

# The Realities of 10 Hmong LGBTQ+ Individuals in the United States: Thriving Alongside Culture, Tradition, and Hmong Identity

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## ABSTRACT

*The Hmong people, a stateless ethnic group, migrated to the United States (U.S.) five decades ago following the Secret War in Laos. Despite resettlement, they continue to uphold their cultural values, beliefs, and traditional shamanistic practices over time. In Hmong society, children are expected to carry on the family lineage and maintain familial honor. However, identifying as LGBTQ+ is often perceived as one of the greatest sources of shame, which can lead to family rejection, homelessness, and, in some cases, suicide.*

*Homosexuality is largely considered foreign to the Hmong community, with no direct linguistic translations for LGBTQ+ identities. Historically, Hmong LGBTQ+ individuals have been ostracized for being perceived as defying cultural, religious, and familial expectations. They are often seen as incapable of continuing their bloodline, reinforcing their marginalization. Existing theoretical frameworks fail to fully capture the unique experiences of queer Hmong individuals, necessitating the development of Hmong Critical Race Theory (HmongCrit) and Queer Hmong Epistemology. These emerging perspectives provide culturally relevant approaches to understanding intersectional identities within the Hmong community.*

*This qualitative study amplifies the voices of Hmong LGBTQ+ individuals through narrative inquiry, highlighting the lived experiences of 10 participants. Findings emphasize the urgent need for culturally sensitive research, advocacy, education, and support networks to promote justice and human rights. The study calls for the*

*extensive development of resources that empower Hmong LGBTQ+ individuals and foster safe spaces for future generations, ensuring visibility and protection within both the Hmong community and broader society.*

*Keywords: stateless, queer Hmong, culturally sensitive, shamanism*

## **Author's Note**

As a Hmong mother of a queer child, my journey has been shaped by both love and deep cultural reckoning. I write from a deeply personal and evolving place of transformation. Growing up in a traditional Hmong household and living within a cultural context where queerness has been ingrained in me as nonexistent, foreign, or shameful, I found myself at a dead end—initially unprepared and uncertain about how to start a conversation and support my queer child. My queer child is the grandson of two respected Hmong shamans—spiritual leaders whose roles are deeply rooted in healing through rituals. Because shamanism is strictly gender-specific, my child's queerness placed him in a painful conflict between spiritual lineage and self-identity. I watched him silently carry the fear of losing not only the love and protection of his parents, siblings, and grandparents, but also the spiritual connection to his ancestors. He feared being unrecognizable in the eyes of the people and spirits who gave him life.

I witnessed my child suffocate under the weight of expectations to be in heterosexual relationships, get married, and have children, while he struggled to reconcile his truth with a cultural identity that offered him no language, no space, and no refuge. While he feared being abandoned by his family and community, I feared for his well-being, his spirit, and his future; most importantly, I feared losing him. I wanted to protect him, but I too felt unprepared and lost in a cultural framework that had no roadmap for queerness.

Being Hmong already carries its own layers of complexity: a history of forced migration and genocide, statelessness, spiritual obligations, and communal belonging. When queerness enters that space, the silences grow deeper, and the consequences become more isolating. This lived

experience drives my scholarly and community work. My positionality in this work emerges from personal experience and communal responsibility to academics and activists. It is about making visible the realities of queer Hmong individuals, who are not outside our culture, but deeply within it. My hope is to carve out spaces for them to be seen, heard, and loved—not in spite of being Hmong, but as an integral part of what it means to be Hmong—and share it with the scholars in academia.

I found a significant gap in the literature addressing the unique experiences of Hmong families with queer children. There is a notable absence of research that centers the emotional realities, needs, challenges, and resilience of queer Hmong individuals within the context of their own cultural community and sociopolitical landscape. Despite my standing as an educated Hmong individual with visibility in both community and academic spaces, I realized that I was replicating the very silences and erasures I had long sought to challenge. This personal experience fueled a profound shift in my purpose—as a Hmong parent, scholar, social justice advocate, and member of the Hmong community. I have witnessed firsthand the emotional, cultural, and spiritual tensions that queer Hmong individuals navigate, not because they reject their Hmong identity, but because they are so deeply rooted in it.

## **Introduction**

Following the aftermath of the Secret War in Laos, the Hmong people, a stateless ethnic group, resettled in the United States (U.S.) five decades ago as refugees escaping war and genocide. Despite the pressures of assimilation, many Hmong families have steadfastly preserved their cultural heritage, including traditional values, beliefs, and religion such as shamanistic practices. Central to Hmong culture is the expectation that children will continue the family lineage and uphold familial honor. However, for those who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer+ (LGBTQ+), this expectation often becomes a source of profound tension within a Hmong family, clan, and community. Within Hmong society, queerness is commonly regarded as shameful, foreign, and incompatible with cultural norms and traditions, which may result in family rejection, homelessness, and in extreme cases, suicide. This paper explores several critical questions:

1. How do Hmong LGBTQ+ individuals navigate their identities within the constraints of a culture that lacks linguistic and conceptual frameworks for queerness?
2. What are the social and emotional impacts of being queer in a Hmong community that ties individual worth to heteronormative family roles?
3. In what ways can culturally grounded frameworks better support and understand queer Hmong experiences?

In this social development journal, the researcher aims to amplify the voices of 10 queer Hmong individuals who do not seek separation from their communities, but instead yearn to be embraced, seen, heard, and loved as they are in their own Hmong skin without comparing them and their unique experiences to western or other Asian cultures. My goal is to contribute to the lack of scholarship that acknowledge the resilience, complexity, and humanity of queer Hmong experiences. It reflects my mission to create safer spaces for queer Hmong individuals, their families and communities, and to disrupt the narratives that render them invisible. By bridging personal insight with a few scholarly inquiries on queer Hmong experiences and frameworks, I seek to expand a body of knowledge that affirms queer Hmong individuals as integral, valued, and vital members of our collective future within and outside of their Hmong community.

This researcher argues that prevailing theoretical frameworks inadequately account for the intersectional struggles of queer Hmong individuals. To address this gap, the paper advances and contributes to the Hmong Critical Race Theory (HmongCrit) and Queer Hmong Epistemology as necessary, culturally grounded perspectives for interpreting these unique lived realities of queer Hmong people. Through narrative inquiry, the voices of 10 Hmong LGBTQ+ participants are amplified, revealing stories of resilience, identity conflict, and cultural navigation, negotiation, and integration. The findings underscore the urgent need for inclusive research, advocacy, and culturally responsive support systems that affirm queer Hmong identities within and outside of the U.S. Ultimately, this paper seeks to contribute to a broader movement for visibility, protection, and justice within the Hmong community and in wider society.

### *Who are the Hmong People?*

The Hmong are considered a stateless people who originated from China and later migrated to various Southeast Asian countries, including Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Burma, in search of asylum during the 19th century (Chiang et al., 2015; Xiong, 2020). Over time, the Hmong people continued to face war and genocide in Southeast Asia, leading to their resettlement in the U.S. and other parts of the world in the mid-1970s. As a result, many people remain unfamiliar with Hmong history, culture, and language.

The Hmong people possess a unique cultural identity and language, referring to themselves as “Hmong,” which translates to “free people” (Vang & Flores, 1999, p. 9). Historically, the Hmong have lacked a sovereign nation, as they have been forced to migrate due to slavery, ethnic persecution, war, and genocide (Faderman & Xiong, 1998). Although Hmong individuals continue to seek answers regarding their origins, the exact location of their ancestral homeland remains a subject of scholarly debate. Some scholars hypothesize that the Hmong originated from Siberia, while Hmong oral traditions trace their lineage back to China more than 5,000 years ago (Faderman & Xiong, 1998). According to Hmong legend, the last Hmong king was assassinated by the Chinese dynasty in the 18th century, followed by efforts to annihilate the Hmong population. This massacre prompted the majority of the Hmong to flee to Laos, Vietnam, Thailand, and Burma. Those who remained in China were pressured to assimilate by abandoning their traditional attire; those who resisted were ostracized (Faderman & Xiong, 1998).

