

# May Stigma Ba? (Is there stigma?) A Qualitative Investigation into HIV Stigma in the Philippine Context 2021

## AUTHORS

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## Research Question & Significance

- Conceptualizes HIV stigma as a social process
- Explores how HIV-related stigma
  - is experienced and dealt with by Philippine key population groups
  - can become a barrier to talking about and getting tested for HIV

## RESULTS

### In relation to being LGBT in the Philippines:

- LGBT persons are considered a disappointment or problem (a)
- LGBT persons are concerned about how they are seen in society (social standing)
- LGBT persons actively respond to negative social standing using concealment (b) and compensatory behaviors (c)

### Analytic model

- When doing so threaten social standing, talking about and getting tested for HIV do not occur (g)
- When doing so do not threaten social standing, talking about and getting tested for HIV can occur, especially when doing so increase social standing, such as by demonstrating seronegative status (h)
- Exception:** During emergencies, social standing is not relevant to HIV talk and testing; these can occur when one is having a sense of crisis, such as when having severe symptoms or being made aware of someone else's diagnosis (i)

## CONCLUSIONS & IMPLICATIONS

- The **active management of social standing** provides a context for understanding the HIV talk and testing behavior of LGBT persons in the Philippines
- The model shows that except for emergencies, threats to social standing can explain when HIV talk and testing occur
- The model can be **useful for making sense of the effectiveness of current and future strategies** for increasing HIV awareness and uptake of HIV testing in the Philippines
- The model highlights **the importance of counteracting LGBT stigma** as a way of alleviating the burden of HIV stigma on men who have sex with men and trans women in the Philippines.

## BACKGROUND

The Philippines has the most rapidly increasing HIV epidemic in the Asia-Pacific, with only 68% of estimated persons living with HIV having been diagnosed (Department of Health Epidemiological Bureau [DOH-EB], 2021)

- Stigma is consistently identified as a barrier for men who have sex with men & trans women (KPG) for accessing HIV testing and treatment (DOH-EB, 2021; UNAIDS, 2021)
- Stigma involves devaluation—a social process; research needs to pay attention to social processes at play (Crocker et al., 1998; Link & Phelan, 2001)

## METHOD

- In-depth, semi-structured interviews of KPG and their parents
  - conducted August to October 2021
  - lasting 1-2 hours
- KPG participants: 19 men who have sex with men and 16 trans women
  - 19 were ages 18-29, and 16 were 40 years or older
  - 19 have tested and 16 have never been tested for HIV
- Parent participants: 8 fathers and 8 mothers who had at least one child that met KPG criteria
- Participants represent all macro-geographic regions of the Philippines
- Interviews audio-recorded, transcribed, translated, subjected to thematic analysis
- Themes transformed into analytic model through iterative collaborative process and validated using coded data
- Ethical approval received from the Holy Angels University Institutional Review Board

### In relation to HIV:

- 'Talking about HIV' and 'getting tested for HIV' can function socially as admitting to risky behavior or having symptoms (d)
- The consequences of admitting to these include the threats of not being accepted by one's parents (f), of being ostracized in the community, and of being unable to find sex partners (e)
- As such, talking about and getting tested for HIV can threaten one's social standing in the family, community, and intimate relations
- This threat is in addition to being treated as a disappointment or a problem by virtue of being LGBT (f)

