

## Babaeng Bakla: Friendships between Women and Gay Men in the Philippines

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In Philippine culture, *babaeng bakla* refers to women who associate with and develop close friendships with gay men and participate in gay cultural activities. This paper discusses a research investigation that examines the “*babaeng bakla*” phenomenon in the Philippines from the perspective of personality trait psychology. Using both imported and indigenous personality measures, we tested the hypothesis that women who are “*babaeng bakla*” might differ from other women along certain trait dimensions. Based on our findings, we developed a tentative model which suggests that Filipino women with certain personality characteristics form a reciprocal attraction with gay men. This leads them to develop close friendships with gay men and in turn fashion a “*babaeng bakla*” identity within Filipino gay culture.

*Keywords:* cross-orientation friendships, gay men’s friendships, women’s friendships, personality traits

Women who form close friendships with gay men and participate in gay cultural activities — sometimes referred to in Western gay culture as “*fag hags*,” and in the Philippines as “*babaeng bakla*” — are often depicted in popular representations as having particular characteristics, or traits, that set them apart from other women. These range from stereotypes of “*fag hag*” women as being overly emotional, unstable, and having low self-esteem (Bartlett et al., 2009), to perceptions of Filipino celebrities who are identified as “*babaeng bakla*” as having the capacity for campy humor as well as *katarayan*

or “haughtiness” (Casocot, 2010) . Although such socially shared stereotypes about various groups do not necessarily reflect actual characteristics of group members, previous research on friendships informed by personality trait theory has demonstrated that particular traits, such as extraversion and agreeableness, can indeed play a role in friendship selection processes (Hamm, 2000; Selfhout et al., 2010). In this paper, we utilize imported and indigenous personality measures to test these popular representations of the characteristics shared by “babaeng bakla” women that set them apart from non-“babaeng bakla” women, and which could possibly play a role in their friendship processes.

The research discussed in this paper addresses questions about the accuracy of popular stereotypes and representations of women who have close friendships with gay men. In addition, these studies seek to contribute to our understanding of close relationships between LGBT and non-LGBT individuals, an area which has received somewhat less attention in LGBT psychology research. Previously, much of the local and international research in this growing subfield of psychology has focused either on heterosexuals' views of LGBT targets (as in the case of anti-LGBT prejudice) or on the subjective realities of LGBT individuals (as in the case of coming out research). While the research on these topics has led to a greater understanding of a number of LGBT experiences, there is also a need for empirical research on interactions and relationships between LGBT and non-LGBT individuals that explores and analyzes experiences both within and across sexualities and sexual identities.

In recent years, the significance of friendships between straight women and gay men has been increasingly recognized in popular culture and in empirical research (Bartlett et al., 2009; Grigoriou, 2004; Russell et al., 2013; Shepperd, Coyle, & Hegarty, 2010). Close friendships between straight women and gay men have been represented in a number of Western television shows and Hollywood films such as *The Next Best Thing* and *Will & Grace* (Quimby, 2005), as well as in Filipino films like Ellen Ongkeko Marfil's (2005) *Mga Pusang Gala* and Joel Lamangan's (2004) *So Happy Together*. These representations of straight woman-gay man friendships often depict the women involved as a particular social category, the aforementioned

“fag hag”. Using discursive analysis of interviews with gay and bisexual North American men, Moon (1995) developed a definition of the term “fag hag” as “a woman who associates with gay men and participates in gay cultural activities”. Bartlett and colleagues (2009) point out that this social categorization appears to be cross-culturally robust, translating to various terms such as the French “soeurettes” (little sisters) and the German “Schwulen-Muttis” (gay moms).

In urban Metro Manila culture, the most widely used term is *babaeng bakla*, a lexical construction that puts together *babae* (woman) and *bakla* (gay man) — literally “a woman who is a gay man.” A number of popular celebrities, including Maricel Soriano and Tessa Prieto-Valdez, have been commonly identified by the Filipino gay community as *babaeng bakla* (Casocot, 2010). In some instances, these women have also spoken extensively of their close relationships with gay men and even “come out” as *babaeng bakla* themselves, publicly presenting a social identity that endears them to many Filipino gay men and seals their membership in a community that extends beyond the confines of traditional notions of gender and sexual orientation.

