis processes.

### **Results**

A total of nine participants were interviewed. The demographics of the participants are detailed in Table 1. The analysis revealed various processes that enabled participants to cope

with and overcome socio-political stressors in Singapore. The emergent superordinate and subordinate themes generated at the end of the analysis process have been illustrated in Figure 1. The prevalence of superordinate and subordinate themes among the study participants are shown in Table 2. Before discussing the emergent themes, there is a need to explicate the challenges experienced by participants in same-sex relationships within the Singapore context.

All participants described how they anticipated and experienced stigma and discrimination from their social networks and the broader society because of their sexuality and the nature of their relationships. Such instances led many participants to conceal their relationships as they feared facing potentially adverse reactions. Other participants were worried about not having the rights to make decisions for their partners in emergencies. Here, Sheldon feared the inability to make medical decisions for his partner because their relationship was not legally recognized in the eyes of the law.

If something happened to my partner, I need to be the one to make all the decisions. I cannot be calling his family in another country and asking them to make decisions. I need to take care of everything. After being together for 18 years, I think it is only fair that I can be the one to do that.

Other participants highlighted the stressors from planning for their futures deliberately. As compared to heterosexual marriages, gay couples could not depend on children, as is typical in Asian societies, or government policies to take care of them in old age. This deliberate planning involved formalizing wills and lasting powers of attorney to protect their relationships legally. Here, Brian related how the lack of recognition forced the couple to think of ways to secure their future.

I think it [the lack of legal recognition] kinds of forced us to plan. We have to think about our future. We cannot deal with things as it comes. I look at my siblings. Their

future is secured because their kids can take care of them. These are things that heterosexual couples do not usually need to think about.

### **Superordinate Theme 1: Making Do with Things We Cannot Change**

As participants feared the potential ramifications of being in marginalized relationships, they coped with socio-political stressors by accepting and adapting to situations beyond their control. This superordinate theme described how participants accepted socio-political stressors as part of their lives and let go of their need for explicit recognition. This external justification strategy enabled participants to reduce feelings of dissonance while externally conforming to socio-political norms. Moreover, most participants preferred living amicably alongside the broader Singapore community while finding peaceful ways to obtain equality and rights. Such strategies enabled participants to move forward with their relationships rather than constantly worry about the things they could not have.

#### ***Accepting Implicit Recognition, Minimizing Explicit Recognition***

Most participants described how they did not see the need to seek explicit recognition from their social networks. In the excerpt below, Rayson explained how he has never found the need to highlight his relationship explicitly to his family, just as the expression of love and other positive emotions remains highly constrained in Asian cultures.

I have never said, “This is my boyfriend”. Just as I do not say “I love you” to my mum because she has never said that to me. It is the same kind of concept.

Many participants described how forcing the explicit acknowledgement of their relationships could disrupt the social harmony with their families of origin. These participants actively reframed the need for explicit recognition and sought, instead, implicit signals of acceptance. Here, Max saw the continued invitations to his partner’s family events as implicit acceptance of their relationship.

My partner's parents have always considered me like the god-son. I have always been included in their family outings and events. So, I think they know I am a very close friend. They may not acknowledge it exactly as a partner. Nevertheless, they are still accepting.

Such implicit recognition was a sufficient compromise as it enabled Max and his partner to maintain their relationship without disrupting the prevailing social harmony with their respective families. Max rationalized that their family members were probably aware and asking for explicit acknowledgement would simply cause problems.

Some things do not have to be spelt out. People are aware. I do not want to create uncomfortable situations or disharmony. We [already] have to deal with enough drama. So, why do I want to make situations more difficult?

Similarly, other participants highlighted how they rationalized or minimized their need for social and legal recognition. Here, Rayson felt saddened that his relationship still lacked legal recognition in Singapore. So, he rationalized how marriage was "just a piece of paper" and believed that his relationship was strong enough without needing a marriage certificate to tell him so.

Marriage is just a piece of paper. You can go to the United States and get it signed, but it does not mean a lot to us. We have been together for ten years. Having been together for so long helps us realize that getting married is truly a piece of paper.