While in Laos, the Hmong settled in the high mountains, at elevations of up to 5,000 feet, forming small, self-sustaining villages where they continued their agricultural and hunting practices (Faderman & Xiong, 1998). Laos was home to approximately 60 distinct Southeast Asian ethnic groups, with over 80 languages and dialects spoken. Despite this diversity, the stateless Hmong people maintained a strong communal identity through shared religion, language, cultural traditions, intricate hand-stitched embroidery, and a collective history of persecution, which distinguished them from other ethnic groups.

The Hmong are traditionally an agrarian and collectivist society, structured around clan-based communal living rather than individualism. Historically, the Hmong people recognized 12 original clan surnames: Chang, Hang, Her, Kong, Lee, Lor, Moua, Thao, Vang, Vue, Xiong, and Yang (Hmongs and Native Americans, 2012). Over time, the number of recognized clan surnames expanded to 21, a change that scholars attribute to spelling variations of the original names. Clan surnames play a fundamental role in Hmong identity, serving as a marker of blood lineage and ancestral heritage. Individuals with the same last name are considered kin and are prohibited from dating or marrying one another. Traditionally, Hmong men and women retain their surname for life; however, when married, the woman keeps her surname linking her to her family's lineage socially, but is spiritually recognized and tied to the man's clan. The children all adopt the man's surname.

In Hmong society, the clan surname serves as an identity card, linking individuals to their familial history, ancestral traditions, linguistic dialect, social status, and spiritual beliefs (Hmongs and Native Americans, 2012). Historically, Hmong marriage has been defined as a union between a man and a woman, with the primary purpose of ensuring lineage continuity across generations. However, there has been limited discourse and educational efforts on the experiences and identities of queer Hmong individuals. As the global Hmong diaspora continues to evolve, there is a growing need for scholarly engagement and cultural understanding regarding the emerging visibility of queer Hmong identities within and beyond the community.

## **Overview of the Literature**

Historically, LGBTQ+ individuals have faced systemic discrimination and dehumanization due to their gender identity and sexual orientation. However, societal awareness and support for the LGBTQ+ community have grown in the U.S. and around the world, leading to the implementation of policies aimed at protecting their rights. Although significant progress has been made in advocating for LGBTQ+ rights, much work remains to be done within the Hmong community. The experiences of queer Hmong individuals remain underresearched due to a lack of scholarly interest in their narratives (Lee, 2024). Within Hmong culture, identifying as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, or any other

member of the LGBTQ+ community is largely forbidden because it goes directly against the Hmong clan system, familial structure, and spiritual beliefs. Hmong youth who come out often face shame, abandonment, and exclusion not only from their families but also from their entire clan and community. As Lee (2024) aptly states, “Queerness and Hmongness were always positioned at odds with one another, known as two clashing cultures. . .” (p. 4).

### *Being Hmong and Queer*

Nearly 50 years have passed since the Hmong people migrated to the U.S. following the Secret War in Laos. While many younger Hmong individuals have assimilated into mainstream American culture, a significant portion of the community continues to uphold traditional values, beliefs, and religious practices, such as shamanism. Shamanism, a dominant religious practice among the Hmong, does not traditionally accommodate LGBTQ+ identities within its spiritual framework. Hmong beliefs dictate that spirituality is gender-specific and that gender roles extend into the afterlife through reincarnation. As a result, LGBTQ+ individuals who do not conform to traditional male or female roles are often perceived as having no place or purpose within their community. They are deemed not only worthless in this life but also without significance in the afterlife.

A significant challenge in addressing LGBTQ+ issues within the Hmong community is the absence of vocabulary in the Hmong language that directly translates to terms such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer/questioning. As a result, discussions surrounding LGBTQ+ identities are considered taboo and, in most cases, nonexistent. Additionally, in traditional Hmong shamanism, spirituality is inherently gendered, and reincarnation is believed to reinforce binary gender roles. According to Nagaraj et al. (2013), an individual’s moral actions in their previous life determine whether they are reborn as a human, animal, or spirit. However, for queer Hmong individuals who do not conform to male or female binaries, there is no defined place for them within the Hmong spiritual world, leading to their exclusion both in this lifetime and the afterlife.

The Hmong are a close-knit community in which children are

expected to honor their family's name, maintain a good reputation, and avoid bringing shame to their parents and ancestors. One of the most dishonorable actions a Hmong child can take is to come out as LGBTQ+. As an indigenous ethnic group deeply rooted in cultural and spiritual traditions, the Hmong have endured significant trauma due to their forced migration and separation from loved ones. The fear of losing a family member, either through separation or death, remains a central concern for Hmong parents. Consequently, when a child comes out as LGBTQ+, parents may perceive it as equivalent to mourning their child's death due to the fear of discontinuing family and clan lineage, causing spiritual repercussions from their ancestors.

Coming out as LGBTQ+ is not only considered a disgrace within Hmong society but can also be life-threatening. Some Hmong LGBTQ+ youth who have come out have been disowned by their parents, families, clans, and communities. Others who remained in their homes have endured physical, emotional, and psychological abuse. Many of those disowned by their families have faced homelessness or, in extreme cases, have died by suicide due to the shame imposed upon them or the pressure from their parents to break up a same-sex relationship.

It is crucial that Hmong LGBTQ+ individuals are acknowledged, heard, and protected in society. Their voices must be amplified to educate parents, communities, professionals, and society at large. Furthermore, there is a pressing need for research, particularly in California, to document the lived experiences of Hmong LGBTQ+ individuals and examine how their sexual orientation intersects with cultural values, beliefs, and spirituality.

### *The Hmong "Coming out" Experience*

Xiong (2019) emphasized that the coming out process for Hmong LGBTQ+ individuals can be a deeply traumatic experience, often resulting in homophobic violence and being disowned by their family and clan. Masterson (2017) further noted that Hmong LGBTQ+ individuals struggle with cultural separation, which can lead to "depression, loneliness, bitterness, and a longing to escape through internalized racism" (para. 6). In Hmong culture, it is expected that children live with their parents under one roof until they marry and start their own families. However, this

expectation is often unrealistic for Hmong LGBTQ+ individuals, forcing many to lead secret lives away from home (Masterson, 2017). Traditional Hmong culture has historically not accommodated LGBTQ+ identities (Mayo, 2013).

Due to the lack of resources in the Hmong community to support queer Hmong and Asian and Pacific Islander individuals and their families, the first and only LGBTQ+ nonprofit organization, Shades of Yellow (SOY), was established in Minnesota in 2003. SOY provided safe spaces for queer Asian individuals and created a platform for awareness, protection, and education through its website, community events, and YouTube videos (Masterson, 2017). According to Mayo (2013), SOY's efforts gave queer Hmong Americans hope for greater acceptance, tolerance, and understanding. However, due to a lack of funding, SOY was forced to close, leaving the Hmong queer community without a dedicated safe space and support network.

Although a handful of researchers have conducted studies on the Hmong LGBTQ+ community, the majority of these scholars are not of Hmong descent. Additionally, most studies and participants are based in the Midwest and East Coast. Research on the Hmong LGBTQ+ community remains particularly limited in California, the state with the largest Hmong population, where Hmong scholars have lagged in addressing this critical topic.

### *Hmong History, Culture, and Language*

It is important to note that the Hmong written language was not developed by Hmong people; it was developed in the early 1950s by three missionaries: Rev. Yves Bertrais, Rev. G. Linwood Barney, and Mr. William Smalley, with the intent of converting Hmong people from Shamanism to Christianity (Panoo, 2023). Given the complexity of the Hmong language, it is crucial to recognize that there is no direct translation for the terms lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer/questioning. Historically, LGBTQ+ identities were not acknowledged within Hmong society, as homosexuality was considered foreign to the Hmong people. Consequently, no words in the Hmong language accurately define or describe homosexuality (Masterson, 2017).

