

**Fag Hags in Filipino Gay Culture: Friendships, Identities, and Personality\***

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\* Paper presented at “Sexualities, Genders, and Rights in Asia: The 1<sup>st</sup> International Conference of Asian Queer Studies” in Bangkok, Thailand (8-10 July 2005)

## Abstract

“Fag hags” or *babaeng bakla* are women who associate with gay men and participate in gay cultural activities. This paper discusses three research investigations that examine the fag hag phenomenon in the Philippines using various approaches. In one study using interviews, focus groups, and questionnaires, we explored the development and dynamics of friendships between straight women and gay men. Another study utilized focus group methodology to examine the components that comprise the Filipino fag hag social identity. Finally, from the perspective of personality psychology, we constructed a profile of the traits that are shared by haggly women and that set them apart from other women. Based on the findings of these studies, we developed a tentative conceptual model which suggests that 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 fag hag identity within Filipino gay culture. On-going work and further directions for our fag hag research program are also discussed, including tests of our fag/hag reciprocal attraction model and other investigations of fag hag experiences in the context of Filipino and possibly other gay cultures.

## Fag Hags in Filipino Gay Culture: Friendships, Identities, and Personality

“Which should we go see: the straight romantic comedy, where the heroine’s best friend is a gay man, or the gay romantic comedy, where the hero’s best friend is a straight woman?”

- *New Yorker* cartoon (2000)

One of the newest and most vibrant subfields in psychology is the empirical investigation of issues and experiences related to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender concerns called *LGBT psychology* (Greene & Herek, 1994). Much of the research in LGBT psychology has traditionally focused on topics like the origins of sexual orientation (i.e., why some people are LGBT, why others are heterosexual), the experience of prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination (also called *heterosexism* or *homophobia*) across different domains of life, and the process of sexual identity development (i.e., the coming out process). In the Philippines, research has been conducted by Filipino psychologists and other social scientists on diverse topics such as heterosexist attitudes (Manalastas & del Pilar, 2005), lesbian and *tomboy* identities (Ofreneo, 2003), coming out narratives of gay men (Guinomma, 2004), and same-sex attractions and sexual intimacy among young adults (Silverio, 2004).

While the research on these topics have led to a greater understanding of a number of LGBT experiences, many of these studies have focused either on non-heterosexuals views of LGBT targets (as in the case of anti-LGT prejudice) or on the subjective realities of LGBT individuals (as in the case of coming out research). In order to add a more truly *social* perspective to LGBT psychology, there is a need for empirical research that incorporates more interpersonal and intergroup perspectives. After all, LGBT individuals do not exist in a culture that is neatly disjoint and completely separate from that of heterosexuals. Most LGBT individuals are raised by heterosexual parents in heterosexual households, go to school with

heterosexual peers and teachers, and work with heterosexual colleagues. In order for LGBT psychology to avoid the risk of becoming a psychology of the other and a subfield that lies in the periphery of the discipline, we need to systematically explore and analyze experiences both within and *across* sexualities and sexual identities, for example, social interactions and close relationships between LGBT and non-LGBT individuals.

In the following paper, we present a series of empirical studies focusing on a particular social phenomenon that may be familiar to members of the LGBT community – heterosexual women who maintain and enjoy close friendships with gay men, participate in gay culture, and develop a particular social identity as a result of this identification.

*Fag Hags: Women in the Lives of Gay Men*

The lives and experiences of the gay community have increasingly become more socially visible, as evidenced by a number of popular television programs, films, books, magazines, websites, and public events revolving around the common system of gay language, history, and activities shared by gay men (Moon, 1995). One particular aspect of gay culture that has repeatedly been captured in the popular media has been the relationship between gay men and “fag hags” – a term, which in gay male culture, refers to straight women who associate with gay men and participate in gay cultural events and activities.