Recent Euro-American empirical investigations of the phenomenon of straight woman-gay man friendships suggest that, at least in some cultural contexts, these friendships are associated with positive outcomes for both straight women and gay men. In Grigoriou's (2004) research using in-depth interviews with London-based straight woman-gay man friendship dyads, gay men reported that their women friends provided support regarding their stigmatized sexual identities and relationships while straight women reported valuing their friendships with gay men as a safe space in which they felt comfortable talking about anything. Muraco's (2006) research on intentional family ties in cross-gender and cross-sexual orientation friendships, which utilized in-depth interviews with US-based friendship dyads (including both gay man-straight woman and lesbian-straight man dyads), showed that these friendships can become so important to the dyad members involved that they identify each other as family and perform functions traditionally associated with biological family, such as emotional and even financial support, for each other. Quantitative research also suggests positive outcomes of gay man-straight woman friendships: a study about the relation between women's

body esteem and friendships with gay men, which was conducted with a predominantly Canadian sample, found that increased body esteem was positively associated with women's reported number of friendships with gay men (Bartlett et al., 2009). Friendships between straight women and gay men may also have cognitive benefits; in a study by Galupo, Cartwright, and Savage (2010), North American university students' cross-category friendships (including friendships across gender and across sexual orientation) were associated with higher levels of post-formal thought.

However, more constructivist approaches have pointed out that dominant discourses often construct these friendships and even the individuals who are involved as somehow deficient (Moon, 1995; Shepperd, Coyle, & Hegarty, 2010). Popular media in Euro-American cultures, such as women's magazines and TV shows, have problematized women's close interactions with gay men as a possible pathway to becoming unattractive to heterosexual men (Shepperd, Coyle, & Hegarty, 2010). Women who associate with gay men are often stereotyped as lonely women who seek out the company of gay men to compensate for their low confidence about their ability to attract heterosexual men; or as Moon (1995) puts it, women who “fail to perpetuate the sexist, heterosexual ideal.” On the other hand, “fag hags” have also been described as “open-minded” and “not hung up on sexuality” (Moon, 1995).

Although previous findings have challenged stereotypes about “fag hag” women's low body esteem and feelings of unattractiveness (Bartlett et al., 2009), they do not touch on other characteristics — negative as well as positive — commonly attributed to women who associate with gay men. Furthermore, because the studies on straight women-gay men's friendships cited above were conducted in Western countries, their findings might not reflect the characteristics and experiences of “babaeng bakla” women within the context of Filipino cultural constructions of gender and sexuality.

This paper describes two quantitative studies that test popular assumptions about the “babaeng bakla” phenomenon from a personality trait perspective. This approach involves the use of systematically developed and validated instruments to measure traits — individual and group differences in consistent patterns of behavior,

affect, and cognition (Larsen & Buss, 2002). Trait approaches have been useful in studying a variety of social phenomena, including attitudes towards sexual minorities (Ekehammar & Akrami, 2003; Shackelford & Besser, 2007) and friendship processes (Asendorpf & Wilpers, 1998; Selfhout et al., 2009). However, little is known about the role of traits in friendships across gender and sexual orientation. The two studies presented in this paper utilize a trait perspective to determine whether “babaeng bakla” women share certain personality characteristics that set them apart from other women, as suggested by popular media representations and cultural stereotypes.

### **STUDY 1: TRAITS OF BABAENG BAKLA WOMEN ASSESSED USING AN IMPORTED MEASURE**

#### **Method**

Participants were straight-identified “babaeng bakla” women recruited through snowball sampling and referral of gay men. Researchers identified potential “babaeng bakla” women within their own social networks, and also asked gay men within their social networks to refer women whom they considered to be “babaeng bakla”. Potential participants were asked to fill up a questionnaire composed of five items that were intended to assess whether they were “babaeng bakla” (including Likert-scaled items such as 'I consider myself a fag hag or “babaeng bakla”' and 'I find that I have adopted some of the expressions and/or mannerisms that my gay male friends use', as well as open-ended questions such as 'How many close male friends do you have?' and 'Among your close male friends, how many are gay?') In order to qualify as a participant, women had to fulfill at least three out of the following inclusion criteria:

- (1) self-identification as a “babaeng bakla”
- (2) nomination by others as a “babaeng bakla”
- (3) majority (at least 60%) of close male friends are gay
- (4) self-reported use of verbal expressions commonly identified with gay men

Thirty-nine women who were identified as “babaeng bakla” using this process then answered an “imported” personality measure,

the Filipino NEO Personality Inventory – Revised (FNEO-PI-R), developed originally by McCrae & Costa (1999) and translated into Filipino and validated for use in Filipino settings (McCrae, Costa, del Pilar, Rolland, & Parker, 1998). This 240-item inventory measures 35 different personality traits and is based on the Five-Factor Model of human personality. According to the FFM, there are five cross-culturally robust broad dimensions in the personality structure, namely Openness to Experience, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism. Previous research using the FNEO-PI-R (Church et al., 2011) has yielded Cronbach alpha reliabilities ( $\alpha$ ) ranging from .46 to .66 for the Openness scale, .52 to .75 for the Conscientiousness scale, .49 to .73 for the Extraversion scale, .57 to .68 for the Agreeableness scale, and .44 to .77 for the Neuroticism scale. Normative data from Filipino women were used to conduct a mean comparisons analysis.