Dr. Brian Xiong, an educator and researcher in Minnesota, identifies as a gay Hmong man. However, self-identification was not a straightforward process for him. Xiong (2019) stated that one of his greatest challenges was that “there is no word for ‘gay’ in the Hmong language” and “no such word exists” to describe his sexual orientation (p. 1).

The Hmong social structure is strictly patriarchal and clan-driven. In the Hmong culture, marriage serves the purpose of preserving the clan’s bloodline, with heterosexual unions expected to produce offspring. According to Masterson (2017), Hmong LGBTQ+ individuals are often viewed as failing to contribute to the continuation of their family lineage, making them defiant in the eyes of their clan due to their attraction to the same sex. Xiong (2019) further explained that Hmong parents feel a deep sense of shame when their children do not carry on the family lineage, as this exposes them to negative scrutiny from their clan members. Consequently, Hmong LGBTQ+ individuals are often ostracized for being perceived as different and for failing to uphold their cultural, religious, and familial obligations (Masterson, 2017).

Over the years, many Hmong children born in the U.S. have assimilated into American culture with varying degrees of difficulty, while others have rejected certain Hmong cultural values and beliefs in the process. Many continue to struggle with identity and acceptance in both the Hmong and American cultures. However, it is evident that the first generation of Hmong American LGBTQ+ individuals faced significantly greater challenges compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Masterson, 2017).

## **Theoretical Framework**

Building upon queer theory, Ferguson (2004) introduced the Queer of Color Critique, which examines “social formations” to explore intersections of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and class outside the constraints of White nationalist norms and practices. Muñoz (1999) further critiques mainstream culture’s depiction of queerness, noting that it is often perceived as a “White thing” due to the normative influence of Whiteness (p. 9). Central to these discussions is Crenshaw’s (1991/1994) groundbreaking concept of intersectionality, which illuminates how multiple forms of identity such as race, gender, sexuality, and class intersect to shape both structural inequities and political realities, mainly in the court of law.

Crenshaw's intersectionality theory emphasizes the interconnectedness of various social categories and highlights how these intersections contribute to overlapping systems of oppression and privilege in the legal settings. In moving away from the normative frameworks imposed by Whiteness, intersectionality serves as a vital lens to understand how marginalized identities experience unique challenges and resistances within broader systems of power.

In recognizing this, Xiong (2020) introduced Hmong Critical Theory (HmongCrit) as a framework to analyze Hmong experiences and histories. HmongCrit emphasizes the importance of understanding Hmong culture, language, religion, spirituality, rituals, and clan systems in order to appreciate their contributions to U.S. history and discourse. According to Xiong (2020), HmongCrit enables scholars and educators to recognize the distinct historical contexts, challenges, outcomes, and experiences of the Hmong people, rather than generalizing all Asian ethnic groups and assuming that they all have the same lived experiences and privileges. By applying a Hmong-specific lens, researchers can better understand the experiences of forced migration and the resilience of Hmong people. Despite their exclusion from U.S. history and educational systems, HmongCrit equips professionals with the tools to appreciate the richness of Hmong culture, resilience, and its enduring legacy. This can extend to other identities that stem from the Hmong people. For instance, the intersections of being Hmong, a stateless people, a refugee, a first-generation Hmong American woman, low socioeconomic status, and identifying as queer adds layers of complexity. However, all of these intersections do not qualify as protected classes in the U.S. legal system compared to Crenshaw's intersectionalities of race, gender, sexuality, and class.

Expanding on these frameworks, Lee (2024) proposes a new theoretical model, the Queer Hmong Epistemology, which addresses the erasure of queer Hmong visibility in both community and academic spaces. Lee's model is important to center in researching Hmong LGBTQ+ people in the 21st century because Lee is one of the first queer Hmong researchers writing through the lens of his queer Hmong community and his own experiences and beliefs simultaneously. He writes how he and his participants have always believed other queer Hmong people exist even though never seeing them while growing up, and argues that the absence

of visibility does not equate to nonexistence. Instead, queer Hmong epistemology challenges communities to acknowledge queer Hmong individuals as integral members, cultural preservers, spiritual healers, and protective ancestors across space, place, and time. Lee (2024) also critiques the Western concept of “coming out” as a means of asserting LGBTQ+ identity. Queer Hmong epistemology shifts this perspective from viewing queerness as coming “out” to queerness as “acting,” meaning what directly challenges patriarchal clan structures and gender roles in the Hmong community. Essentially, Queer Hmong epistemology suggests queer Hmongness is historically and subsequently embedded in Hmong culture and traditions whether or not explicitly named as LGBTQ+ or queer.

With these theoretical models, Ferguson’s *Queer of Color Critique* (2004) and Lee’s *Queer Hmong Epistemology* (2024) offer a theoretical reframing of how to research queer individuals in the U.S. They suggest we move away from approaching queer research as purely Western and White, and add nuance by carving space for queer people of color and even queer Hmong people. These models lay the groundwork for the researcher’s approach in interviewing queer Hmong participants from conceptualizing this research, drafting research and interview questions, how the researcher conducts the interviews, and analyzing the data. Crenshaw’s intersectionality framework (1991/1994) and Xiong’s *HmongCrit* (2020) model offer tools on how to conduct interviews and analyze participant responses in terms of identity formation, placement within systems of oppression, and historical context. These models promote participants to speak about their identities and experiences as nuanced and multidimensional, permitting them to be authentic in their responses without separating identities for the sake of “identity research.” All together, these four theoretical frameworks and models allow the researcher to approach, conduct, and analyze the research holistically to accurately represent the queer Hmong stories of these 10 individuals.

## **Methodology**

The researcher employed a qualitative method approach for this study, utilizing individual interviews. Narrative research was used to conduct this study to gather participants’ personal stories of their lived experiences as a queer Hmong, their identity awareness, and their life before and after coming out. According to Creswell (2013), narrative study voices the

individuals' lived experiences "within their personal, social, and historical context" (p. 75). Clandinin and Connolly (2000) further elaborated that "narrative inquiry is stories lived and told" (p. 20). Furthermore, Creswell (2013) highlighted that narrative research is used to examine "life events," "turning points," or "epiphanies" gathered from participants' stories (p. 75). Narrative research is vital to addressing issues related to race, discrimination, and marginality and how these issues impact one's culture (Creswell, 2013). This approach is most effective in capturing the participants' lived experiences, culture, and history (Creswell, 2013).

This qualitative study focused on the interviews of 10 Hmong adults who self-identify as members of the LGBTQ+ community. Eight of 10 participants reside in California while two reside in Wisconsin and Minnesota. Participants were recruited through snowball sampling because the Hmong LGBTQ+ community is hidden and sacred, in which access was limited and trust must be established beforehand as a non-queer Hmong individual and researcher. Interviews were conducted via in-person or virtually (via Zoom) depending on the participants' preference. The interviews lasted between 90 to 120 minutes using an interview guide that consisted of 15 open-ended questions with follow-up questions as needed. Each interview was semi-structured, permitting participants to speak openly without restrictions, regardless if they directly answered the questions. Interviews were in English, Hmong, or both languages depending on the participants' preference. After completion of the interviews, the researcher transcribed and translated the interviews and analyzed the data to collect significant themes, ideas, and unique experiences.

The participants' responses were first analyzed through open coding to identify initial patterns and meaningful themes. This was followed by axial coding to organize and group these themes into broader categories that captured the significant experiences of Hmong LGBTQ+ participants, particularly in relation to their "coming out" narratives. To further refine and visualize thematic relationship, clustering analysis was employed to explore how certain themes appeared together and to identify patterns in how they were connected. The combined use of open coding, axial coding, and clustering analysis provided a structured framework for interpreting the data and developing grounded theoretical insights into queer Hmong experiences. Creswell (2013) recommended that the researcher actively involve the participants throughout the study. Therefore, the researcher

and participants may negotiate or clarify the meaning of life stories and experiences, which adds “a validation check to the analysis” (Creswell, 2013, p. 75). The researcher also conducted follow-ups and member checks with participants to clarify statements and ensure that the given information was accurate (Creswell, 2013).