Originally a term originating in Western gay cultures, the idea of a fag hag woman has been well-represented in a number of television shows such as *Sex And The City*, *Queer Eye For The Straight Girl*, *Queer As Folk*, and probably most notably *Will & Grace*, a critically acclaimed primetime sitcom that revolves around the story of the friendship between a gay male lawyer and a straight female interior designer (Quimby, 2005). Hollywood films such as *The*

*Object of My Affection* (1998), *The Next Best Thing* (2000), and *My Best Friend's Wedding* (1997) have also depicted straight women and gay men in close friendships, falling in love with their respective men, and sharing lives.

Local observations suggest that the fag hag phenomenon is not limited to Western cultures. 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.” In Filipino cinema, friendships between gay men and haggly women have come to life in such exemplars as Ellen Ongkeko Marfil’s (2005) *Mga Pusang Gala* (which tells the story of a straight woman, played by Irma Adlawan, and a gay man, played by Ricky Davao, who are next-door neighbors – cum – best friends dealing with the trials of juggling love and work) and Joel Lamangan’s (2004) *So Happy Together* (a feature starring Kris Aquino and Eric Quizon as a straight woman and a gay man who meet during a Gay Pride parade in Malate and go on to develop a lifetime friendship), among others. A number of popular celebrities have been commonly identified by the Filipino gay community as *babaeng bakla* or haggly women, including Kris Aquino, Maricel Soriano, Ai Ai de las Alas, Tuesday Vargas, Jaya, and Tessa Prieto-Valdez. In many instances, these women have also spoken extensively of their close relationships with gay men and some even “come out” as fag hags 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.

### *Fag Hags: Working Definitions*

Though there are few scholarly attempts that look into fag hags (see Grigoriou, 2004, and Thompson, 2004, for exceptions), a number of popular definitions for the term *fag hag* exist.

These include:

- “a woman who prefers the company of gay men”
- “a woman who spends much of her time in the company of gay men”
- “a woman whose primary relationships are non-sexually oriented ones with gay men”
- “a woman who is extremely comfortable around members of any sexual orientation, especially gay and bisexual men”
- “a woman who associates with gay men and participates in gay cultural activities”

For the purposes of this paper, we adopt the last as a tentative conceptual definition. This conceptualization of haggly women in terms of their “association” with gay men and participation in the gay community was developed by Moon (1995) in her sociological study of the term *fag hag* using discursive analysis of qualitative interviews with 33 gay men. Many other words, though less commonly used, for *fag hag* have also been documented, including *fairy godmother*, *fruit fly* (based on a metaphor of a women buzzing around gay men), *hand bag* (the notion that a woman is an indispensable accessory for a gay man), and *beard* (a woman whose company a closeted gay man depends on in order to pass as heterosexual).

## Overview of the Haggly Research Program

In the following sections of the paper, we present three different research investigations that explore the fag hag phenomenon in the local setting. First, we discuss a multi-method qualitative study that looked into friendships between heterosexual women and gay men (Study 1). Second, we talk about a pair of quantitative investigations that looked into haggly women from the perspective of personality psychology (Study 2A and 2B). Finally, we explore possible components of a fag hag social identity using focus group methodology (Study 3).

### *Study 1: Friendships between Straight Women and Gay Men*

In order to explore the social psychological dynamics of friendships between straight women and gay men, we conducted an exploratory multi-method study that looked into lived experiences of straight women with close gay male friends and of gay men with close straight female friends. Specifically, we aimed to analyze these friendships using a social exchange framework, which suggests that interpersonal relationships exist as a pattern of exchanges of material and perhaps more importantly, non-material (i.e., psychological) rewards, with attendant costs and tradeoffs, leading to levels of satisfaction with the relationship as well as commitment to keeping the relationship intact. We sought to describe and compare the perceived rewards and costs of straight woman – gay man friendships from the perspective of both straight women and gay men currently in those relationships.

In addition, we wanted to describe the salient social influences exerted by gay men on their straight female friends and by straight women on their gay male friends, following the

principle of mutual interdependence which characterizes interpersonal relations, especially friendships. Finally, we also asked participants to describe their cognitive representations of women who develop close friendships with gay men, including any personality characteristics which they may have observed.