## Results

Statistical analysis showed that “babaeng bakla” women were significantly different compared to other women on a number of personality dimensions. “Babaeng bakla” women had higher scores in the domain Openness,  $t(308) = 2.19, p < 0.03$ , suggesting that women who associate with gay men are more receptive to diverse ideas and experiences than are non-“babaeng bakla” women.

“Babaeng bakla” women also scored significantly higher on two facets under the extraversion domain: Assertiveness,  $t(308) = 3.54, p < 0.001$ , and Excitement-Seeking,  $t(308) = 2.04, p < 0.001$  (see Figure 1). These findings suggest that women who associate with gay men are more likely to be socially dominant and to enjoy leadership roles, and more likely to seek out stimulating situations, compared to non-babaeng bakla women (Lucas et al., 2000).

Taken together, these results suggest that beyond their close friendship with gay men, “babaeng bakla” women may indeed share certain personality characteristics that set them apart from non-babaeng bakla women. In order to provide additional evidence for this view, we conducted a similar trait investigation using a culturally derived measure of personality.

## STUDY 2: TRAITS OF BABAENG BAKLA WOMEN ASSESSED USING AN INDIGENOUS MEASURE

### Method

Convenience sampling was used to recruit 35 “babaeng bakla” women, who were identified using similar prior inclusion criteria, and 57 non-“babaeng bakla” women. Participants completed an “indigenous” measure of personality, the Panukat ng Pagkataong Pilipino (PPP; Carlota, 1985, 1997) which measures 19 culturally-derived traits that are central to members of Filipino culture. In the PPP Manual, Carlota (1997) reported Cronbach alpha reliabilities ( $\alpha$ 's) ranging from .51 to .94 for the 19 scales that comprise the measure.

### Results

A two-sample mean comparison showed that babaeng bakla women were different compared to non-babaeng bakla women on a number of culturally relevant personality dimensions: palakaibigan, pagkamasayhin, and pagkamadaldal. These results are presented in Table 1.

For all three traits – *Palakaibigan*, *Pagkamasayahin*, and *Pagkamadaldal* – women who were considered “babaeng bakla” scored significantly higher than a comparison group of non-“babaeng bakla” women. “Babaeng bakla” women tended to be more gregarious and outgoing, cheerful and humor-oriented, and vocal and talkative.

Taken together, the results of Studies 1 and 2 offer partial support for popular accounts of “babaeng bakla” as women who share particular traits that set them apart from non-“babaeng bakla” women. Based on our findings, the traits shared by “babaeng bakla” women include Openness to Experience, Assertiveness, and Excitement-Seeking, as well as Pagkamadaldal, Pagkamasayahin, and Palakaibigan. These results seem to support popular accounts of “babaeng bakla” as women who tend to be openminded, sociable, humor-oriented, and talkative (Casocot, 2010; Cho, 2002; Moon, 1995). However, our findings do not support other common stereotypes of women who associate with gay men as emotionally unstable or low in self-confidence.

Table 1. Traits From the Panukat ng Pagkataong Pilipino on Which “Babaeng Bakla” Women Scored Higher Than Non-”babaeng Bakla” Women

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Traits on Which “babaeng bakla” Women Scored Higher Than Non-”babaeng bakla” Women	Definition
Palakaibigan ( $t = 2.72, p = 0.008$ )	The capacity to make friends easily and to enjoy the company of others.
Pagkamasayahin ( $t = 3.26, p = 0.002$ )	Cheerfulness and the capacity to see the humorous aspects of situations.
Pagkamadaldal ( $t = 3.07, p = 0.003$ )	Being talkative, speaking without hesitation and doing most of the talking.

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## DISCUSSION

This paper presented two empirical studies on “babaeng bakla” — women who associate with and develop close friendships with gay men and who participate in gay cultural activities — in Filipino gay culture. The studies used a personality approach to investigate whether “babaeng bakla” women share certain traits that set them apart from other women. This hypothesis was supported by data from an imported measure and an indigenous one, which showed that “babaeng bakla” women scored higher than non-”babaeng bakla” women on Openness to Experience, Assertiveness, and Excitement-seeking as well as Palakaibigan, Pagkamasayahin, and Pagkamadaldal.

Previous research on the links between traits, social behavior, and relationships provide a number of possible explanations for these

findings. Personality approaches to the study of prejudice suggest a substantial link between certain Big Five traits and attitudes towards minorities (Ekehammar & Akrami, 2003; Shackleford & Besser, 2007). In particular, Openness to Experience as a personality trait is correlated with liberalism, acceptance and appreciation of social diversity, and lower levels of homophobia (McCrae, 1996). Low-Openness women may have little interest or ability to develop close friendships with sexual minorities such as gay men, whereas High-Openness women may be more motivated to participate in diverse activities and thus have more opportunities, as well as motivation, to form friendships across sexual orientation.