This qualitative research captured the authentic voices of 10 Hmong LGBTQ+ individuals and provided a deeper understanding of their unique experiences, cultural loyalty, and challenges and needs as a vulnerable population.

## **Results**

The 10 participants in this study were Hmong adults who self-identified as queer. To ensure the anonymity of participants, each individual was assigned a unique pseudonym for the purpose of this study. Eight of the 10 participants were born in the U.S., while two were born in Laos and Thailand. Their ages ranged from 22 to 45. Five participants currently live with their parents, while the other five live independently outside of their family’s home.

Regarding religious affiliation, two participants declared their faith as shamanism, five as Christian or Catholic, and three as having no religious faith. Three participants—Sia, Yia, and Xee—grew up in traditional households that practice Shamanism; however, they no longer feel a sense of belonging to the religion due to their queer identity. Sia stated, “I grew up in a very religious home. I still consider myself to be a spiritual person, but as of now, I’m not a Catholic or Christian. I don’t practice Shamanism anymore.” Xee considered herself to be an atheist and Yia converted from shamanism to Christianity.

The majority of participants disclosed that they moved out or away from home to go to college in order to further explore their sexual identity and find a more LGBTQ+ friendly community. Teng, Yia, Ker, Sheng, Houa, Chao, and Tou expressed that they did not have a strong family support and safe environment to come out and explore their sexual identity. Teng felt that “Fresno is not a safe space and not accepting. Fresno is super hypermasculine and homophobic.” Ker is the only son and after he came out to his parents in high school, he “felt like the black sheep in the family

. . . [and] didn't have the support [he] needed as a gay Hmong man so [he] had to leave to find that support on [his] own." Tou confirmed that "college became a safe space for me to be queer, to be free." Houa came out to her parents at age 15 as bisexual and they were not accepting of her sexual identity. Houa said, "After that, I felt closed off from them for a long time. . . . I moved away for college . . . a few hours away, but enough to miss each other. We reconnected during my college years." All except one participant had graduated from college; three earned a master's degree, six obtained a bachelor's degree, and one is still pursuing a bachelor's degree.

Through the analysis of data collected from personal interviews using narrative inquiry, four key themes emerged as follows, highlighting the unique experiences of queer Hmong individuals in the process of coming out: (a) No Formal Conversation of "Coming Out," (b) To be Queer Hmong Means to be Educated and Financially Independent, (c) Queer Hmong Preserving Parents' Face and Reputation, and (d) Selflessness: Choosing Grandparents' Love Over True Identity.

### *No "Coming out" Conversation in Hmong Language*

As previously mentioned, it is important to recognize that the Hmong written language was not developed by Hmong people, but rather by three missionaries in the early 1950s, primarily as a tool for religious conversion from Shamanism to Christianity. Due to the linguistic and cultural complexity of the Hmong language, there are no direct translations for terms such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer/questioning. Historically, LGBTQ+ identities were not explicitly acknowledged within traditional Hmong society, as same-sex relationships and gender nonconformity were often viewed as foreign concepts or nonexistent. As a result, the Hmong language lacks specific vocabulary to define or describe non-heteronormative sexualities and gender identities.

Participants whose parents and grandparents were not fluent in English faced greater challenges in expressing their sexual identity and navigating coming out conversations in the Hmong language. All participants disclosed their queer identity to friends and siblings before coming out to one or both parents; only one participant has not come out to his parents. Anticipating the worst possible outcome, such as rejection, they sought acceptance from their peers and siblings first to ensure they

had a place to stay if their parents disowned them. In some cases, after coming out to their parents, participants continued to experience pressure to date, marry, and have children in accordance with heterosexual norms. Those with more traditional or older parents struggled to initiate a coming out conversation due to the lack of terminology in the Hmong language to define homosexuality. Tou has not openly come out to his parents because he is “not ready to have a conversation” with his parents. Tou questions, “How would we be in a conversation together if there are no Hmong words to accurately describe my sexual identity?” Houa related that she has not come out to her grandmother saying, “I feel that if my parents, who are younger in the mid-forties, can’t even understand, I’m hesitant to tell my grandma who’s much older from the older generation.” Bao reiterated that if she was to tell her grandparents, they would be confused and not understand what queer is and emphasized,

The lack of queer representation in the Hmong community and the conversations around that is a problem. We don’t even have the language for it and language is an incredibly imperative way of literally influencing your worldview and the way you think because you think in words and the languages that you know. So when your language doesn’t have the vocabulary for the queer people and the experiences they go through, they don’t exist essentially.

During the time that Teng was struggling with his sexual identity, he had a difficult time conveying his feelings and emotions and what he was going through in Hmong. Teng said,

I told my parents that I’m not going to church anymore. I didn’t know how to explain it to my parents, so I had my older sister help me translate to them that I was having thoughts and feeling the sin of being gay. My parents still wanted me to go to church to be saved.

Sheng shared that her parents are more modernized and accepting of her sexual identity; therefore, her coming out conversation with her parents was in English. Sheng has been in a relationship with her partner for many years, so she felt comfortable bringing her partner to their family gatherings. However, she still finds it difficult to appropriately introduce her partner in the Hmong language. Sheng would introduce her partner to the elders as “*Tus no yog kuv tus phooj ywg zoo*” which translates to “This

is my best friend.”

It is vital to underscore the deep linguistic and cultural barriers faced by queer Hmong individuals in articulating and asserting their sexual and gender identities within their families and communities. Because Hmong people’s vocabulary is limited and the Hmong written language was developed by non-Hmong missionaries in the 1950s primarily for religious conversion, it lacks the linguistic capacity to express LGBTQ+ identities. Traditional Hmong society historically did not acknowledge non-heteronormative sexualities or gender nonconformity, often regarding them as foreign or nonexistent. For example, Houa’s parents and relatives told her,

You’re too young. How do you know this? You must be indoctrinated because we moved to an all-White town and you want to be like White people now. [Her parents and relatives] said that when they were living back in Laos and Thailand, this never existed and how come it existed all of a sudden now in this day and age.

This absence of language and cultural recognition presents significant challenges for queer Hmong individuals during their coming out journeys, particularly with parents and grandparents who are not fluent in English.

Participants often disclosed their identities to friends or siblings before approaching their parents, anticipating rejection and fearing familial disownment. For many, the lack of equivalent Hmong terminology to describe their experiences created emotional distance, miscommunication, and misunderstanding. While some participants with more modern or English-speaking parents encountered some sort of acceptance, they also struggled with how to present their partners in culturally and linguistically appropriate ways, often defaulting to “best friend” when introducing partners to Hmong elders.

The absence of queer representation and language within the Hmong community contributes to the invisibility of LGBTQ+ experiences. As Bao previously pointed out, when there is no vocabulary for queer people, they are invisible. This erasure underscores the urgent need to create space for new narratives, vocabularies, and cultural understandings that affirm and legitimize queer Hmong identities, not just in English, but in Hmong

language and cultural discourse. By doing so, the community can begin to foster inclusion, acceptance, and belonging for queer Hmong individuals across generations within the U.S. and across the globe.

In using HmongCrit and Queer Hmong Epistemology, we can better understand how the absence of queer vocabulary in the Hmong language reflects historical shifts rather than a lack of queerness in Hmong life. The Romanized Popular Alphabet (RPA), developed by missionaries, was a starting point for literacy and cross-cultural communication, but it did not capture the full complexity of Hmong identity, including diverse expressions of gender and sexuality. HmongCrit helps us see how oppression, migration, colonization, and adaptation shaped what was preserved and what was left unspoken. At the same time, Queer Hmong Epistemology highlights the lived experiences, creativity, and agency of queer Hmong individuals who are actively redefining language and cultural understanding. Rather than erasure, these frameworks illuminate the evolving nature of Hmong culture and the growing efforts to create space for queer identities, which are rooted in love, kinship, and the continuity of tradition across generations.