*Methods.* We used a number of exploratory qualitative methods including focus groups (two with heterosexual women,  $N = 14$  total, and two with gay men,  $N = 12$  total), survey questionnaires ( $N = 100$  heterosexual women), and in-depth interviews with straight women and with five gay men. Participants were university students ages 16 to 22; all males self-identified as gay, while straight women all reported having at least one close gay male friend.

*Results.* Straight women and gay men reported a number of different salient rewards in their friendships (see Table 1). For women, friendships with gay men provided them with boosts in self-esteem, informational perspectives on issues different from those of straight male and female friends, and the sheer enjoyment of participating in gay culture. Gay men reported enjoying validation and support for their sexual identity from their friendships with straight women, a “sharing” of perspectives on life issues, and a general sense of mutual learning. On the other hand, straight women identified social stigma as a possible downside of their friendships with gay men, including stigma by association and stigma for displaying behaviors that may be commonly identified with gay men. For gay men, costs included possible competition for mates as well as the apparent difficulty of some female friends in fully accepting particular aspects of their sexuality, for example, sexual behaviors.

**Table 1. Rewards and costs of straight woman–gay man friendships for straight women and for gay men.**

	Rewards	Costs
<b>Straight Women</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Self-esteem: Gay friends make you feel good about yourself.</li> <li>• “Best of both worlds”: Gay friends offer a perspective different from that of female friends and of straight male friends.</li> <li>• Enjoyment of participating in gay culture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social stigma as a result of their friendship with gay men or of displaying behavior identified with gay men.</li> <li>• Ambivalent attitudes towards certain beliefs or actions of gay men.</li> </ul>
<b>Gay Men</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Support for one’s gay identity</li> <li>• “Sharing” of perspectives</li> <li>• Learning from each other</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Competition for men</li> <li>• Difficulty of women friends in fully understanding or accepting certain aspects of their sexuality.</li> </ul>

In terms of interdependence and mutual influence (see Table 2), straight women reported that, largely as function of their friendships with gay men, they learned to become more liberal and open-minded in their social views, more expressive of their thoughts and feelings, and even more socially aggressive and hyper-critical by being “bitchy” and “brutally honest.”

Interestingly, gay men reported experiencing a seemingly complementary influence by becoming more socially agreeable as a result of their friendship with straight women. In addition, gay men apparently began to develop more negative stereotypes of and attitudes toward *heterosexual* men, possibly due to negative experiences of their straight female friends with those men.

**Table 2. Mutual influences of straight women and gay men on each other in the context of their friendship.**

Influences of gay men on straight women	Influences of straight women on gay men
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being more liberal, open-minded, and expressive.</li> <li>• Behavior—for example, speech.</li> <li>• Becoming more “bitchy”, “brutally honest”, “vulgar”.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Becoming more “tactful”, “considerate”, and “sensitive”.</li> <li>• Developing negative attitudes towards straight men</li> </ul>

Finally, gay men and straight women identified the following as possible characteristics shared by women with close gay male friends:

- “Open-minded”
- “Accepting”
- “Liberal”
- “Non-judgmental”
- “Understanding”
- “Assertive”
- “Vocal”
- “Talkative”
- “Outgoing”
- “Share similar interests with gay men”

Participants’ cognitive representations, which may in part be based on their own naturalistic observations since they all belong to friendships between straight women and gay

men, appear to construct images of such women as open and non-traditional as well as gregarious, in addition to high similarity with gay men in terms of social interests.

In order to test the extent of the validity of these person perceptions, we conducted more focused quantitative investigations using established procedures in personality psychology as part of Study 2A and Study 2B.

### *Study 2A: Traits of Haggy Women Assessed Using an Imported Measure*

For Study 2A and 2B, we employed a trait perspective to determine whether haggy women share certain personality characteristics that set them apart from non-fag hag women, as suggested by our qualitative data as well as the popular gay literature. This approach involves the use of systematically developed and validated instruments to measure individual and group differences in consistent patterns of behavior, affect, and cognition (Larsen & Buss, 2002).