One participant, Aaron, was fortunate to receive explicit recognition from his parents, thereby enabling his partner and family to celebrate festivities together peacefully. However, deep down, Aaron remained fearful that his parents might still not accept same-sex marriage due to generational differences and Asian cultural values.

During Chinese New Year, my partner would be invited over for reunion dinners. It is kind of expected. My mom will separately prepare dishes for him. It is these little

things that make me feel very lucky. However, they are Chinese. They are from a different generation. I think it is also the Asian in me. As open as they are, there was a part of me that thought they might not be that comfortable to attend my wedding.

### *Fighting Peacefully for Equality and Rights*

Interestingly, many participants believed that the LGBTQ community must “adapt and respond accordingly” to the surrounding socio-cultural context. One participant, Dominic, opined that the LGBTQ community was only able to influence society to a certain extent. Dominic felt that the community should let the current socio-political situation evolve and not waste efforts altering situations they could not change.

I think Pink Dot and [other] gay pride movements need to recognize that coming out with these militant messages for equality would simply result in a very strong pushback. It comes across as being very self-entitled. We probably can influence SOME people. However, that is on a very limited scale. I think society has to evolve in its own way.

Dominic saw nothing wrong in ensuring that society remained aware of the LGBTQ community’s existence. However, he and other participants preferred to fight for equality and civil rights by contributing meaningfully to society. Dominic expressed that “being gay still carried much stigma” as the Singapore society still perceived gays as “effeminate, drug users, and promiscuous”. Dominic was further frustrated at how these negative stereotypes continued to be portrayed by those who openly championed civil rights and equality in the public sphere. In giving back to society, he hoped to alter society’s perceptions that gay people were “just normal human beings in many areas of life”.

If gays are seen helping society at large cope with challenges like poverty eradication, helping the disadvantaged, doing social work, and all that. People will eventually realize that “Look, there is really nothing wrong with them”, and “They are just

different from us”. I think it is more effective if we live our lives as contributing and caring members of society to gain acceptance.

Similarly, Aaron felt disheartened about the evolution of civil rights in Singapore but explained how he had to make do with the slow speed of socio-political change.

I guess it is going to take a while for people to accept same-sex couples. Getting social and legal recognition would always be a struggle for the next decade or two, especially in Singapore. It is multicultural...being in Asia. There are boundaries that we will have to live by being a same-sex couple, especially in Singapore.

In contrast, some participants believed in fighting aggressively against the socio-political inequality in Singapore. In the excerpt below, Brian felt frustrated with the proponents of the peaceful approaches who chided him for openly fighting for equality and against Section 377A of the penal code.

If gay people in Singapore were a little stronger and stepped up to do something about the [current socio-political] situation...I think that would have helped more. We have friends who said, “Why do you need to do fight against 377A? Now everybody is going to talk about this issue. You are putting us under the spotlight!”. That does not help.

### **Superordinate Theme 2: Remaining Resilient Through Social and Financial Capital**

In this superordinate theme, all participants described how various social and financial resources helped them cope with or be shielded from stigma and discrimination. As many participants remained unwilling to disrupt the social harmony by seeking explicit recognition from their families of origin, they highlighted how they sought emotional and instrumental support from their families of choice. Some participants also pointed to the ways in which their socioeconomic status and financial resources enabled them to overcome the stressors they faced in Singapore.



### ***Feeling Safe with Our Families of Choice***

Most participants explained that acceptance from their closest friends allowed them access to emotional and instrumental support. Here, Kamal related how he felt more at ease in showing affection to his partner in his friends' presence.

We do spend gatherings together with my friends. It makes me much more at ease to be more affectionate to my partner. It is a positive feeling that I can be open with my partner in their presence.

Whilst fearing potential rejection from their parents, many participants highlighted how siblings played a role in recognizing and supporting their relationships. Such support and recognition enabled them to remain connected to their families of origin in some ways. Here, Max described how his siblings accepted his relationship as they entrusted their kids to Max and his partner.