### *Queer Hmong Redefining Education and Financial Dependency*

In the traditional Hmong culture, success is often defined through educational attainment, financial independence, and the ability to contribute to the well-being of one's family and community. Hmong parents place a high value on raising children who are academically accomplished and economically self-sufficient, with the expectation that adult children will provide financial support not only to their aging parents but also to siblings and the broader Hmong community. This collectivist orientation reflects the Hmong community's deep-rooted emphasis on interdependence, reciprocity, and familial duty.

However, for Hmong LGBTQ+ individuals, the meaning and implications of education and financial independence are shaped by additional layers of complexity. While they are equally encouraged to pursue success, many queer Hmong individuals internalize these expectations not solely as a means of honoring familial obligation, but as a necessary strategy for survival and self-preservation. For Yia, he worked hard to earn a master's degree and has a well-paid career, which provides

financial stability for him. Yia described how he mentally prepared himself to finally come out to his parents and siblings at age 30,

It was 30 years in the making. I was already in my 30s, already had a job, already secretly married my partner, already had a group of close friends, already built a safe support net . . . so I got to the point of where if my family rejects me, I have a place to go, a family that I've formed through friendship.

For some, financial independence becomes a prerequisite for leaving their parents' homes that may be unwelcoming or emotionally and/or physically unsafe due to rejection, shame, or hostility. The pressure to achieve higher education and financial independence are not only about fulfilling familial pride, but also about securing the autonomy needed to navigate life without the traditional safety net of their own parents and family. Teng knew that education and financial stability were key to being independent away from his unaccepting parents. Teng explained, "I earned a bachelor's degree, completed law school, and is currently preparing for my California Bar Exam. I have a full-time job and live on my own with roommates." Consequently, the pursuit of education and economic stability carries additional pressure and emotional and social meanings for queer Hmong youth compared to their heterosexual counterparts. As Bao tried to understand why families would disown their queer children, she stated,

I have accomplished so much in my life. I've been the one that is more involved at family events . . . in their eyes, I'm praiseworthy. . . . I've done all these things my whole life and you've loved me for it, but what about queerness changes what I've already done and who I've always been? It's important for families to consider why they suddenly have a change of heart toward a queer person when it's still the same person they've known their whole life.

Participants reported that from a young age, they recognized the necessity of education and financial independence in order to live authentically. Many internalized the belief that being different or identifying as queer could lead to rejection or disownment by their loved ones. Houa recalled, "When you're young, finance is something that can be held over your head...you're relying on these caretakers to care for you until you're able to care for yourself. Don't come out until you are absolutely

ready and financially stable.” Nine of the 10 participants obtained college degrees and are employed professionals who are financially independent. Among them, three own homes and live with their partners. Those who still reside with their parents have established professional careers and do not rely on their families for financial support; instead, they financially contribute to their parents and household expenses. Sheng, who identifies as a lesbian, acknowledged that her experience as a queer individual would differ from that of her siblings. She also expressed concerns that her parents and relatives would treat her differently, ultimately providing her with less emotional and financial support.

I knew I had to work harder than my siblings who are not queer.  
... I needed to be financially stable. ... I moved away for college.  
... I had to get a college degree so I can make more money ...  
so I can move out and live on my own even if it goes against my  
culture or my parents' wishes. I just had to survive on my own  
because I knew that I was going to find my wife and marry her  
someday.

While all Hmong children may view success as a way to give back to their families, some queer Hmong individuals are forced to view it as a critical tool for navigating potential isolation and creating alternative pathways to safety, acceptance, and self-determination. This divergence reveals how cultural expectations around success intersect with queerness in ways that reframe traditional Hmong values of collectivism, highlighting the tensions between individual survival and communal belonging for LGBTQ+ members of the Hmong diaspora.

HmongCrit and Queer Hmong Epistemology offer critical insight into how queer Hmong individuals uniquely navigate the cultural expectations of success. While non-queer Hmong children are often raised with the expectation that their educational and financial achievements will serve the family and community, queer Hmong individuals may experience these same goals through a different lens. For many, becoming educated and financially independent is not only about fulfilling cultural pride, it is also about gaining the autonomy to live authentically in environments that may not be fully accepting. These frameworks highlight how queer Hmong individuals anticipate the possibility of rejection or misunderstanding and prepare for independence at an earlier age. Education and financial stability become tools of resilience and survival, to provide the means to

maintain the love and peace while living with their family, or move out, create chosen families, and protect their well-being if familial support is withdrawn. Yet, rather than abandoning their cultural values, queer Hmong often reinterpret them. They continue to care for their families, attend community events, and uphold their heritage, while also creating new forms of kinship and self-determination that honor both their queerness and their Hmong identity.

### *Queer Hmong Children Preserving Parents' Face and Reputation*

In the Hmong culture, children are socialized from an early age to uphold their family's honor, safeguard their parents' reputation, and maintain the collective dignity of their clan. This strong sense of filial piety and communal accountability is deeply embedded within Hmong values, where a child's actions are perceived as direct reflections of parental success or failure. Within this Hmong framework, conformity to cultural norms is expected, while any deviation, especially with regard to gender and sexual identity, is often seen as a threat to familial and clan integrity. Among the most stigmatized acts a Hmong child can commit is to openly identify as queer, as such disclosures not only challenge heteronormative assumptions, but also disrupt long-standing beliefs around family roles, legacy, and cultural continuity.

This study reveals that queer Hmong individuals continue to internalize and uphold these cultural expectations and mindset to protect their parents' reputation, even as they struggle to live authentically. Participants consistently emphasized their efforts to protect their parents from public shame, particularly within the Hmong community, by remaining discreet, selectively navigating community spaces, and in many cases, avoiding large family gatherings altogether to prevent others from disrespecting their parents, grandparents, ancestors, and clans. For example, Houa expressed deep concern that her queer identity might undermine her academic and professional achievements and simultaneously "soil [her] parents' reputation." Her remarks underscore the dual burden queer Hmong individuals carry, the pain of concealing their identities and the emotional labor of shielding their families from judgment rooted in cultural and communal surveillance, in which her parents would be judged as bad parents. These tensions are intensified by the historical and political backdrop of the Hmong refugee experience. As Houa further articulated,

For Hmong parents, their first instinct is to protect their child no matter what people say but at the same time, Hmong refugee parents were taught that reputation and what the world and the community think about you supersedes how you love your children and family because it matters how outsiders see you. At the same time, queer children do not want to come out to the community because they also want to protect their parents and their reputation. It hurts me when people talk badly about my parents so I will protect my parents. My parents did everything for me, sacrificed for me. How dare people say that my parents aren't good parents just because I'm queer.

In this sense, love and support become dependent on how well a child represents their family through the lens of communal perception and collective honor. Participants like Xee and Tou echoed similar sentiments, expressing reluctance to be visible within their families for fear that their queerness might tarnish the public image of their parents, particularly when their parents hold respected positions within the clan system. Although Tou no longer attends family gatherings, he still fears that his parents' reputation may be damaged by others who are homophobic in the Hmong community. Tou mentioned, "My dad is well-known in the community, someone important amongst the family clan. I don't want to see him get backlash or disrespected, it's unfair to him." By removing themselves from environments where they face judgment, they have learned to disregard negative remarks and prioritize their own well-being. Many continue to exist quietly in the shadows as a means of shielding their parents and grandparents from societal scrutiny while finding peace in living life on their own terms. As Xee stated:

My parents are well-known in the community. . . . I don't want to ruin their reputation. I'm scared about what people will think of them if our relatives know that I'm queer. My cousins are already wondering why my hair is short like a boy . . . why I wear baggy clothes, why I don't come around to large gatherings anymore, why I'm not married and have kids yet because I have a master's degree. I'm ok with not attending events anymore. . . . I don't want to deal with that.

