

# Unpacking gender: Examining cross-dressing performance as a contested terrain

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## Abstract

Gender as a social construction is complex, and at times, unsettling. This study interrogates college students' reenactments of cross-dressing in the Aguman Sanduk festival. Cross-dressing performance constitutes a site of contestation within the changing landscape of gender discourse. I contend that cross-dressing as a gender performance, extends beyond mere gender expression. It is a cultural expression that is practiced, negotiated, renegotiated, and contested. This study employs interviews and an analysis of Facebook posts and comments from 2022-2025. Interviewees include members of the LGBTQIA+ community who reside in the town where the festival originated and is celebrated. The analysis of Facebook posts and comments, together with the interview data exemplify the ambivalent positions about these reenactments. However, it is in this cross-dressing performance where gender is continuously redefined. This paper argues that crossdressing as performance and cultural expression is complex and a productive site to interrogate the existing gender system. It exemplifies a form of subversion and a means to undo gender within a changing social milieu.

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**Keywords:** festival, cross-dressing, gender performativity, subversion, undoing gender

## Introduction

Cross-dressing, viewed through ritual and performance, is not merely an act of gender expression but a complex and often contested cultural phenomenon. There are arrays of functions of cross-dressing performance that are potential sites to examine the existing gender system in society. As scholarship illustrates, cross-dressing can function to destabilize gender binarism (Roscoe, 1991), it can be as a theatrical demonstration that gender is a cultural script (Leiter, 2002); and it can hold significant spiritual and social functions within specific societies (Fisher, 2021). This paper examines contemporary reenactments of the cross-dressing performances that originate from a town festival. Aguman Sanduk is a festival that began in 1931, which showcase the cross-dressing of men in Minalin, Pampanga. The festival was originally conceived as a response to drought experienced by the community. With limited harvest due to the drought, the community faced the prospect of a bleak New Year without sufficient food. Desiring an abundant start of the year despite their dire condition, the festival's pioneers devised a way to uplift the community's spirit: thus, cisgender men cross-dressed. This act initiated the festival, which continues to be observed today. In its modern form, the Aguman Sanduk festival involves hundreds of men cross-dressing and parading around town. Activities include float-making competition, street-dancing by the cross-dressers, and the crowning of the Aguman Sanduk queen as the culminating event.

For the many decades of its celebration, the festival has been shaped by various factors including influences from other festivals, the commercialization common to modern festivals, and the challenge of maintaining its significance to the community. Globalization has impacted festivals like Aguman Sanduk. Advancing technologies have facilitated greater cultural exchange, prompting festivals to adapt to remain relevant and marketable. A significant threat in this process, however, is the potential loss of local tradition in exchange for marketability and tourism.

Inarguably, festivals become tourist attractions that generate economic gains, and local governments often maximize these

celebrations to boost tourism. These forces shift the functions of festivals from their original, locally-rooted meanings (unaffected by outside influences) to becoming spectacles designed to transcend borders. The Aguman Sanduk festival, where the celebration was originally intimately shared by the members within community, has become widely accessible to people outside the community as new media amplified its reach. Social media has become a way to share cultural practices. These changes in the current social milieu exposed the festival to a wider audience. Consequently, it is not immune to phenomena like *cancel culture* and the practice of calling out people and institutions, which are salient features of social media engagement.

The main objective of this study is to interrogate the college students' reenactments of the festival's cross-dressing performances as a site of contestations and a reflection of the changing landscapes in gender discourse. Specifically, this study seeks to examine how transgender community members make sense of the festival and its campus reenactments. Lastly, it aims to illustrate the undoing of gender through the varying interpretations of cross-dressing. I argue that cross-dressing, as a gender performance, constitutes a cultural expression that is practiced and negotiated across different contexts. Moreover, cross-dressing performance serves as a trajectory where gender becomes contested but at the same time, remains subversive. Using Deutsch's *Undoing gender* and Butler's *performativity and subversion*, I unpack the complex and unsettling nature of gender and gender performances, specifically cross-dressing performances.

The Doing Gender framework of West and Zimmerman (1987), though influential, has a major setback in emphasizing accountability to the binary gender arrangement. While it sees gender as an ongoing performance, it fails to account for the individual's sense of agency to resist and to undo gender. It is for this reason that this study is framed using Francine Deutsch's (2007) *Undoing gender* approach. Deutsch (2007) redefined 'accountability' in gender performances by shifting focus from mere compliance to norms toward resistance and transformation. She argues that interactions can destabilize gender and challenge

its importance in certain contexts. It is within this line of thought that I see the potential of the cross-dressing performances of Aguman Sanduk and the reenactments as crucial trajectories to interrogate and possibly undo exclusionary and discriminatory gender practices. The cross-dressing performance even though it remains as contested terrain, maintains its subversive character.