*Method.* We administered an “imported” personality measure, the Filipino NEO Personality Inventory – Revised, 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, Conscientiousness, Extraversion, Agreeableness, and Neuroticism. We administered this inventory to a sample of 39 fag hag women and conducted a mean comparisons analysis using normative data from Filipino women. In order to qualify as a fag hag, women had to fulfill at least three out of the following inclusion criteria:

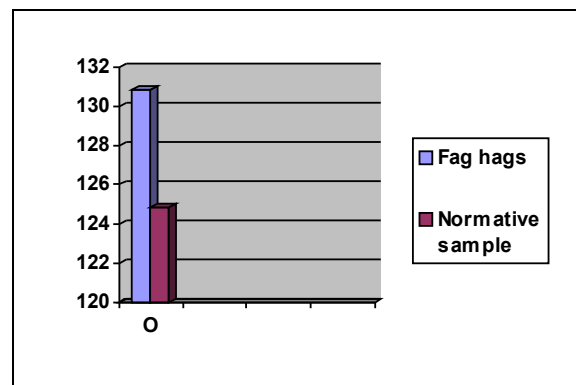
- (1) self-identification as a fag hag

- (2) nomination by others as a fag hag
- (3) majority (at least 60%) of close male friends are gay
- (4) use of behaviors and verbal expressions commonly identified with gay men

*Results.* Statistical analysis showed that fag hag women were significantly different compared to other women on a number of personality dimensions. Haggy women had higher scores in the domain Openness,  $t(308) = 2.19, p < 0.03$ , suggesting that women who associate with gay men are indeed more receptive to diverse ideas and experiences (see Figure 1).

Openness as a personality trait is correlated with liberalism, acceptance and appreciation of social diversity, lower levels of homophobia, and lower levels of right-wing authoritarianism (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 including gay cultural ones and thus have more opportunities, as well as motivation, to form friendships across sexual orientation.

**Figure 1. Openness to Experience comparison of fag hag sample vs normative sample.**

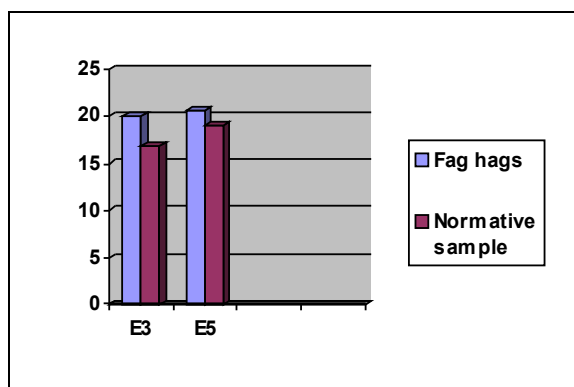


Secondly, haggy women had higher Assertiveness  $t(308) = 3.54, p < 0.001$  (see Figure 2). Assertiveness, which is a facet under the Extraversion domain, is commonly perceived as an instrumental trait and is often associated with male gender roles. Women who are high in

Assertiveness, according to popular accounts, may intimidate straight men but appeal to gay men. This may in turn produce a social avoidance-approach pattern that favors the development of friendships with gay men over friendships with heterosexual men.

Finally, women who are fag hags scored significantly higher in Excitement-Seeking,  $t(308) = 2.04, p < 0.001$  (see Figure 2). This finding may be related to the perception of haggly women as women “who love drama and crave scandal” (Cho, 2002).

**Figure 2. Assertiveness (E3) and Excitement-seeking (E5) comparison of fag hag sample vs normative sample.**



Taken together, these findings suggest that beyond their close friendship and identification with gay men, haggly women may indeed share certain personality characteristics that set them apart from non-fag hags. In order to provide additional evidence for this view, we conducted another similar trait investigation but using a culturally derived measure of personality.