Despite the marginalization that queer Hmong individuals face, many

participants in this study described their self-imposed withdrawal from community life as a form of agency, self-preservation, and respect for their parents. For some, distancing from judgmental environments created space for healing and self-acceptance.

These narratives demonstrate how queer Hmong individuals must constantly negotiate between authenticity and obligation, self-care and cultural loyalty. They also exposed how silence became a strategy of protection, for themselves and their families, highlighting the complex emotional terrain in which love, shame, and duty are deeply entangled. As José Esteban Muñoz (1999) reminds us in *Disidentifications*, queer people of color often survive by tactically engaging with cultural codes that deny them full recognition. Through strategic withdrawal, quiet resilience, and selective participation, queer Hmong individuals continue to resist erasure while seeking ways to exist meaningfully within and beyond the boundaries of their cultural worlds.

Applying HmongCrit and Queer Hmong Epistemology is vital for making visible the complex ways that queer Hmong individuals navigate cultural and familial expectations in a Western context that often misunderstands or overlooks their experiences. HmongCrit offers a lens that situates queer Hmong identity within the historical and political trauma of war, displacement, and racialization in the U.S., highlighting how Hmong values around family honor, obedience, and clan reputation are not simply cultural, but are deeply shaped by intergenerational survival strategies. Meanwhile, Queer Hmong Epistemology centers the knowledge, resilience, and emotional intelligence that queer Hmong people develop to negotiate their queerness in ways that protect their parents from shame while still embracing personal authenticity. In Western discourse, coming out is often framed as liberation through visibility, but for queer Hmong individuals, silence, strategic absence, or selective disclosure can be acts of deep cultural love and survival. These frameworks challenge Western binaries of acceptance versus rejection and instead, uncover how queer Hmong individuals remain loyal to their families while resisting heteronormative norms through quiet, culturally situated forms of resistance. By engaging these frameworks, Western scholars can better understand and appreciate that queer Hmong people are not merely victims of tradition, but active agents in reshaping what kinship, success, and identity can look like within and beyond themselves and their cultural

communities.

### *Negotiating Grandparents' Love and Coming out*

Throughout Hmong history and cultural traditions, grandparents hold a sacred and revered position within the family structure. Elders are not only seen as sources of wisdom, but are also honored as the foundational pillars of the family lineage, the creators of life, who carry spiritual, cultural, and ancestral knowledge. Within the multigenerational Hmong household, grandparents are often co-parents and primary caregivers, especially for first- and second-generation Hmong children in the U.S. whose parents had to work long hours in labor-intensive or low-wage jobs to support their families following their resettlement as refugees. This intergenerational caregiving model, deeply embedded in Hmong collectivist values, stands in contrast to Western frameworks that often downgrade grandparents to secondary or auxiliary roles. This caregiving arrangement is rooted in Hmong collectivism and a survivalist ethic developed through war, displacement, and statelessness, resisting Western notions of nuclear family structures and the reduction of grandparents to passive “babysitters.” Instead, in Hmong families, grandparents are central figures whose emotional support, protection, and wisdom shape the lives and values of their grandchildren from the day they were born.

From a HmongCrit lens, the intergenerational relationship between Hmong grandparents and grandchildren must be understood within a context of racialized displacement, cultural preservation, and generational survival. HmongCrit recognizes that Hmong families are entangled in systems of racialization, war trauma, and structural invisibility in both U.S. institutions and broader discourses of the Western identity. The love between Hmong grandparents and grandchildren, then, is not merely emotional, but also political and cultural, that reflects an embodied form of resistance and resilience. Grandparents, often displaced elders who survived the Secret War in Laos, refugee camps in Thailand, and American resettlement, become vessels of cultural continuity. Their love is not only unconditional, but also protective, serving as a shield against historical erasure and cultural loss.

HmongCrit asserts that this grandparental love is a form of generational armor passed onto children navigating a racialized U.S.

society that often fails to see or value them. The bond between Hmong grandchildren and their grandparents is characterized by a unique form of unconditional love, one that is tender, nurturing, and deeply spiritual. Participants described their grandparents' affection as softer and more patient than that of their parents, often interpreting it as a second chance for grandparents to express love, gentleness, and affirmation that may have been constrained in their parenting years due to war, displacement, and poverty. Houa reflected on this, stating, "It is like they got a second chance of raising children so they're nicer and more loving." Grandparents often serve as cultural anchors, bridging traditional Hmong customs with the realities of growing up in the U.S., and their presence within the household conveys a sense of continuity, legacy, and emotional grounding.

Within this relational structure, Queer Hmong Epistemology brings to light the tensions, silences, and contradictions that queer Hmong grandchildren experience as they navigate their identities in the shadows of cultural expectations. Queer Hmong Epistemology recognizes that queerness, while often untranslatable in Hmong language and tradition, is not absent, and therefore, it is embodied, lived, and negotiated through everyday acts of survival and relational care. Participants in this study disclosed that while they deeply cherish the love of their grandparents, they consciously choose not to reveal their queer identities. This silence is not simply avoidance; rather, it is an epistemological act of care and protection, rooted in culture and intergenerational loyalty. Sheng, for example, expressed, "coming out to them would be like dropping a bomb on them," highlighting not only the emotional weight of the decision but the cultural stakes involved in disrupting traditional gendered and spiritual roles that grandparents uphold. She explained that her closeness to her paternal grandparents is too precious to risk, saying she is "not ready to have the line to be cut between [her] and [her] grandparents."

Despite this deep love, all participants in this study reported withholding their queer identities from their grandparents. This choice is driven by profound respect, love, and concern for their grandparents' emotional and physical well-being. Participants expressed fear that disclosure would not only challenge their grandparents' worldview, one shaped by traditional norms and spiritual beliefs, but also potentially rupture the loving relationships that have sustained them throughout their lives. For Sheng, Houa, Xee, Tou, Bao, and Chao, the decision to remain

silent is not rooted in shame about their queer identity, but in the desire to protect a cherished bond with their aging grandparents. Participants emphasized that their grandparents, having survived war, grief and loss, and forced migration, deserve peace and emotional ease in their later years. Tou, whose bond with his grandmother is marked by deep affection and reverence, stated, “She’s been through so much in her life...surviving the war... raising my father and his siblings and grandchildren. She’s old. I don’t want to burden her with the stress of me.” His wish to come out before his grandmother passes away is blocked by the deep fear of losing her love if she were to misunderstand or reject his identity. Similarly, Houa and Xee described their decisions not to disclose their identities as conscious acts of love and sacrifice, choosing peace over disruption, and connection over confrontation. As Houa stated, “If that’s the one thing I have to sacrifice to keep the peace in my family, then I’m okay with it.” Xee echoed this sentiment, affirming that “maintaining a peaceful relationship with them is for the best...it serves me some positive benefits and serves them a good grandchild.”

This sentiment illustrates how queer Hmong knowledge is relational and context dependent, where it is shaped not through declarations of identity but through careful navigation of familial love, respect, and emotional preservation. Queer Hmong Epistemology centers this nuanced silence not as weakness, but as a form of strategic intimacy, where queer individuals prioritize emotional safety and the preservation of intergenerational relationships over visibility. Therefore, the love between Hmong grandparents and grandchildren must be understood not only through emotional or cultural lenses, but through the intertwined frameworks of HmongCrit and Queer Hmong Epistemology. These frameworks reveal how love, silence, identity, and resistance co-exist within queer Hmong experiences, where the act of protecting one’s grandparents from cultural rupture is a deeply loving and cultural decision. As participants find ways to live authentically while preserving ancestral bonds, they embody a distinctly Hmong queer resilience, one shaped by love, complexity, and survival. Their silence is not evidence of personal denial, but rather an embodiment of cultural love, one that prioritizes the emotional security of elders over personal disclosure.