Butler's (1990) theory of gender performativity further supports the view that gender is not fixed but constantly enacted. Within this theoretical frame, cross-dressing performances can be interpreted as cultural scripts that test, reassert, or reconfigure gender boundaries. Guided by Butler's theory (1990), these performances are interpreted as performative acts rather than expressions of stable identity. Butler (1990) argued that cross-dressing is a form of subversion because it disrupts binarism in gender. Moreover, cross-dressing does not inherently define one's gender identity. Instead, the repetitive performative acts create the illusion of a stable identity. From this theoretical standpoint I argue that more than just a gender expression, cross-dressing is a cultural expression defined by the changing socio-cultural context in which it is interpreted.

## Methods of Data Collection

The study is qualitative in approach. Interview and content analyses were employed as methods of data collection. Seale (2004) posited that interviewing as a method produces cultural experiences and knowledge that is personal and authentic. Moreover, the value of qualitative interviewing is its capacity to access subjugated voices (Hesse-Biber, 2017). Thus, it is the most suited method to capture the voices of the transgender members of the community.

Originally, there was an attempt to also interview the students who reenacted the festival in their universities to have firsthand information as to how they make sense of their reenactments. However, the students who pioneered the reenactments declined the interview but rather referred the researcher to their public posts and official statements online. Due to the unwillingness of the pioneering students to be interviewed, content analysis of public posts and comments was utilized.

According to Kimberly Neuedorf (2017) content analysis is unobtrusive compared to face-to-face interviews; therefore issues of informed consent are moot. However, it is still important that commenters will not be identified with specific FB users. To secure confidentiality and anonymity, FB data were presented in this study as aggregates, and names of FB users and institutions they are associated with were anonymized. Consequently, the limitation of this study is that the point of view of students on the cross-dressing will solely come from public Facebook posts and comments. Emojis and the number of reactions on the public posts were excluded from the analysis. The purpose of gathering these FB data is simply to provide a description of the reenactments as represented on social media.

A combination of purposive and snowball sampling was utilized in recruiting participants for the interview. Purposive sampling as a technique provides information-rich cases through the use of criteria for selecting who can participate to meet the purpose of the study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In this study, the researcher began the selection with the gatekeeper as the initial participant and sought referrals for the remaining seven participants.

Interviews with participants were conducted between the months of February and March 2023. All eight participants are members of the transgender community and were born and raised in the town where the Aguman Sanduk festival is celebrated. Specifically, two transgender identities are included: those who considered themselves *bakla* and those who are identified as *transpinay*. These two gender identities were considered since both of them are nonconforming to their sex assigned at birth, which contrast to the cisgender men who are expected to cross-dress in the festival. This inclusion criterion aims to understand the sentiments of members of the LGBTQIA+ community differently from the cisgender men who were part of ethnographic research about the festival (Zamora-Morales, 2011).

Transgender individuals in the community were selected based on two considerations: 1) they experience cross-dressing in their everyday life and during the festival, and 2) they have a different positionality compared with the cisgender men who

traditionally perform in the festival and other transgender individuals who are not part of the community. It is important for this study to underscore the voices of the transgender members of the community on how they make sense of the festival and its reenactments.

The age of the research participants interviewed in this study ranges from 25 to 42 years old. With only one student who accepted the interview the other seven participants are from different professions such as teaching, graphic design and business process outsourcing (BPO). Except for one participant who is a high school graduate, the other seven participants are college graduates. All interviewees participated in the festival as organizers, spectators and one of them represented her/his barangay as a queen when s/he was six years old. All the participants are assigned male at birth and identify themselves as part of the transgender community.

The interviews are complemented by the posts and comments made by outsiders' interpretations of the festival through the reenactments. The value of the interviews of transgender individuals in the community is to illustrate that even members of the LGBTQIA+ community have varying opinions about the reenactments based on their positionality as insiders and outsiders.

In this research, Facebook posts and comments about the festival and its reenactments spanning 2022 to 2025 were analyzed. Thematic analysis of the interview data and content analysis of the FB posts and comments were employed. The combined analysis of interview data, and comments serves to show the complexity and contending issues surrounding gender, specifically regarding gender performances.

## **Results and Discussions**

This section is divided into various themes taken from the content analysis of FB posts and the interview data. The first part provided a brief background of the festival and the beginning of the reenactments. The results of the content analysis are presented under the subtheme 'The controversial

reenactments.” The rest of the discussions focused on the themes that emerged from the interviews with the research participants.