My parents do not know [about the relationship]. But my sister and my brother-in-law...they know. They are very accepting. They even allowed their kids to go out with us. So, I think that's good. Having supportive siblings helps.

### ***Being Shielded by Our Socioeconomic Status***

Interestingly, some participants highlighted how their financial security and social status shielded them from socio-political stressors in Singapore. Some believed that being of higher socioeconomic status allowed them to move around in social circles that were less judgmental of their marginalized relationships. Max related how being of higher socioeconomic status enabled his relationship to flourish as his relationship was surrounded by social circles that had, perhaps, more liberal values and, thus, were more accepting of same-sex relationships.

We are lucky that we are both...I hate to use it...of higher socioeconomic status. If we are at movies, nobody bothers. If we are at dinners, nobody bothers. Society

events...nobody bothers. People are just polite. We have not had to worry about the social or structural issues that may affect other people.

Others used their financial resources to overcome the structural barriers present in Singapore. Participants such as Dominic were able to purchase their own houses and formalize wills early on in their relationships.

We would have liked more protection and more recognition for our relationship.

Fortunately, we are not directly affected [by structural barriers]. I live in a private apartment. We have done up wills and legal power of attorney to protect each other's rights and entitlements under the law.

Participants who were more financially secure also seemed to reject the need for the government to recognize their relationships legally. These participants were worried about losing their freedoms if such legal recognition were enacted in Singapore. In this excerpt, Kamal rejected marriage as his relationship's financial resources allowed them to obtain some legal aspects of heterosexual marriage.

I have no desire to have kids. The concept of getting married has no meaning to me. I have my own home. The structural barriers [in Singapore] do not really affect me. It is a bit counterintuitive. But, I want the government to stay out of my life as much as possible. They can keep those subsidies. It is not something that I want in my life.

Such sentiments seemed to be fiercely opposed by participants who seemed to be less financially secure. In addition to feeling frustrated in the previous superordinate theme, Brian further explained how he believed that people who opposed fighting aggressively for equality and rights in Singapore were usually wealthy and powerful. Brian believed these rich and powerful gay men were worried about losing the privileges and comforts they had attained whenever Section 377A comes under the spotlight. Such sentiments seemed to be confirmed by participants who alluded to their high social status in this subordinate theme. Brian also

believed that those of higher socioeconomic status had the resources to live out their lives overseas or use their financial resources to overcome the socio-political barriers in Singapore.

Many gay people are very powerful and wealthy. They are the ones who feel that they have a lot to lose. They are the ones who, “We do not have the rights here...[but] I can always go to Madrid for my Mardi Gras. I can go [somewhere else] to have my parties.” They have the resources to do that. They can live out their gay lives there. They think that we are rocking the boat [by fighting against Section 377A]. I think that is not right. That is being selfish. You have the resources. Not everybody has the kind of resources that you have.

### **Superordinate Theme 3: Our Love is Stronger than the Challenges We Face**

No matter what sources of support they had, most participants believed that their relationships were stronger than the socio-political challenges they faced. In this superordinate theme, participants believed in strengthening their relationship from within and continued to evolve as a couple to overcome the stressors they faced. Participants felt their relationships flourished because of the efforts and time invested in their relationships. This included adapting to their relationships' sexual needs and counting on their partners to be there no matter the challenges. When asked how he kept his relationship flourishing, Alvyn highlighted how his relationship remained resilient because he and his partner proactively chose to remain strong and happy in their relationship.

Our relationship cannot crumble just because there are no gay rights. Our gay identity crumbles because there are no gay rights. Our love does not. So, our happiness is not in ANY way dependent on the lack of gay rights in Singapore but on the individuals [in the relationship], you know? Not [being able to] get married does not make us sad and decide to break up. No, nothing like that.

Participants also firmly believed their relationships were special and unique in some way. Some participants viewed their relationship as “a secret recipe they refused to give up on (Kamal)”, while others, like Sheldon, saw their relationship as unique, possibly due to the challenges their relationship has faced.