Ultimately, the stories of these participants demonstrate how queer Hmong individuals continue to navigate their identities within a deeply

relational and culture-bound framework. Their love for their grandparents remains steadfast, even as they suppress parts of themselves to preserve that love. In doing so, they embody a form of resilience that speaks not only to their strength, but also to the profound emotional intelligence and cultural fluency required to exist at the intersection of queerness and Hmong traditions.

## **Discussion**

### *Section 1: Early Research on the Hmong*

In acknowledging the Hmong people's unique history, familial structure, and multi-layered intersectionality, it is evident that they are a resilient community that has survived the deadliest war in American history and is thriving after resettling in the U.S. Despite their status as a stateless people, Hmong individuals have demonstrated remarkable adaptability, integrating into diverse cultural, national, and global landscapes while maintaining their traditions and cultural heritage.

However, in the 21st century, there remains a lack of written and recording form of documentation of Hmong people's existence and history of statelessness, persecution, genocide, and forced migration experience. When the first Hmong families resettled in the U.S. in the mid-1970s and then a bigger wave of Hmong refugees surfaced in the 1980s and 1990s, scholars had a fascination with this increasing population in the U.S. since the absence of knowledge about the Hmong stemmed from their lack of having a centralized home country to refer back to. The U.S. government assumed that the Hmong people were Laotian or Thai due to their homeland in Laos and later in the refugee camps in Thailand. Therefore, early scholarly work about the Hmong people was written by non-Hmong researchers. As new refugees in the U.S., the Hmong people did not speak, read, write, and understand the English language. The non-Hmong scholars heavily relied on Hmong refugee students and children with minimal education in the U.S. to translate while conducting research; therefore, the Hmong stories, experiences, and way of life have been misinterpreted and lost in translation in early published scholarly work.

The distinct worldview and way of life of the Hmong people have given rise to culturally specific phrases, metaphors, and expressions that

hold meaning only within the Hmong context. When U.S. scholars used the Hmong refugees as interpreters for research purposes in the earlier days, many of the interpreters spoke limited English. Moreover, when they translated interviews conducted in Hmong into English, and those translations were further shaped by non-Hmong researchers or authors during the writing process, the original meaning and theoretical insights often become distorted or illegible to Hmong audiences. This process risks erasing the cultural logic and epistemologies embedded in the original narratives. As a result, the research may no longer reflect an authentic understanding of the Hmong experience. Instead, it becomes centered on how non-Hmong researchers interpret or frame Hmong stories, shifting the focus away from the Hmong themselves and toward an outsider's attempt to make sense of their lives through a Western lens.

## *Section 2: Hmong LGBTQ+ Absence in U.S. Queer and Ethnic Scholarship*

Over the past three decades, queer studies and ethnic studies have increasingly examined the intersections of race, culture, and sexuality. Central to this expansion is the queer of color critique, a framework that challenges the Whiteness of mainstream queer theory and the ethnocentrism of ethnic studies. Scholars such as José Esteban Muñoz (1999), Roderick Ferguson (2004), and Cathy J. Cohen (1997) have emphasized that queer identities are deeply shaped by systems of race, class, coloniality, and heteropatriarchy. Their work critiques the universalizing tendencies of LGBTQ+ discourse, arguing that queerness cannot be fully understood apart from race, class, coloniality, and heteropatriarchy.

Other scholars such as Ho and Blackwood (2022) have critically expanded queer frameworks by examining how power, intimacy, citizenship, and sexual identity operate across diverse Asian contexts, including Japan, Taiwan, Indonesia, Hong Kong, the Philippines, and the U.S. These contributions are part of a broader project to reframe “Queer Asia” not as an imitation of Western queer theory, but as a method and critique grounded in local genealogies and cultural specificities (Chiang & Wong, 2017; Yue, 2017). Drawing on Chen's (2010) “Asia as method,” such scholarship seeks to decenter Euro-American epistemologies and instead, elevate theories and practices emerging from within Asia itself. However, despite this regional turn, the majority of this work continues to center dominant or nationally recognized Asian groups, leaving

stateless, refugee, and indigenous populations, such as the Hmong, largely absent from academic discourse. As Gopinath (2005) notes, mapping queer geographies across Asia requires attention to transnational and alternative forms of subjectivity. Yet, Hmong LGBTQ+ individuals whose identities are shaped by forced displacement, ancestral obligations, clan-based kinship, and spirituality remain undertheorized and excluded even within these progressive scholarly conversations.

This study calls attention to fill the gap in queer Hmong research by advancing HmongCrit and Queer Hmong Epistemology as necessary frameworks to make visible the lived experiences and systems of Hmong LGBTQ+ people. These frameworks insist on the inclusion of stateless and minoritized Asian communities in academic and activist discourse, expanding what counts as “Queer Asia” and challenging scholars to recognize how epistemic erasure persists, even in decolonial projects that aim to center Asian voices. By integrating HmongCrit and Queer Hmong Epistemology into academic discourse, we can begin to develop frameworks that authentically reflect the realities of queer Hmong individuals.

### *Section 3: Hmong Intersectionality Contributions to Existing Scholarship*

Additionally, the intersection of the Hmong identity with queerness remains underexplored, largely due to the absence of theoretical frameworks that capture the complexity of being both Hmong and queer. Existing theoretical models fail to encompass the nuanced experiences of queer Hmong individuals, necessitating the development of new perspectives such as HmongCrit (Xiong, 2020) and Queer Hmong Epistemology (Lee, 2024). These emerging frameworks allow for a culturally relevant understanding of Hmong identity while centering the lived experiences of queer Hmong individuals and their reimagination of a community that accepts them as cultural preservers, healers, protectors, and human rights advocates.

Hmong LGBTQ+ experiences provide a critical yet underexamined lens through which to extend and complicate intersectionality theory. Emerging from a stateless, clan-based society characterized by deeply embedded expectations surrounding lineage, gender performance, and spiritual continuity, Hmong cultural frameworks produce distinct forms

of tension for queer individuals navigating multiple and overlapping sites of marginalization. While intersectionality has traditionally illuminated the intersections of marginalized identities such as race, gender, class, and sexuality, it often operates within a U.S. epistemological framework through legal disputes with a marginalized person against the state, government, or other systems of power. The existing intersectionality framework neglects culturally specific modalities of oppression, particularly those rooted in ancestry, spirituality, and collective familial obligations. For Hmong LGBTQ+ individuals, identity formation is shaped not only by structural racism and heteronormativity in U.S. contexts, but also by intra-community imperatives to preserve clan honor, perform gendered rituals, and maintain ancestral and spiritual ties. In this context, intersectionality reads as a marginalized member, the queer Hmong person, against their governing body which is the Hmong 18 Clan System and patriarchal family structure. Integrating Hmong cultural contexts into intersectional analysis compels scholars to move beyond rigid structural categories and consider the cultural, spiritual, and diasporic dimensions of identity. In doing so, it extends intersectionality to engage with more cultural systems beyond the U.S. institutions, where queerness is negotiated not solely through institutional power, but also through kinship systems, ritual practices, and cultural survival.

The narratives shared by participants in this study reveal how existing critical race and queer theories fall short in accounting for the specific cultural and historical experiences of Hmong LGBTQ+ individuals. While often grouped under the broad category of Asian American, the Hmong people's statelessness, wartime displacement, genocide, and clan-based cultural systems set them apart from other Southeast Asian groups such as Vietnamese, Cambodian, Laotian, or Thai communities. The participants' stories highlighted the complex ways in which identity is negotiated not only through race, gender, sexuality, and nationhood, but also through ancestral ties, spiritual expectations, and obligations to uphold familial structures and lineages. These dimensions remain largely absent in mainstream frameworks.