### **Crossdressing performances in the Aguman Sanduk and the Reenactments**

*Aguman Sanduk* – translated as “Fellowship of the Ladle” – is a festival that reflects the enduring sense of community and togetherness. The tradition of cross-dressing or dressing as women (*pamamiblas babai*) during the festival is closely linked to the community’s desire to spread collective joy (*tula*) throughout the town as part of the New Year’s celebration (Zamora-Morales, 2011). Since its inception, the festival has been celebrated continuously by the community, even during challenging periods such as the Martial Law era. Only the strict lockdowns imposed during the Covid-19 pandemic caused a pause in the festivities. As government health measures eased, the town picked up the tradition once more, and the festival continues to be observed today.

At the heart of the festival is *tula*, or collective joy. Expressions of collective joy encapsulate the spirit of the cross-dressing performances, which foster interaction and connection among people. The cross-dressers poke fun at themselves with the aim of bringing happiness (*mamye tula*) to others, and the desired outcome is to evoke joy in the audience (Zamora-Morales 2011). The shared experience of happiness helps the community transition into the new year, even in the face of hardship. As Barbara Ehrenreich (2006) suggests, this collective sense of euphoria – what she calls “collective joy” – offers a temporary escape and strengthens community bonds. It is this sense of togetherness that motivates the town’s men to keep the tradition alive. The festival represents a fellowship (*aguman*) that transcends individual differences. Every man in the town temporarily sets aside his status as an act of solidarity (*pamakiabe*). The festival’s joyful atmosphere provides a welcome break from the rigid routines of daily life.

The playful banter (*crissotan*) and humorous poetry shared during the festival highlight the community’s lively spirit. In

interviews conducted in 2023, participants shared personal insights about the festival. One expressed the importance of continuing the tradition to honor ancestors and preserve the community's camaraderie. Another saw the festival as an opportunity to bond and pay tribute to women. Similarly, another participant described the festival as a celebration that lifts the community's spirits. The *Aguman Sanduk* festival is a rare occasion when people step out of their comfort zones, temporarily setting aside their various social locations.

The *Aguman Sanduk* is not exempt from outside influences and from the changes brought significantly by cultural diffusion and advancement in technology. One of the interviewees mentioned that in the recent celebrations the cross-dressing and even the float parade became grandiose and expensive. According to him, the high prizes of the winning queen and float design motivate people to spend in preparation for the event. The usual intimate and simple parade shared within the community is now shared even in social media. There are elements of the festival that were lost such as the verbal joust in the olden times. There are also elements that are new such as the presence of background (pop) music on the float parade, the intricate details put in designing the float, and the presence of spectacles such as giant figures which could be found in other festival in the country such as the *Higantes* Festival in Angono, Rizal (Zamora-Morales, 2011). The infusion of street dancing is also relatively new. Street dancing is a common element found on most festivals nowadays. The cross-dressing performances also significantly change through time. From the old tradition of selecting the ugliest cross-dresser to be the *Aguman Sanduk* queen, to the selection of good-looking cross-dressers similar to other pageantry. There are also significant changes in the demographics of participants as more and more young cross-dressers participate and the inclusion of women cross-dressing as men to serve as escort of the queen. One of the interviewees shared his observation of these changes by saying:

*There now emerged varying themes and men who cross-dress nowadays no longer look displeasing to the eye. In the olden times, the goal is to be the ugliest and the funniest crossdresser. There is also an increased participation among the young ones, even as young as 12 years of age.*

Luna et al. (2022) account for the commoditization and commercialization of festivals in Calabarzon, Philippines from the late 1990s to 2000s. In their study, Luna et al. (2022) observed that the usual one-day festival event was prolonged to week-long and even month-long celebrations. Commercialization is evident in the presence of selling booths during these celebrations (Luna et al, 2022). Similar to other festivals, the Aguman Sanduk is not exempt from commercialization. It is considered by the community to be an opportunity to promote tourism. It is also not uncommon for large media outlets feature the celebration. Thus, the original intention of giving joy to the townspeople was now open for the appreciation and potential scrutiny of outsiders. The changes in the gender and sexuality discourse also provide a new challenge for Aguman Sanduk to reinvent its cross-dressing performances making them more inclusive and gender sensitive.