*Study 2B: Traits of Haggy Women Assessed Using an Indigenous Measure*

*Method.* We administered an “indigenous” measure of personality, the Panukat ng Pagkataong Pilipino (Carlota, 1985) which measures 19 culturally-derived traits that are central to members of Filipino culture. Participants were 92 women (35 fag hags identified using similar prior inclusion criteria, as well as 57 non-fag hags), most of whom were university students.

*Results.* A two-sample mean comparison showed that haggy women were different compared to non-fag hags on a number of culturally relevant personality dimensions. These results are presented in Table 2.

**Table 3. Traits from the Panukat ng Pagkataong Pilipino on which fag hags were scored higher than non-fag hags.**

Trait	Definition
<b><i>Palakaibigan</i></b> ( $t = 2.72, p < 0.008$ )	The capacity to make friends easily and to enjoy the company of others.
<b><i>Pagkamasayahin</i></b> ( $t = 3.26, p < 0.002$ )	Cheerfulness and the capacity to see the humorous aspects of situations.
<b><i>Pagkamadaldal</i></b> ( $t = 3.07, p < 0.003$ )	Being talkative, speaking without hesitation and doing most of the talking.

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

Taken together, the results of both Study 2A and 2B seem to support lay observations and popular accounts of fag hags as women who not only enjoy close friendships with gay men but

also tend to be highly open-minded, assertive and sociable, and “dramatic” and vocal (Cho, 2002). We should note, however, 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 fag hags or self-identify as such. Because the term *fag hag* or *babaeng bakla*, like any other social identity label, is 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 fag hag. We flesh out the components of this social identity using qualitative methodology in Study 3.

### *Study 3: Fashioning a Fag Hag Social Identity*

According to social psychologists who study self and identity, an important component of an individual’s construal of herself as well as a fundamental source of self-esteem is her memberships in social groups and communities. Social identity is considered to be the component of the self-schema that develops as a function of membership, actual or perceived, to a certain social group (Deaux, Reid, Mizrahi, & Ethier, 1995).

Similar to the distinction between sexual orientation (i.e., individual patterns of sexual and romantic attraction) and sexual identity (i.e., self-ascription of one’s attractions and self as “gay” or “heterosexual” or whatever labels one’s culture offers), a woman’s status as a fag hag is argued to go beyond personal characteristics but also constitute a form of social identity. That is, fag hag women may and do develop the self-identification as fag hags and in doing so, reflect on the subjective meanings of this identity.

*Method.* Using focus group methodology ( $N = 5$  self-identified fag hags), we conducted a more in-depth exploration of how haggly women come to define themselves as fag hags. Inductive analysis of a transcription of the discussion, which was facilitated by the first author, yielded a number of salient components comprising the Filipino fag hag identity.

*Results.* Insights from our haggly focus group revealed at least five salient factors that figure in the development of a fag hag social identity. These five components, along with illustrative quotes from participants, are presented in Table 4.

**Table 4. Components of the Filipino fag hag social identity**

Components	Quotes from fag hag participants
Majority of male friends are gay	"A large number of my male friends are bisexuals or homosexuals, and I enjoy their company immensely. I find myself more comfortable with them than with 'straight' guys—most of the time."
Use or understanding of "gay lingo"	"People say I sound like a bading—my intonation and the expressions I use, and I realize that yes, I do sound like a bading sometimes!"
Shared mindset or empathy with gay men	"I have a strong affinity/attachment with gays. I have imbibed the culture and can highly empathize with them. Sometimes, I feel like a male gay trapped in a woman's body."
Personality or behavior similar to that of gay men	"I think they associate my 'gregarious'/'flamboyant' personality with being gay. The label actually came from other people. I think being OVERLY vivacious is not-so-womanly, thus the label—babaeng bakla or fag hag."
Consensus of others	"Coz a lot of people seem to think I'm bakla."