#### ***Section 4: Cultivating and Developing Hmong-Centered Frameworks and Models***

In America, queer Hmong people have the freedom to be openly queer

as a constitutional right. However, we (Hmong community, researcher, etc.) must still understand or recognize that queer Hmong people also operate within the Hmong family structure and clan system that looks negatively upon queerness, as we worry about birthing for future generations. HmongCrit offers a vital model for centering these nuanced experiences as these relate to the Hmong identity. It recognizes that to be Hmong is already complex enough with a multiple situated identity, one shaped by the trauma of statelessness, refugee displacement, and clan-based cultural expectations. HmongCrit holds space for the internal conflicts that arise from navigating ancestral responsibility, gender performance, and Western social systems, which often operate in contradiction. HmongCrit ensures that a Hmong person's identities and experiences are considered holistically, even when discussions around their intersectional identities and experiences are dominated by non-Hmong or Western discourses. For this reason, it discourages non-Hmong discourses to separate a Hmong person from their Hmongness.

Building on this, Lee (2024) introduced Queer Hmong Epistemology as a critical framework that foregrounds the voices, knowledge, and worldviews of Hmong LGBTQ+ individuals. This epistemology affirms that queer Hmong people do not merely inhabit marginal positions; instead, they produce knowledge that challenges dominant logics of normativity and universality. In alignment with Muñoz's (1999) notion of *disidentification*, Hmong queer individuals often creatively and critically engage with the expectations of both their cultural and national communities, not wholly assimilating, yet not entirely rejecting. Their identity work resists fixed categories and instead forms what Muñoz (1999, p. 4) calls "survival strategies within the cultural logic of heteronormativity and racialization." Similarly, Cohen's (1997) critique of mainstream queer politics as overly narrow and assimilationist applies here; Queer Hmong Epistemology refuses the idea that queerness must align with Western frameworks of visibility, individuality, or liberal identity politics. Instead, it honors silence, relational duty, and spiritual belief as valid modes of surviving, resisting, and thriving in the Hmong community and the U.S.

By paying attention to storytelling, ritual memory, spiritual symbolism, and embodied practices, Queer Hmong Epistemology legitimizes ways of knowing that are often dismissed in dominant academic discourse. It recognizes that queerness, for Hmong individuals,

is not only a matter of sexual orientation or gender identity, but is entangled with spirituality, kinship, and the afterlife. Together, HmongCrit and Queer Hmong Epistemology push intersectionality beyond structural analysis, urging scholars to consider how statelessness, cultural epistemologies, and ancestral ties shape the meaning and expression of queerness. These frameworks not only center Hmong voices, but also contribute to the larger queer of color critique by illustrating the transformative potential of theorizing from the margins of the margins. Queer Hmong Epistemology recognizes these expressions not as deviations from normativity but as legitimate, situated forms of theorizing. It values the ways Hmong queer individuals navigate rejection and resilience, invisibility and emergence, and silence and survival. Together with HmongCrit, it builds a culturally grounded, intersectional framework that not only centers Hmong voices but expands what counts as theory and whose knowledge is seen as valid in academic and community discourse.

## **Conclusion**

Being Hmong is, in itself, an intersectional identity, one that is shaped by the convergence of marginalized culture, ethnicity, language, religion, social class, generational status, and ancestral ties. As a stateless people with a history of genocide, forced migration, and resettlement, Hmong individuals often navigate complex layers of identity that include expectations tied to familial and clan structures, spiritual practices, and cultural preservation. These dimensions are further compounded by socioeconomic challenges, religious obligations, and intergenerational dynamics, particularly within Hmong refugee contexts. For many, to be Hmong is to constantly negotiate belonging and legitimacy within systems of power along lines of identity formation, making Hmong identity inherently intersectional, even before additional aspects of identity such as queerness, gender, or class are considered. This notion of Hmong identity being inherently intersectional therefore remains constant across the global Hmong community, but differs in the context of where they relocated geographically across the globe.

Despite ongoing efforts to foster inclusivity in the U.S., Hmong LGBTQ+ identities remain taboo within Hmong communities, academic discourse, and professional spaces. The lack of language and terminology in Hmong to describe queerness and LGBTQ+ identities creates significant

barriers for queer Hmong individuals in communicating with their parents, grandparents, and elders. Without culturally specific models or guidance, queer Hmong individuals must navigate their identities in isolation, often reimagining and creating new spaces where they can exist within, rather than outside of the Hmong cultural norms. However, these efforts remain constrained by an unspoken cultural norm that queerness is incompatible with dominant Hmong traditions. Unlike Western narratives of coming out, the experiences of queer Hmong individuals are shaped by complex familial and generational hierarchies that extend beyond immediate family units to include clan structures and communal reputation. The coming out process for queer Hmong individuals is not merely a personal act of self-identification but a deeply communal negotiation of belonging, survival, and familial duty.

Despite these challenges, the narratives of queer Hmong individuals reveal a profound commitment to family, cultural preservation, and ancestral reverence. Their queerness does not negate their Hmongness; rather, it redefines and expands it. While previous studies have focused primarily on the struggles and marginalization of queer Hmong individuals, the findings in this study highlight their resilience, agency, and deep familial loyalty and contributions. Their lived experiences echo the courage of their Hmong ancestors, especially the Hmong soldiers who made immense sacrifices and those who died during war to pave the way for the Hmong people to have a better life in America. For many queer Hmong individuals, choosing to remain in the shadows of their parents and grandparents is an act of bravery and selflessness, a form of cultural preservation that prioritizes family honor over personal visibility. This tension between visibility and familial duty underscores the urgent need for further research, advocacy, and culturally specific resources that support queer Hmong individuals and their families while respecting the collectivist values of the Hmong community.

## **Recommendations**

In moving toward a more inclusive and culturally grounded scholarship, it is essential for both queer and non-queer Hmong scholars, as well as non-Hmong researchers, and community partners and allies to engage deeply with Hmong epistemologies such as HmongCrit and Queer Hmong Epistemology to develop culturally relevant and sustainable

resources. These frameworks not only center the lived experiences of Hmong LGBTQ+ individuals but also preserve the cultural integrity of their stories and wishes for the future. As Chao powerfully stated, “We need to unpack all of the hurt and fear from the Hmong community and forgive and move forward together.” This call to action reflects a communal desire for healing and understanding. Xee emphasized the importance of cultural transformation through empathy and education: “Help Hmong people to process and normalize LGBTQ. Help them understand that it is ok to love their child regardless of their sexual orientation . . . acceptance is acknowledging that LGBTQ exists in the community, it shouldn’t need to be shunned.” These testimonies speak to a need for not only visibility but active normalization of queer identities within Hmong families and communities. Tou’s reflection illustrates the generational potential for change:

I think my siblings felt bad . . . they know it’s not easy to be queer.  
I think that by me sharing my identity with them, I hope that  
they do better as allies who don’t have to navigate the culture in  
the community as an outcast.

To honor these narratives, scholars must shift away from Western-dominant frameworks that often erase or misinterpret Hmong experiences, and instead root their analyses in community-based, culturally fluent approaches that allow Hmong people to define themselves on their own terms.

Lastly, to foster culturally responsive social development, funders and Hmong-serving organizations must invest in healing spaces specifically for queer Hmong individuals and their families and community. Currently, very few Hmong-led organizations throughout the U.S. are equipped with the funding or structure to support queer Hmong healing and community-building. Participants consistently emphasized the value of culturally affirming spaces. For example, Sheng shared that organizations like Youth Leadership Institute and Fresno Barrios Unidos in California gave her “a sense of belonging.” Houa found support through Gender and Sexuality Alliance networks and the Hmong National Development Conference, saying, “I met other queer Hmong youth and adults who kept me going.” Teng added, “Having queer friends from community organizing work and a queer therapist really helped me in my healing journey.”

These reflections show that healing happens in safe community spaces. Funding must prioritize queer Hmong-led healing circles, mental health access, and leadership development. As Chao expressed, “We need to unpack all the hurt and move forward together.” These investments are not optional, they are essential for the Hmong American community’s future of transformation and long-term inclusion.

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