Certain traits, especially those that are traditionally associated with gender roles, can also play a role in social processes such as the formation of friendships across gender and sexual orientation (Richardson et al., 1980; Rudman & Glick, 2001; Spence & Helmreich, 1972). Assertiveness and Excitement-Seeking are typically associated with masculinity, and men are more likely to be perceived as higher in these traits than women (Costa, Terracciano, & McCrae, 2001; Schmitt et al., 2008). In particular, Assertiveness is commonly perceived as an instrumental trait and is often associated with masculine gender roles (Rudman & Glick, 2001). Past research suggests that women whose behaviors violate traditional expectations of feminine conduct are evaluated more negatively by individuals with traditional gender-role attitudes (Richardson et al., 1980; Spence & Helmreich, 1972). Additionally, studies have shown that women with traits that are considered masculine are more likely to form close cross-gender friendships compared to more traditionally feminine women (Reeder, 2003). This may produce a pattern that favors the development of friendships with gay men, who may have less traditional gender-role attitudes and may be less likely to negatively evaluate women who violate gendered expectations.

Personality similarity, particularly perceived similarity, may also play an important role in friendship formation (Selfhout et al., 2009). In a longitudinal study, Selfhout and colleagues (2009) found that both perceived similarity and peer-rated similarity – but not actual similarity – predicted friendship intensity among college undergraduates. Thus, women with traits that are stereotypically

associated with gay men — such as being madaldal or talkative and masayahin or humor-oriented (Casocot, 2010; Madon, 1997) — may be perceived (by themselves, by gay men, and by other peers) as having similar personalities as gay men. This perceived similarity may facilitate the formation of close friendships with gay men that they interact with.

The traits commonly shared by “babaeng bakla” women may also play a role in other aspects of their friendships with gay men, such as the benefits experienced by the individuals involved in these friendships. For instance, Galupo, Cartwright, and Savage (2010) suggested that friendships across social categories (including friendships across gender and sexual orientation) provide a space for complex social interactions where differences must be negotiated, possibly enhancing the cognitive development of the individuals involved. Women who are higher in traits such as Openness and Excitement-Seeking may be more likely to enjoy and even seek out cross-category friendships because of the relatively unusual and complex interactions entailed by these friendships.

Based on these results, we developed a tentative conceptual model describing how personality and friendships are involved in fashioning a “babaeng bakla” identity within gay culture. This model suggests that there is a “babaeng bakla personality” which involves the traits that were found to be significantly different for “babaeng bakla”, some of which may be perceived as similar to traits that are commonly associated with gay men. This “babaeng bakla personality”, as well as the perceived similarity, may lead to an attraction between babaeng bakla women and gay men. This attraction facilitates the formation of close friendships between gay men and straight women with these traits, possibly reinforcing these traits at the same time. Because of these friendships, these women develop supported social identity (Weisz & Wood, 2000) as “babaeng bakla”. These friendships and the babaeng bakla social identity exist within gay culture.

This tentative model raises many questions that can not be addressed by the two correlational studies discussed in this paper. Does the proposed “babaeng bakla personality” exist prior to the formation of the friendship with gay men, or does it develop as a result of the friendship? Do the shared traits of “babaeng bakla” women influence

the dynamics and processes of their friendships with gay men? Further research on this topic can address these questions more directly.

Due to the use of convenience sampling in both studies described in this paper, any conclusions about the generalizability of the results to all “babaeng bakla” women or all straight women in close friendships with gay men are tentative at best. We should also note that not all women who have a close gay male friend may necessarily possess such characteristics and that not all women with such personality characteristics are automatically “babaeng bakla” or self-identify as such. Because terms like fag hag or “babaeng bakla,” like any other social identity label, are constructed and developed within a particular social group or culture, other dimensions beyond any underlying personality characteristics may be argued to be at work in order for a woman to construct and develop an identity as a “babaeng bakla”.

In addition, although we pointed out the possible links between the identified trait profile of “babaeng bakla” women and other characteristics such as liberalism, homophobic or heterosexual attitudes, gender-atypicality, and perceived similarity to gay men, these constructs were not measured in either of the present studies. Further research can examine more directly the links between these constructs, traits, and friendships across gender and sexual orientation.

The current research extends the findings of previous studies on women who associate with gay men and, more broadly, on friendships across gender and across sexual orientation. While our findings challenge negative cultural stereotypes about women who associate with gay men, they support the idea that particular traits may facilitate the formation of close friendships between women and gay men, and eventually the development of a social identity as “babaeng bakla”. In addition, our findings contribute to a growing body of research on interactions between LGBTs and heterosexuals, extending the focus of the literature beyond negative interactions and highlighting the potential of friendships across sexual orientation to result in positive outcomes and experiences.

### AUTHORS' NOTE

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