Figure 1. The management of LGBT social standing

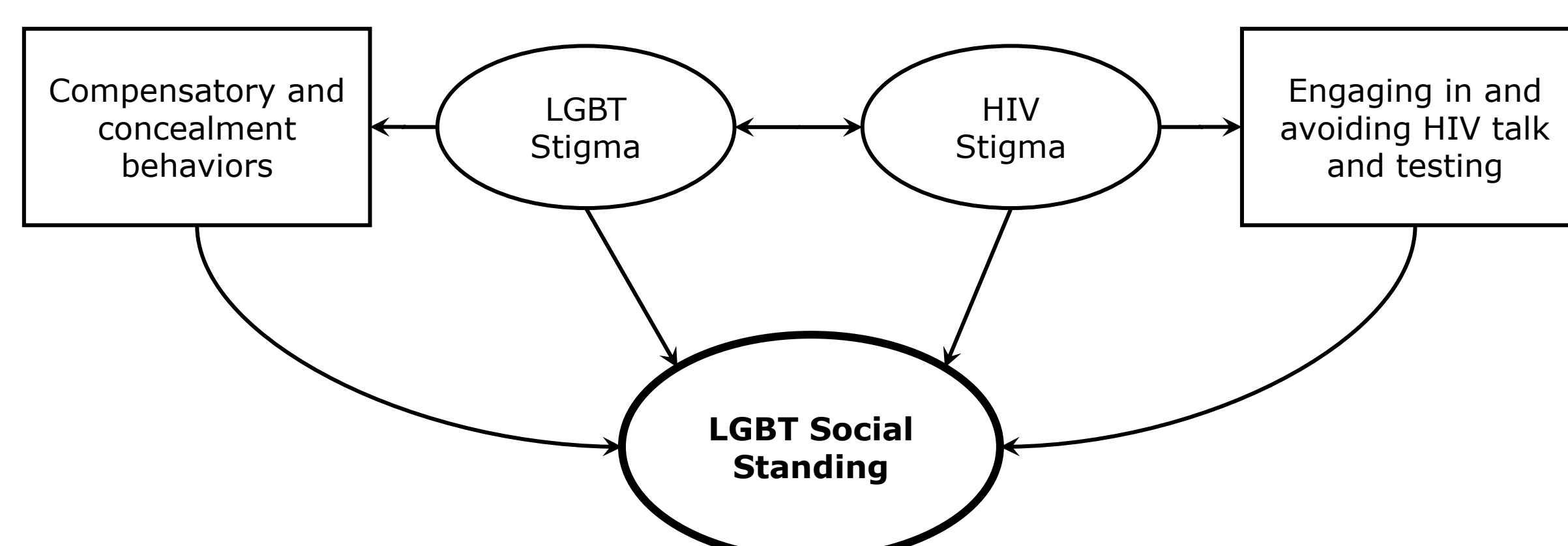
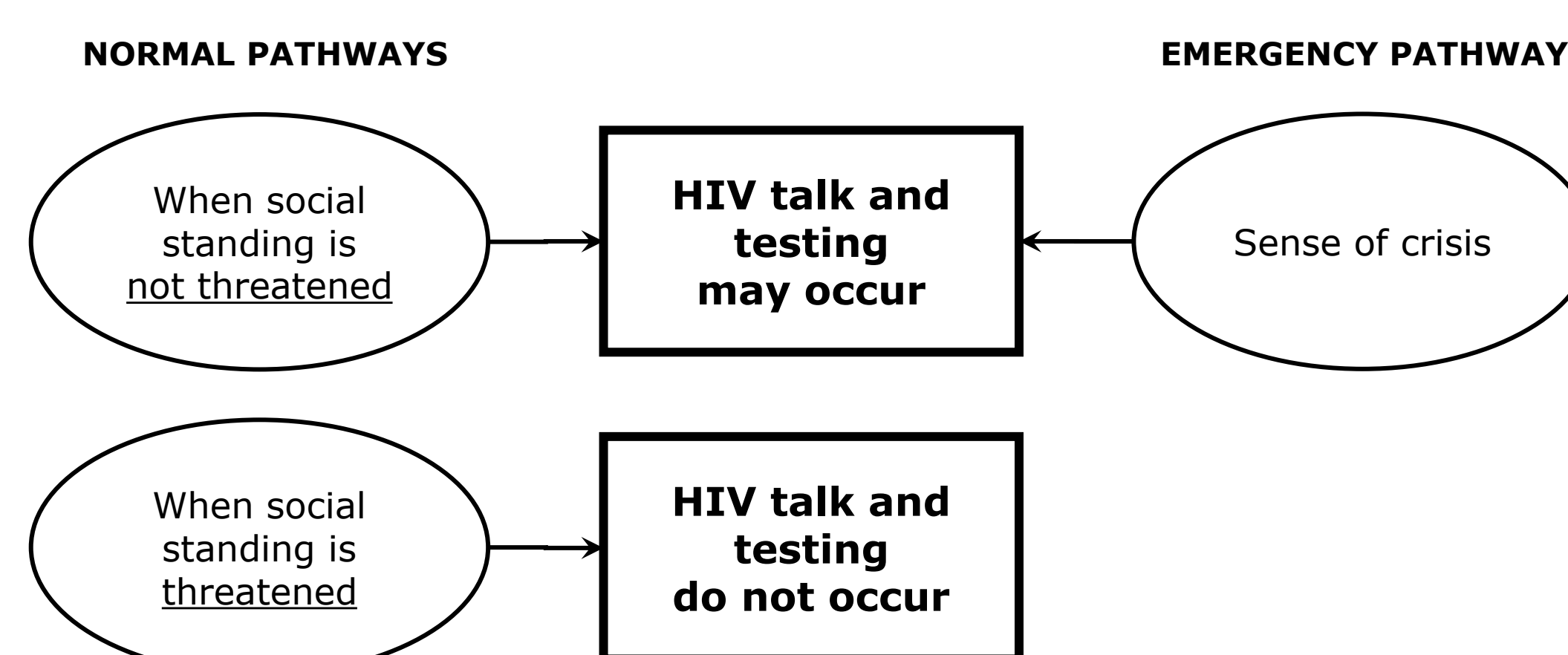