### **The Controversial Reenactments**

The reenactments of the cross-dressing performances of the Aguman Sanduk were observed in the mid-2000, performed by cisgender Engineering and Architecture students of a private university. According to the students, the reenactment is their way of commemorating the tradition and celebrating womanhood, which aligns with one of the festival's original purpose. In 2023, a similar reenactment of the festival was organized by students from a state university in the same region. These reenactments by students from the two universities sparked heated debates, as not all members of the student body agreed with them. Student members of the LGBTQIA+ community strongly opposed the reenactment, believing that the performance of heterosexual male students was a form of mockery and would not advance the cause of the community of transgender students. These contestations were catalyzed by a cross-dressing performance at a private university in Metro Manila during its Pep rally in 2022. A student leader expressed displeased, stating that gender expression of the members of the LGBTQIA+ should not be a source of entertainment. From this social media post, the discussion expanded as other social media users joined in, calling out students from two other universities that promoted and showcased the Aguman Sanduk festival. In defense of the tradition of reenacting the festival, the students who first

conceptualized the event explained that they had consulted with some residents of the community where the festival originated. Nevertheless, the student LGBTQIA+ organization condemned this practice. Some student organizations of the private university even released a solidarity statement that strongly opposed the continuation of the event. These debates were amplified in social media platforms such as Facebook. Other social media users brought the issue of cultural appropriation and urged the students to reconsider these reenactments of the festival in campus activities, warning that the meanings attached to it could be lost in the process. It is in these exchanges that the festival was unintentionally placed under the scrutiny of outsiders. Those who were not familiar with the festival accused the community of discrimination against the transgender community. As one post argued, the intention of the festival was 'problematic' and that the people should consider its continuation. Other Kapampangan social media users argued that it was unfair to encourage people to cancel the festival. However, there is a danger of losing the meaning of the festival when it is uprooted in its original purpose and context.

The original intention of the cross-dressing performances in the festival is explained by community members as pure and simple shared merriment. Nevertheless, reenacting it in a different context such as the school setting, undeniably brews controversies that actually go beyond the celebration of the festival. The reenactment issue clashes with other gender issues that are present in the school setting, such as representation and gender-based discrimination. Those who support the reenactments argue that it is an opportunity for students to promote gender equality and at the same time to commemorate a festival that celebrates the role of women in society. For example, the official statement released by one of the universities on their FB page states:

*"The motivation was to show that we, as a community, embrace and respect diversity and never put anyone - men, women, and non-binary in mockery.... genuinely designed the activity to pay respect to and honor women in celebration of the women's month. Through this activity, we believe that we were imploring a culture of acceptance, equality, and utmost respect for genders."*

Some students suggest that the reenactment is acceptable on the condition that it sticks to its purpose rather than simply as a source of entertainment. As one student stated in an FB post, “I think it is ok for me... The main objective of the Aguman Sanduk is to break the stereotype, to promote the culture of the community itself and to broaden the perspective of men about women’s experiences.”

On the other hand, there are students who do not share the same opinion about the reenactments taking place in both universities. The strong opposition stems from the day-to-day experiences of discrimination and the feeling of invisibility experienced by transgender students. This was expressed in a post by a student leader from an organization that advances the rights of the LGBTQIA+ community. In the said post, she/he/they argued that the event aggravates experiences of discrimination and queerphobia felt by transgender students. She/he/they called out the student council “who misrepresented, maligned, and in context wise portrayed the festival in a sexual, gender expression discriminant, and blatant insult to the feminine & LGBTQIA+ community.”

The figure below shows the varying descriptions of the reenactments based on FB posts and comments:



Fig.1 Word cloud representation of students’ sentiment on the reenactments

The representations in the word cloud suggest that most posts and comments have negative reception to the reenactments of the cross-dressing performances. In analyzing the data, only 10% indicate a positive reception to the reenactments. These descriptions include the following: 1) it is “never to put anyone in mockery,” 2) It is “a value to women,” 3) It “breaks stereotypes,” 4) It promotes “respect to our mothers, sisters, wives, and non-binary friends,” and 5) It is a celebration of “empowered queens.” On the other hand, the actual words used on posts and comments describing the negative reception is summarized in the following table:

Problematic	symphony of insensitivity
Exclusively for heterosexual males	shamelessly exploit sexual allusions
Unmindful	a deafening echo of obtuseness
unfairness	sexist
undermining of gender identity and expression	queerphobia
uncomfortable	promoted any form of gender-based discrimination
thoughtlessly conspired	prejudiced beliefs
These events do look like one's where the LGBTQ are laughed	portrayed the festival in a sexual gender expression
It doesn't appear to be a well-meaning event	paradoxical double standard
humor should not come at the cost of someone's gender expression and identity	outdated homophobic doctrines
the most heterosexual and masculine drag festival	offensive
exaggerates	mockery
disgraceful	oblivious
discriminatory dogma	mockery
a joke	mock and make a fool by parading like queers
cultural discord	misrepresented
condemns	misplaced
blatant insult to the feminine & LGBTQ+ community	maligned
bigotry	inappropriate context
amusement	hypocrisy
a source of entertainment	a mere pretext

The strong disapproval from transgender students of the reenactments comes from a position that while cisgender students can freely cross-dress in school, they themselves are often curtailed in their right to gender expression.