First, being a fag hag is about friendship and social relations. Participants agreed that having many close gay male friends, in fact a majority in one's social network of men, was an important component of the fag hag identity. Friendships with gay men, spending time with gay men, engaging in shared leisure activities, going to gay cultural events like LGBT film festivals and gay celebrations, and forming bonds of psychological closeness and intimacy with these gay men were important for fag hag women.

Second, gay linguistic discourse facilitates and is part of the fag hag identity. The expert understanding and use of verbal expressions commonly thought of as "gay lingo" because of

their coinage and/or use by some gay men was cited as another important component of being a fag hag woman.

Third, empathy with gay men and their experiences is important to the identity of a fag hag. Some haggly women may even describe themselves as “gay men trapped in women’s bodies” as a testament to the subjective feeling that they understand the experiences of their gay friends and of gay men in general, including experiences of stigma and “otherness” and views on men, attraction, and relationships.

Fourth, fag hags come to develop behaviors or personality characteristics that may be commonly associated with some gay men – including speaking their minds, having extremely open ideas, being comfortable with attention, being “loud” or “flamboyant,” being hypercritical, and being assertive in many social domains including sex.

Finally, consensual feedback from others, including identification by gay men and even non-gay people that one is indeed a fag hag, carries an important weight in the fag hag social identity. The fag hag identity is not merely formed by self-perception but also by “looking-glass self” processes like being called *bakla* (even though one is a woman) and being considered a fag hag by external observers.

Apart from these components of the fag hag social identity, focus group participants also acknowledged possible negative social meanings associated with being a fag hag or simply the term *fag hag* and *babaeng bakla*. These negative connotations include the image of a woman who is “*palengker*”, “cheap”, “*maledukada*”, “[a person with] no manners”, and “[someone who is] not well brought up.” Indeed, the popular literature and media have sometimes represented haggly women as lonely and unable to form meaningful relationships with straight men and thus have to “resort to chasing after” gay men (e.g., Rodi, 1992). Also, because gay men as a social group often face prejudice and stigma in a heterosexist society, the discourses and specific terms

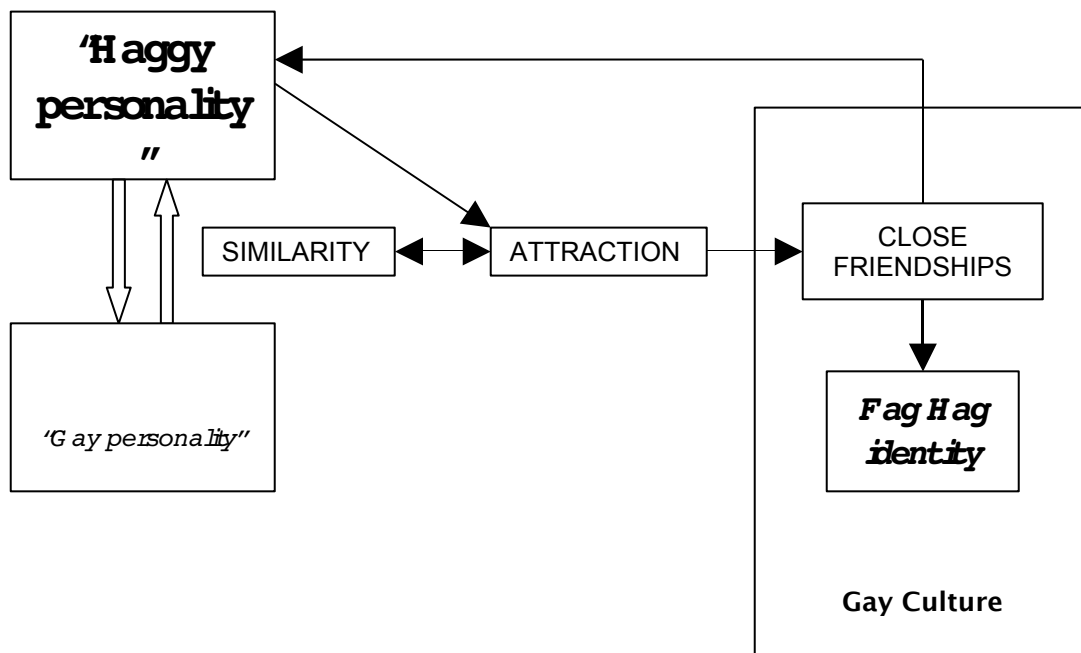
associated with being gay, including hybrids like *babaeng bakla* may carry with them some of the same social devaluation, a point that fag hag women, at least in our study, were well-aware of.