We are non-standard Singapore gay men. I do not think you can compare us with other couples or take us as a standard. I am the king of loopholes. We know how to look for loopholes to work around the policies [that are in place in Singapore].

### Discussion

This study examined the processes and strategies that gay men in long-term relationships undertook to safeguard their relationships in Singapore. The findings revealed various coping mechanisms and resilience processes that enabled couples to cope with, overcome, and positively adapt to the socio-political stressors in the Singapore context. Like same-sex couples living in Western countries (Graham & Barnow, 2013; Haas & Lannutti, 2021), participants in this study anticipated and experienced stigma and discrimination due to the lack of recognition of their relationships in Singapore. Likewise, participants in Singapore felt their relationships were stronger than the socio-political challenges they faced (Applewhite & Littlefield, 2016; Connolly, 2005). They believed in strengthening their relationship from within, growing together and supporting each other while continuing to evolve as a couple to overcome the stressors they faced.

Over and above these dyadic-level strategies, the study findings corroborated with other studies that revealed the ways in which access to social and financial capital allowed same-sex couples to cope with and overcome socio-political stressors (Haas & Lannutti, 2021; Shulman et al., 2009). Social support and recognition provided by “families of choice” shielded participants in same-sex relationships from negative sentiments and societal disapproval. First coined by Weston (1997), families of choice represent a close and

supportive social network that provides an additional avenue for same-sex couples to receive much-needed emotional and instrumental support (Schechter et al., 2008; Whitton et al., 2015). This buffering effect from families of choice augmented relationship satisfaction, commitment, and maintenance.

Participants who alluded to their financial security and higher socioeconomic status utilized various opportunities provided by their privileged backgrounds. These financial resources enabled participants to overcome the relationship barriers present in the Singapore context. Some used their financial security to obtain legal elements of heterosexual marriage, such as getting married overseas or procuring housing together early on in their relationships. Others believed that their higher social status surrounded them with people who were less judgmental about their relationships. Indeed, Barrett and Pollack (2005) explained how gay men of higher socioeconomic status and income could socialize and express their sexuality in safer and more liberal spaces. Moreover, various studies have shown how the availability of financial resources helps to increase resilience in these individuals (Bonanno et al., 2007; Stepleman et al., 2009). These resources helped buffer against stressors, allowing individuals to respond adaptively, thereby protecting them from poor outcomes.

Beyond social and financial capital, this study provided insights into the pivotal influence of culture on gay intimate relationships in Singapore. As compared to their counterparts in less socially and politically conservative societies, study participants in Singapore remained resilient in their relationships through the utilization of collectivistic coping strategies. Most participants adjusted and accommodated to the socio-political context in Singapore, rather than directly confronting situations they felt powerless to change. The study findings revealed how participants reframed their thoughts and responses to adapt to their current circumstances positively. Such strategies enabled participants to remain together by providing them with some agency to rise above the socio-political context that

disempowered their marginalized relationships. These strategies were also similar to the pragmatic resistance strategies employed by LGBTQ organizations in their fight against inequalities within the illiberal context of Singapore (Chua, 2012; Oswin, 2014). Lazar (2017, p. 439) described this pragmatic resistance as “a contextualized form of resistance that demonstrated the resilience, creativity and agency of a queer subaltern constituency in Singapore”. Researchers found that individuals engaging in collectivistic coping typically used emotion-focused or avoidance-oriented strategies (Tweed & Conway, 2006; Yeh et al., 2006). They were also more likely to cope using forbearance and fatalism. Like this study, Kuo (2011) highlighted how their participants used coping strategies that included withholding their opinions and emotions to maintain social harmony, positively reappraising stressors and externalizing their locus of control.

Collectivistic forms of coping have typically been viewed as maladaptive and associated with lower levels of well-being and poor mental health outcomes (Fletcher & Sarkar, 2013). However, it must be noted that many of these studies were conducted in Western, individualistic cultures. Researchers have cautioned against dichotomizing coping strategies as either good or bad, preferring to view them as adaptive to specific cultural contexts (Heppner et al., 2006; Kuo, 2011). To this end, research in Asian societies have found that individuals who utilized collectivistic forms of coping experienced reduced interpersonal stress and fewer moderated stressors such as family conflict and discrimination (Tweed & Conway, 2006). Moreover, Ungar (2011) posited that resilience involved the interactions between individuals and their environments for culturally appropriate strategies and resources, enabling individuals to cope with and positively adapt to stressors in their socio-cultural context. Participants in this study were evidently able to balance maintaining social harmony with those around them while ensuring their intimate relationship needs were met.