### **The messiness of gender categories and cross-dressing as a contested terrain**

The controversies surrounding crossdressing performances can be traced historically to their connection with the *bakla* identity. Embedded in the term *bakla* are effeminacy and cross-dressing. This identity holds an ambivalent status in Philippine culture, revered in pre-colonial times as a member of the *babaylan* and stigmatized during the colonial period (Ildefonso, 2023). In the pre-colonial period, the *babaylan* were predominantly women, but biological males were permitted to assume roles as spiritual leaders and ritual specialists. These male *babaylanes*, who often dressed in women's attire, were considered legitimate conduits to the spiritual realm (Garcia, 2009). Their cross-dressing was not merely tolerated but revered in pre-colonial society, though this status was later repressed under colonial Christianity. This case underscores how cross-dressing in Philippine ritual once signaled sacred gender fluidity, but later became a site of cultural and religious conflict.

The *bakla* as a gender non-conforming identity was demonized during the Spanish period (Alegre, 2022), yet it stands as a culturally unique gender category that continuously challenges Western heteronormative formulations (Garcia, 2013). Among the queer spaces where the *bakla* construct continuously challenges heteronormativity are on beauty pageants, film, and popular culture. It is in beauty pageants that the *bakla* transforms and reclaims a public position while challenging traditional gender norms (Roman-Tamesis, 2023). Inton (2017) posits that there has been a change in the portrayal of the *bakla's* desire and a framing of the *bakla* against pathologizing narratives in films. This marks a departure from the previous portrayals in which effeminacy and cross-dressing were central traits. The intersection of the *bakla* identity with other social locations such as ethnicity and class creates a mixture of acceptance and discrimination (Presto, 2023). Given the ambivalent status of the *bakla*, the Society

of Transsexual Women in the Philippines (STRAP) coined the term *transpinay* to distinguish the transgender women from the broader *bakla* identity. Martin Manalansan (2014) describes the confluence of gender categories such as ‘*Bakla*’ and ‘*Transpinay*’ as messy. The messiness arises not only because the latter is a fairly new categorization, but also because the term *bakla* has traditionally been used to refer to both gay men and transgender women (Ildefonso, 2023). Thus, the trajectory found in the construction of the term *bakla* and *transpinay*—both positioned against hegemonic masculinity—further render cross-dressing performance a contested terrain.

In the interviews conducted in 2023, there is ambivalence among the research participants regarding the reenactments of the festival done in universities. This ambivalence is connected to their unique positionality as both members of the LGBTQIA+ and residents of the town that celebrates the festival. One participant argued that it is ‘very wrong,’ while another emphasized the need to respect the tradition. Other research participants do not mind the reenactments, as long as they stick to the essence of the festival. As one participant mentioned, “For me, it (the reenactment) is a good way of acknowledging our culture. For as long as it is not being used to degrade any person. I don’t think it should be an issue, since the celebration of the festival is done not to mock anyone.” One participant also agreed with the reenactments and saw the value of it in terms of making the festival known to outsiders and promoting their town as a tourist destination. Another research participant sees the value of the reenactments as an avenue for academic discourses. As s/he stated:

*It is a huge step of opening the discourse to the academic community and those who put value on the culture and arts in the community. It should be clear that the meaning of transgender is not the same as cross-dressers or drag artists. So, if you have a deep sense of understanding, it (the reenactment) should not even be an issue.*

Evident in this discourse is the issue of positionality. For instance, the cisgender students who pioneered the reenactments at the private university see the event as a

way to advance and promote the spirit of the town festival. This is not unusual since the said university is a purveyor and an advocate of Kapampangan culture. It promotes other Kapampangan cultural practices, such as *Passion* play. The challenge in reenacting the Aguman Sanduk is two-fold: 1) the school as a Catholic University and 2) the positionality of the cisgender students who perform the cross-dressing. These two positionalities are the basis of the LGBTQIA+ student organization's grievance against the reenactments. The reenactments could be interpreted as operating within the same heterosexual matrix that stereotypically emphasizes binarism, hegemonic masculinity, and traditional gender roles, as coined by Connell (1995), does not entail the total obliteration of alternatives (or other forms of masculinities and femininities). The cross-dressing of cisgender men therefore can indirectly (or unintentionally) emphasize what is hegemonic. Moreover, because the reenactments, like the festival itself, occur only during a specific season as a student activity, they could be seen as a form of tokenism regarding gender equality. Transgender students seek a genuine form of inclusion. This would entail creating an atmosphere at the university that allows them to express themselves freely and share their day-to-day experiences there.