Figure 2. Pathways to HIV talk and testing



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## Appendix – Select Quotes

### LEGEND:

I: Interviewer  
P: Participant  
( ): Supplied by transcriber  
[ ]: Supplied by translator  
Underlining: Marked by research team for emphasis

- (a) I: Do you have a child that is... LGBT, for example, bakla or silahis?  
P: ... My second [child] is... silahis [bisexual]. I didn't show him that I was feeling bad about it... I kept it to myself. My wife stopped me [from showing this to my child].  
I: ... Was there a time that you talked [with your child] about something important or serious?  
P: Yes, I told them, I wish you had been a man.  
- father of a man who has sex with men, Northern Philippines
- I: So your reaction when you found out [your child was LGBT] was, "okay I'll let you be if that's what you want." [Was it] like that?  
P: Yes, I didn't ask about [it] anymore. [If I did] I might beat them up.  
- father of trans woman, National Capital Region
- (b) P: With my child I tell them that even though you are LGBT, I hope you would be [the] respectable [kind of] LGBT [person]. Not the—because there are many LGBT that are not formal. I always tell them that even though you are LGBT, you should be formal-looking, you shouldn't be unrepresentable or be in a way that people around you will disrespect or be rude to you. Isn't it that the LGBT out there that aren't formal, aren't they the ones that get ridiculed or judged?  
I: When you say "formal", can you describe [what you mean by] that to me?  
P: Like, I really don't want [them wearing] make-up, [I want them to be] really formal, as if they were men, like their [being] LGBT is hidden. Unfortunately my child is really out. Wears make-up, dresses. You can't stop [them] no matter how angry you get.  
- mother of trans woman, Central Philippines
- P: My mom told me back then, I accept you as whatever you are, if you're LGBT, as long as you don't bring us shame. I'd wondered, if I'm LGBT, that's all there is to it. But I didn't want to implicate my family in anything that would bring them shame.  
I: Did your mom say what she meant by the things that would bring shame?  
P: For example, dressing like a woman, wearing make-up—she didn't want to see us doing those things...  
- mature man who has sex with men, Southern Philippines
- (c) I: So your child is LGBT. So what?  
P: I told them (singular), study well so that (pauses for 9 seconds) study well so that you can show that even if you're LGBT, you have achieved something.  
- mother of trans woman, Central Philippines
- P: When [they] say "LGBT" before, it meant that that's all you are, that you will amount to nothing. Just be there on the sidelines. You know, they look down on [LGBT people]. So I said to myself, that can't be... So I became diligent in studying, I strived and strived to finish so that at least the way they see us (sic, thought incomplete)... I was able to earn respect because until now, I don't really experience being bullied. I mean, every now and then maybe, but who cares.  
- young man who has sex with men, Northern Philippines
- I: What are people's beliefs about LGBT [persons]?  
P: Beliefs? Well that depends... [and] that's why this needs to be done—even if we are like this, let's do some good, right? ... Here we are, we are already like this, [so] we need to do good around us, to our fellow humans, so that they don't discriminate against us, so they don't bully us.  
- mature trans woman, Northern Philippines
- (d) I: What do you think of them—those who get an HIV test?  
P: Hmm, not that [I'm being] judgmental, they're probably um... exposed, or they're too active in risky behavior, in sex... Plus, they're not sure about their partner.  
- mature man who has sex with men, Northern Philippines
- I: What do you think they will think about you or say about you if you told them you had gotten tested for HIV?  
P: They will probably say to me, "big sister, why did you get tested? Why, are you feeling symptoms of HIV?" They'll say things like that...  
- young trans woman, Northern Philippines
- (e) P: It would be a big issue if [people] found out that you had done 'that', gotten an HIV test. Even if you just get a swab test, no one here will talk to you anymore. And that's just a swab test.  
I: What does it mean if you are getting tested?  