## Discussion

This paper presented four empirical studies on fag hags—women who associate with gay men and who participate in gay cultural activities—in Filipino gay culture. In the first study, we found that friendships between straight women and gay men are characterized by certain rewards and costs for both, as well as mutual influences. It was also seen that both straight women and gay men associate being hagggy with certain personality characteristics. The next two studies used a personality approach to investigate whether hagggy women do indeed share certain traits that set them apart from non-fag hag women. This hypothesis was supported by data from an imported measure and an indigenous one, which showed that fag hags scored higher than non-fag hag women on Openness to Experience, Assertiveness, and Excitement-seeking as well as *Palakaibigan*, *Pagkamasayahin*, and *Pagkamadaldal*. Finally, the last study identified five components that make up the Filipino fag hag social identity: the majority of fag hag women’s close male friends are gay, they are able to use and/or understand “gay lingo”, they have a shared mindset or empathy with gay men, they have personalities or exhibit behaviors similar to those of gay men, and they receive consensual feedback from others identifying them as fag hags.

Based on the results of these four studies, we developed a tentative conceptual model describing how personality and friendships are involved in fashioning a fag hag identity within gay culture (see Figure 3). This model suggests that there is a “hagggy personality” which involves the traits that were found to be significantly different for fag hags and which may be

similar to traits that are commonly associated with gay men. This haggy personality, as well as the possible similarity, may lead to an attraction between haggy women and gay men. This attraction facilitates the formation of close friendships between gay men and straight women with these haggy personality traits, possibly reinforcing these traits at the same time. Because of these friendships, these women develop a supported social identity (Weisz & Wood, 2000). These friendships and the fag hag social identity exist within gay culture.



**Figure 3. Proposed conceptual process model for fag hag identity**

This tentative model raises many questions that can not be addressed by the studies that have been discussed. Does the proposed “haggy personality” exist prior to the formation of the friendship with gay men, or does it develop as a *result* of the friendship? Moreover, are the personalities of haggy women and gay men truly similar, and if so, to what extent are they similar? Further research on this topic can address these questions more directly.

### *Future Haggly Research Directions*

Apart from more direct tests of our fag/hag reciprocal attraction model of friendship and fag hag identity development, further research can look into the more specific lived experiences of fag hag women in the context of their friendships with gay men and of gay culture in general. This may include the investigation of social stigma experienced by haggly women as a result of their association and identification with gay men. Researchers interested in the coming out process can also look into coming out from the perspective of the receiver, in this case, women who are told by a male friend of his sexual orientation. From a personality perspective, researchers could also explore the hypothesis that haggly women may possess traits that make them instrumental or “masculine” and thus may repel heterosexual men while drawing the admiration of gay men. Finally, to round out our expansion of LGBT psychology, future studies could explore the phenomenon of *hag fags* (gay men who develop close friendships with women—which may not be true of all gay men) and *fag stags* (straight men who develop close friendships with gay men).

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Big hagggy thanks go out to the following: our fag hag participants, the gay men who pointed the way to them; Dr Mita Jimenez, Dr Greg del Pilar, and Dr Daisy Carlota for supervising earlier parts of the research; and RJ de la Peña for assistance in data analysis for Study 3. Particular acknowledgements also go out to our co-researchers Leonard Umali, Krissie Coronel, Mark Quiazon, and Mike Luistro for their assistance throughout various parts of the different studies.

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