The recent controversy that aimed to cancel the Aguman Sanduk festival and its reenactments, due to perceived discrimination against people of other genders, is rooted in the association of cross-dressing with the construction of the term *bakla* (Manalansan, 2006). It is commonsensical for people to interpret the cross-dressing performances in the festival as a parody of the gender expression of gay men. As a counterargument, Marjorie Garber (1992) posited that the motivation to cross-dress goes beyond sexual identity. Associating crossdressing with a single identity oversimplifies the practice. Garber (1992) further argued that one can examine cross-dressing separately from sexual identity. Without the social context in which the cross-dressing performances are situated, outsiders can easily pass judgment, assuming that the festival perpetuates discrimination. Cross-dressing is associated with transvestism (Ekins, 1997; Tolentino, 2000), although they differ in that the former has a broader and varied purpose that goes beyond sexual gratification. Rolando

Tolentino (2000) examined the intersection of gender and political power in his discussion of the kind of *'panggagaya'* (mimicry) by working-class gay characters on cinema. Applying this concept of *'panggagaya'* to the reenactments, they represent a form of 'slippage' or reflections of the current gender system that operates in the school setting. The kind of *'panggagaya'* through the cross-dressing performances should be understood as limited to the kind of gender norms that the cross-dressers grew up with and learned from their social environment. The mimicry in the reenactments is a reflection of the gender arrangement present in both universities. First, one of the universities involved is not just a private but a Catholic university. Thus, the conservatism and heteronormativity observed by the transgender students in their grievance against the reenactment could be explained by this context. The student cross-dresser's construction of gender also includes the imagery that they see in media pertaining to gender. In the case of the other university, their official statement declares their positionality in terms of gender and development. They emphasize gender equality and empowerment of women and non-binary categories. However, recognizing the feminist root of the Gender and Development (GAD) framework, the protest from the transgender community could be interpreted as a gender backlash. The intention to empower and include women unintentionally creates reactions from other genders. This goes to show how complex and unsettling cross-dressing performance can be as a cultural expression, making it a contested terrain. As a cultural expression, it gives away cultural scripts, (and sexual scripts in particular), that are relative across time and space. This is why it is important to understand the context of the debates, the time periods they exist within, and the resulting diverse interpretations.

### **Gender expression, Cultural expression, and Cultural appropriation**

Central to the argument of this research is that cross-dressing as a performative act can be a cultural expression or a form of gender expression depending on the context. This is not to suggest that the two terms are mutually exclusive. Cultural expression refers to the tangible and intangible forms in which culture is communicated such as ceremonies, stories,

dance, rituals and other cultural practices (WIPO, 2023). On the other hand, gender expression is the way individuals convey their gender identity externally through behaviors, clothing, mannerisms, and voice (Todd, 2020). In the case of cross-dressing performances in the festival, a crucial distinction exists between cisgender men cross-dressing as part of a cultural practice and the cross-dressing of transgender people to make their identity visible and recognized. These two expressions are interconnected but differ significantly in their focus: cultural expression aims to foster a collective identity, while gender expression seeks to articulate an individual identity.

The development of new media opened the window for people outside the community to witness the Aguman Sanduk festival as an open spectacle for outsiders via YouTube, Facebook, and other platforms. The issue of cultural appropriation was raised in online comments as reenactments of the Aguman Sanduk were performed by other college students. Cultural appropriation refers to an adoption of one element of culture by members of another culture (Young & Brunk, 2009). Young and Brunk (2009) presented the on-going debates on cultural appropriation, specifically the question as to what are considered inappropriate, disrespectful, or harmful. Though the reenactments of the Aguman Sanduk had the noble intention of promoting the festival, members of transgender student organizations at the two universities protested, arguing that it is a form of mockery and discrimination. Two town residents interviewed for this paper disagreed with the reenactments, while six did not find them offensive. Those who disagreed were alarmed by the fact that outsiders might misconstrue the festival as a gay pride parade. They emphasize that the festival is a celebration of femininity and women's role in the community. One even stated that, as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community, she does not see herself performing in the festival, since it is intended to be the cross-dressing of straight men. Young and Brunk (2009) posit that cultural appropriation is controversial because not all forms of cultural appropriation are unethical. However, in some harmful forms, there is the potential of misrepresentation. In the case of the Aguman Sanduk, both the students and the community became the focus of social media reactions. An optimistic way of looking at this, is to understand

that cross-dressing as a gender performance has an element of subversion. It is in its subversive form that discourses about gender circulate. As a contested terrain, it promotes the dynamic social construction of gender. It is in these debates that people confront the existing gender system.