Furthermore, most study participants sought peaceful ways of engendering change in the Singapore society. These participants wanted to use their abilities and resources to contribute meaningfully to the broader community, which they believed was more influential in changing the minds and hearts of the Singapore community. Although some participants preferred a direct approach to address the existing inequalities, more peaceful strategies may be more culturally appropriate in the Singapore context than protests and pride parades often seen in Western societies (Mazumder, 2018; Ratcliff et al., 2012).

Finally, the study findings were counter to some aspects of the Minority Stress Theory. First developed by Meyer (2003), the theory extends the social stress theory by highlighting how individuals with minority status experienced stressors differently. The theory posits that continued exposure to distal forms of stressors, i.e., external stressors to the individual, led to the development of proximal stressors, i.e. internal, psychological stressors within individuals or same-sex couples (LeBlanc & Frost, 2019). These stressors consequently lead to persistent, elevated stress levels. Over time, same-sex couples experience increased internalized stigma, fears of rejection, as well as the need to conceal their identities and relationships, which may ultimately lead to relationship dissolution (Lannutti, 2018; Quam et al., 2010). Thus, the study's initial consideration was whether participants had internalized homophobia due to their responses in coping with these socio-political stressors. However, the study findings indicated this to be unlikely. Unlike participants in this study, individuals with internalized homophobia typically experienced more relationship problems and were unlikely to remain stable in long-term relationships (Frost & Meyer, 2009).

Moreover, the participants and their partners seemed determined to maintain their relationships despite the negative impact caused by the socio-political stigma and discrimination in Singapore. This is evident as many participants have remained together in

their relationships for seven or more years. Participants also displayed various forms of agency in coping, overcoming and positively adapting to the socio-political stressors in Singapore. These strategies, in turn, ensured their commitment towards one another endured despite living in an unwelcoming environment. Interestingly, while participants made do with implicit acceptance, families of origin also seemed willing to accept these couples implicitly. This implicit acceptance may protect participants and their partners from the negative impact of typical minority stressors. The implicit acceptance also allowed their families of origin to “keep their face” or maintain their dignity with extended social networks and the broader community who may still be judgmental of such relationships (Bong, 2011; Tan, 2011).

### **Strengths and Limitations**

This study adds to the limited published literature on same-sex couples in Asian societies. Moreover, the study findings highlighted the positive processes and outcomes that marginalized couples undertook to ensure their relationships flourished in adverse environments. The study also utilized an interpretive phenomenological approach which allowed researchers to understand the lived experiences and contextual meanings that gay couples in Singapore ascribed to their relationships. The findings provide an in-depth and insightful interpretation of participants’ relationship experiences, cognition and emotions while considering each relationship’s socio-cultural context.

Despite the study providing new insights into the ways in which gay men safeguarded their relationships in Singapore, several limitations could impact the transferability of study findings to similar contexts. The sample was self-selected. Participants recruited for the study self-identified as gay. They took part in the study as they were likely to be more comfortable with their sexuality. Individuals who did not identify as gay or were not comfortable with their sexuality might be reluctant to participate in the study.



Additionally, participants were already committed to their partners and relationships for durations of more than five years. There could be various long-term couple-specific investments that made relationship dissolution to be perceived as costlier. Thus, couples were more likely to try to find strategies to remain together due to loss aversion (Rosenfeld, 2014). Individuals whose relationships did not last as long could probably have different experiences in facing the socio-political stressors existing in Singapore. Furthermore, participants in this study were cis-gender males, predominantly Chinese, above thirty years of age and highly educated. Individuals with different gender identities, from other ethnic and sexual minority groups, who are younger and have lower educational levels may have different experiences and attitudes due to their identities and social backgrounds.