P: It means that you are really feeling something. Yeah, that's what it is here. [They'll] spread [the news] immediately... So if you get an AIDS or HIV test, it would be better if you are the only one who will know... Like I said, I had gotten swabbed before [for another medical condition]... and then my neighbors stopped talking to me because I had gotten swabbed. The reaction will be the same, all the more for HIV. My goodness, [if I got tested for HIV] I may never get guys again.  
- mature trans woman, Central Philippines
- (f) P: There are very few Filipino parents who would accept their children [and] people they've been with if they ended up [having] HIV... I'm 100% sure that if, for example, I tested positive my parents would not accept me fully... They won't be able to accept [it]... They said to me, "we already gave you a pass to have a relationship with someone like you, [we] hope you don't add [to it]." The word 'add'—they're pertaining [to] HIV status... My parents told me that they already gave me a chance on this thing [being gay], so don't further destroy or burden the family...  
- young man who has sex with men, Northern Philippines
- (g) I: Was there a time that you wanted to talk to someone about HIV testing, but you had no one to talk to or it didn't push through?  
P: No... if I ask other people about HIV and so on, they might think that I'm positive, so I'm embarrassed to look for someone to talk to about these things. So I just watch YouTube.  
- young trans woman, Northern Philippines
- I: How about your family members, how would you describe them?  
P: They're okay, they're support[ive of] me in a way... They were the people I was always with, that were always there... They support[ed] and assisted me. But with the condition that I shouldn't tell anybody my status. But that's okay, I understand. They probably just didn't want to get dragged into ill-repute when someone hears about me.  
- mature trans woman, National Capital Region
- I: Was there a time you considered getting an HIV screening, but didn't go through with it?  
P: Yes, many instances... because I had recently reconnected with my mother's side of the family... [who are] traditional... [And if] you get a test and you're positive... then it will be a shame for the family... Although we [had] just reconnected they are very proud of me, like I am the pride of my family.  
- mature man who has sex with men, Central Philippines
- I: Was there a time that you wanted to talk about HIV screening with someone but you didn't? You wanted to talk about it but you didn't push through?  
P: Yes, yes I did... I wanted to get an HIV exam but I [didn't] want to be judged, you know? Like, why are you taking this HIV test? I was afraid to talk to anyone about it because maybe they'll think that I am sick with HIV or I have AIDS.  
- mature trans woman, Southern Philippines
- (h) P: Then I could really tell [them], "look at me, I am gay, I am sexually active, I don't have it, right?"  
- mature man who has sex with men, Central Philippines
- I: What was the conversation like with your family members when you shared that you had gotten tested and the result was negative?  
P: ... My sister was happy to know that I'm negative.  
I: Okay, and your parents?  
P: They were happy. And I think they had more respect [for me] when that happened. I'm not saying that if I had been positive that they would have no respect (laughs), but I think they respected me, that our child hadn't lost [her] way, because [she's] negative.  
- mature trans woman, Southern Philippines
- I: What did you feel after your screening?  
P: I felt relief, [I was] happy and confident again, like confidant to my boyfriend because I could definitively tell [him] that [it was] negative—I'm still negative.  
- young man who has sex with men, Northern Philippines
- (i) I: What was the primary reason why you got tested?  
P: Because there were some things—symptoms I was feeling, so I was bleeding, blood from my anus. So like, this was not normal, like (gasp) this was not normal. This was unusual, so when I realized this I got tested immediately.  
- young man who has sex with men, Northern Philippines
- P: I had [a] very close friend who—something happened [between] us. And then (pauses) after 6 months he died because he committed suicide... because he had the virus. That's why I was worried for myself. So that's why I immediately [had myself] checked.  
- young man who has sex with men, Southern Philippines