### Cross-dressing as a subversive gender performance

In the 2023 interviews, the participants were asked for their opinion on whether or not to exclude transgender people from the cross-dressing performances. While there is no written rule that excludes members of the LGBTQIA+ community, it is a common understanding within the community that cisgender men are the expected participants. As one cross-dresser argued, it would not be an equal playing field if there were gay cross-dressers, since they would not need to exert the same effort in changing their comportment. Among the interviewees, two thought that, since there are no specific rules prohibiting transgender people from participating, it is only fair not to exclude them and allow them to join. Overall, there are varying sentiments among the interviewees regarding who should join as cross-dressers. As one of these two interviewees shared:

*There is one instance that a friend of mine (who is a member of the LGBTQIA+ community) joined as a queen. A lot of people were arguing against his participation since the cross-dressing according to them is for 'real men' (totoong lalaki). I also knew some member of the LGBTQIA+ who joined the festival but there was no protest. I think it is only fair to include the members of the LGBTQIA+ community.*

One interviewee's opinion offered an interesting way of looking at cross-dressing. She said, "For me the cross-dressing is intended for straight men dressing as women. As a transgender woman, I will not join because I am not a man dressing like a woman. I am a woman." This position makes sense when looking at cross-dressing as a gender role reversal. The reversal, or the 'crossing,' is actually what makes the performance, as Garber would describe, a 'category crisis.' Cross-dressing is a form of transgression from essentialist notions of gender. Using Butler's analysis, it is in this crisis that one can see the subversive nature of gender performance.

Every day of our lives we perform gender. Gender is not an innate biological trait but rather constructed in repeated performances. Judith Butler (2006) argued that gender performativity is socially regulated; it is judged based on the existing regulatory practices in society. An example of how one performs gender is through a dress code. Society expects its members to adhere to the socially acceptable styles and manner of dressing. In the festival, the cross-dressing of men serves a form of entertainment because it disrupts the existing dress code in the community. Wearing dresses and applying make-up is usually associated with women. Thus, the cross-dressing performance highlights the current institutional arrangement. It is when rules are breached that people become conscious about them. Although the cross-dressing performance happens only once a year, it represents a glimpse of the gender system that exists in the community. The cross-dressing performances are a sneak preview of the current gender system, based on the actions of the cross-dressers and the body adornment they use to depict a woman's body. Flores (1999) posited that it is during Filipino fiestas and barangay festivals, mock beauty pageants – often performed by men in drag – are a staple. While often comedic, they may also challenge gender expectations and serve as moments of safe transgression. However, their subversive potential is often neutralized by the framing of such acts as entertainment rather than political statements.

Gender is fluid and gender expression can change over time. Gender fluidity is defined as the changing or shifting of gender identity or expression (Raynard-Leroy & Trinquet du Lys, 2021). Raynard-Leroy and Trinquet du Lys (2021) argued that, though the coinage of the term 'gender fluidity' is fairly recent, instances of gender bending can be seen in early literatures. One expression of gender fluidity is through cross-dressing. It is in cross-dressing that the binary concepts of sex and gender are challenged. Cross-dressing represents a 'category crisis' on binarism (Garber, 1992) and a form of subversion (Butler, 1990). This is evident in the cross-dressing performances in the festival from the period of its inception and up to this day. The shifting gender expression from being a woman, man or gay was showcased in the festival. In this study, I argue that the crossdressing performance has no single gender expression through time. The cross-dressing

performances in the festival evolved from the original act of cross-dressing as a woman to eventually showcasing various gender expressions. The complexity of cross-dressing performances can also be seen in the work of Patrick Alcedo (2007). Alcedo's (2007) study examined the participation of a prominent figure who performed in a religious festival while identifying as a member of the LGBTQIA+ community. Performing as a showgirl, the participant was able to navigate his identity while pursuing his religious devotion (Alcedo, 2007). Alcedo (2007) shows not only the complexity of gender performance in a religious festival but the potential to challenge traditional gender norms within such contexts.