### **Implications and Future Research**

Findings from this exploratory study have several practical and theoretical implications. Findings may help practitioners and organizations further understand how collectivistic coping strategies may be adaptive and beneficial for same-sex couples, allowing them to cope and flourish in societies that remain socially and legally unaccepting of these marginalized relationships. This study also revealed the potential intersectionality between participants' socioeconomic status and the differences in their experiences of stigma and discrimination in Singapore. Future research should further examine the effects of overlapping social identities on experiences of stigma and discrimination among same-sex couples in Asian societies. These should include exploring how same-sex couples of different ethnicities, religions, and social backgrounds understand, cope with, and overcome the socio-political stressors existing within Asian societies. Such studies would enrich the extant intersectionality literature that is predominantly from the West (Crenshaw, 1989; Liu et al., 2016).

Moreover, various education and counselling initiatives could be developed and adapted to meet the needs of LGBTQ individuals and couples who may face different sets of challenges as compared to those living in Western societies (Szymanski & Sung, 2013). Finally, this study has highlighted various interactional effects between individuals and their socio-political context. Much of the current research on LGBTQ resilience has solely focused on individual or community resilience (de Lira & de Moraes, 2018). This fragmented view of resilience minimizes the influence and impact of an individual's socio-cultural context, which may moderate resilient outcomes in LGBTQ individuals and relationships. Therefore, future research should situate and integrate individual resilience within its socio-cultural-political context to allow a more holistic comprehension of the resilience construct.

### **Conclusion**

The study extended the current understanding of how gay men in intimate relationships safeguard their relationships against socio-political stressors in Singapore. Like same-sex couples in Western societies, gay men in intimate relationships in Singapore accessed emotional, social, and instrumental support through social and financial capital when faced with stressors. Over and above these similarities, the study participants preferred to use collectivistic forms of coping such as avoidance, forbearance and fatalism. Accepting implicit recognition and fighting peacefully for equality and rights ensured that gay men in intimate relationships could cope and flourish in Singapore. Findings from this study point to how coping and resilience strategies differ in different cultures and societies. The findings also warrant further research on the ways in which same-sex couples cope with and overcome challenges in different cultural contexts. Such an understanding may help improve educational, legal, and counselling initiatives for same-sex couples living in Asian societies.

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**Table 1***Participants' Demographics*

S/N	Pseudonym	Age (in years)	Highest Qualification	Ethnicity	Partner's Ethnicity	Relationship Length (in years)
1	Sheldon	40	A Levels/ Diploma	Chinese	Chinese	18
2	Rayson	31	Degree/Postgraduate	Chinese	Chinese	10
3	Kamal	37	A Levels/ Diploma	Malay	Chinese	8
4	Max	47	Degree/Postgraduate	Chinese	Chinese	19
5	Brian	51	Degree/Postgraduate	Chinese	Chinese	22
6	Aaron	36	Degree/Postgraduate	Chinese	Italian	7
7	Alvyn	44	A Levels/ Diploma	Chinese	Chinese	22
8	Dominic	54	Degree/Postgraduate	Chinese	Chinese	27
9	Izwan	31	Degree/Postgraduate	Malay	Malay	8

**Table 2***Prevalence of Superordinate and Subordinate Themes*

Superordinate and Subordinate Themes	Sheldon	Rayson	Kamal	Max	Brian	Aaron	Alvyn	Dominic	Izwan	Addresses which research question?
<b>Making Do with Things We Cannot Change</b>										
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Accepting implicit recognition, minimizing explicit recognition</li> </ul>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	1,2
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fighting peacefully for equality and rights</li> </ul>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	1, 2
<b>Remaining Resilient Through Social and Financial Capital</b>										
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feeling safe with our families of choice</li> </ul>	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	2, 3
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being shielded by our socioeconomic status</li> </ul>	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	2, 3
<b>Our Love is Stronger than the Challenges We Face</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	3

**Figure 1.***Superordinate and Subordinate Themes*