### Unpacking gender, Undoing gender practices

The goal of the Aguman Sanduk festival, from its beginning to today, is to maintain the spirit of camaraderie and to experience the collective joy in the community. The future and continuity of the festival depend on how the community is able to share this collective joy while being mindful of the changing viewpoints on cross-dressing and gender. Members of the LGBTQIA+ community clamor for equal rights and equal representation. In the interviews conducted, the participants were asked if they see more representations of the LGBTQIA+ community in the festival. Some argued that they are already part of the festival, as their community is very much involved in the float design and in glamming up the cross-dressers. One interviewee said, *"There are times that the LGBT were not considered and it becomes an issue. It is but natural however that the LGBT are represented in the festival because they are the ultimate gender bender, that their lives transgress the standards of being a man or a woman."* One interviewee is hopeful that in the future, more and more transgender people will be able to join the festival. Another interviewee does not have any expectation in terms of inclusion, and s/he pointed out, *"It (the festival) is not about the LGBT community. It does not represent the LGBT community since they do not join the festival."*

Drawing from these divergent positions—even among transgender community members—and building on Garber's (1992) argument, cross-dressing in this festival should be understood primarily as a cultural expression. These

performances should not be equated with the cross-dresser's sexual identity. Instead, cross-dressing in the festival highlights a form of the 'gender role reversal' more than it expresses a gay identity. Moreover, as Garber (1992) contends, cross-dressing can serve as a way to potentially redefine culture. In the festival, this redefinition, particularly concerning gender norms, can be observed in the changing imagery of women. While the original celebrations emphasized as women's role in domestic spheres such as household chores and childcare, recent celebrations portray women occupying different positions in the productive sphere, such as nurses, doctors, among others. The continuity of cross-dressing performances in the festival offers a means to challenge the traditional views on gender by opening a window for the audience to interrogate the existing gender system. As Judith Butler (2006) posits, gender can be subverted through parody and performance. Deutsch (2007) further suggests that gender can also be undone, a process through which inequality can be dismantled. The term 'undoing' itself holds importance, as it highlights the power of language to frame our reality. Taking the points of Garber (1992) and Deutsch (2007) suggests a potential to transform gender representations in the Aguman Sanduk in the future. Rather than viewing the festival merely as a gender expression, its significance should be recognized within the cultural context that defines the performance. The Aguman Sanduk festival, which showcases the complexities of gender performance, serves as a site for change and the possibility of 'undoing' gender inequities.

Using Valoochi's term (2005) the presence of debates on social media is also an indication of a kind of "queering." Queering requires transcending binaries such as male/female, heterosexual/homosexual. It occurs when people examine how hegemonic norms are perpetuated and continuously practiced, and how individuals (such as the transgender students in this study) navigate their identities. The Aguman Sanduk festival is an avenue where 'queering' allows a possibility to undo heteronormative and exclusionary practices. The transformation of the cross-dressing from the festival's origins to this day, such as the inclusion of women cross-dressing as 'escorts' (in men's dress) indicates that queering is happening. These exchanges reveal assertions about gender and the articulation of the

positionalities of town residents, the college students who reenact the festival, school administrations, the FB users who engaged in online debates, and members of the transgender community. It is our taken-for-granted notions of gender that are being interrogated and tested in these on-going and unsettling debates on cross-dressing performances.

## Conclusion

The Aguman Sanduk Festival is an avenue where men from all walks of life cross-dress and dare to step out of their status. Disregarding social class, gender and age, male residents, with utmost pride, dare step out of their status to give joy (*tula*) to people. It is the community's value for camaraderie (*pamakiabe*) that continuously motivates men to cross-dress. While outsiders may see it as a parody of the transgender gender expression, residents view their cross-dressing as making fun of themselves, not others. However, it is also fair to say that the cross-dressing performances present representations that are heteronormative and stereotypical.

The cross-dressing of cisgender students within heteronormative educational institution that discourages LGBTQIA+ gender expression highlights society's ambivalent stance toward fully accepting the transgender community. Like anyone else, these cisgender men are products of their social milieu; therefore, their self-presentation in cross-dressing is limited to the social constructions and gender socialization they have known. With the rise of wokeness and cancel culture, festivals such as the Aguman Sanduk need to address issues of representation without losing sight of their original purpose. It is crucial to understand the context why people do what they do. The festival and the community that celebrates it continuously evolve in a contemporary period marked by detraditionalization in institutions. Anthony Giddens' concept of detraditionalization is central to his analysis of globalization. Giddens (2003) points out that globalization introduces alternative beliefs and values, compelling institutions to reinvent themselves to remain relevant. Detraditionalization entails questioning tradition, including existing gender norms and values. With competing views on gender presented on social media, we can expect a

continuous renegotiation of cross-dressing performance as cultural expression. It is in the hands of future cross-dressers to change the heteronormative constructions and representations of gender in the festival.

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