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Abstract
Queer theory has had a central premise since its foundation: to destabilize identities and understand them as contested sociocultural constructs. This article combines conceptual elements from queer theory and phenomenology to understand the formation of queer subjectivities and experiences. This research was conducted by studying adult queer book clubs in Quito, Ecuador. Through an ethnographical methodology, the processes of subjectivation within these communities are reconstructed, as well as their cultural practices. The result is an insight into queer populations that suggests that their queer experiences transcend the categories of homosexuality and transsexuality, and are instead shaped by identifications, life trajectories, and shared experiences. Finally, it conceives a *marica*[1] experience category that takes local conditions and intersectional relations[2] under consideration.

Keywords
Queer Theory; Phenomenology; Gender; Qualitative Research; LGBTIQ+

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[1] *Marica* is one of several terms commonly used in Latin America to refer to queer people with a homophobic undertone.
[2] This paper is a direct result of a doctoral research to obtain the PhD degree in Anthropology and Communication. It received no external funding.

Introduction

Words carry a history, political weight, and symbolic potential to understand reality. The terms 'lesbian', 'gay', and 'trans' have been resources to visibilize and advocate for sex/gender dissidents since the mid-20th century. Despite their political horizon, the LGBTIA+[3] acronym today poses a couple of challenges. First, it tries to encompass a range of subjectivities with diverse conditions and characteristics, leading to fragmentation. Then, it aims to create a sense of belonging and community among people who do not always feel represented within these initials. Although the 'essentialism' of certain identities is a strategic resource for advocacy, it also tends to generate feelings of exclusion among members of these communities and can hinder dialogue between people whose experiences have more in common than what identity tags initially reveal.

This article draws on elements of queer theory and phenomenology to develop a broad understanding of what it means to have a 'queer experience' and to answer the question: what elements define the life trajectories of people whose subjectivities and representations are stated as 'queer'? It is important to clarify that the research approach was predominantly qualitative. It aims not to generalize but to examine the narratives these individuals have created about their lives in order to understand what it means to inhabit the world from a standpoint of dissidence/disorientation, and to imagine a reality where identity and gender transcend the constraints of heteronormative imposition (Berná, 2011).

This research was carried out in Quito, capital city of Ecuador. As of today, the country legislation is progressive in terms of LGBTIA+ rights but with few effective public policies (Argüello Pazmiño, 2012). Homosexuality was decriminalized in 1997, and same-sex marriage and self-determination of gender identity were legalized in 2019 and 2022 respectively. However, there are no educational programs regarding diversity in schools, and queer socialization is broadly limited to parties, social media, small groups and somewhat clandestine locals (Lobato Fuente, 2024). Ecuador was declared a plurinational state in its 2008 Constitution, which states a 'non-discrimination' principle. Yet, it remains a rather conservative society with prejudices deeply rooted in religion and misogyny. Quito's population attitude towards sex/gender diversity could be defined as a 'don't ask, don't tell' discourse (Aguirre Aráuz, 2010).

Methodology

This work is rooted in phenomenology. According to this philosophical paradigm, studying reality involves not only examining its objective aspects —what we perceive as cognitive experiences (Husserl, 2015)— but also understanding the intersubjective nature of social phenomena. Without denying materiality, Husserl (2015) emphasizes how facts gain meaning through an individual's life history and are experienced as meaningful content. This study explores how queer people perceive reality and develop their identities, gender, sexuality, emotions, and cultural consumption. Their experiences are understood as narratives shaped by a network of texts, contexts, and social relationships, reflecting their life trajectories as gendered individuals (Ahmed, 2019).

'What would it mean for queer studies if we posed the question of sexual orientation as a phenomenological question?' (Ahmed, 2019, p.12). This work proposes an introspection into people's sexual orientation and gender identity as ways of experiencing the world. Orientation shapes our bodies, practices, roles, and subjectivities. Analyzing queerness through phenomenology means examining it internally, as an experience of disorder and contingency, reflecting on how bodies inhabit spaces, incorporate intersectional perspectives,

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[3] Currently, there is a complex discussion concerning the letters (identities) composing this acronym. The absence of the letter Q is grounded in the argument that queer is a non-identitarian concept, as will be explained in this paper. Thus, this acronym will be replaced by the term 'queer' to encompass all sex/gender diverse subjectivities, except when it refers to historical and political movements that have been established under the acronym.

and acquire an 'orientation'(Ahmed, 2019). It is an experience that confronts us with the familiar and the unknown, a form of appropriation[4] leading us to inhabit spaces of enunciation and find a 'familiar home' where heteronormativity is a point of pressure.

Phenomenology is an inductive epistemological approach that connects the visible (materiality) with the invisible (thought). Husserl (2015) views creating knowledge as a relational process grounded in perception and direct experience, but also infers about what we do not directly experience. This approach is inductive because it reconstructs the unknown from what is perceived, remembered, and discussed, applying interpretation to specific cases. Phenomenology challenges positivism by emphasizing that knowledge is deeply linked to our experiences and subjectivities. It highlights the interplay between experience, meaning, and objects, to examine the intersubjective nature of knowledge. This approach develops an understanding of what is 'real' through dialogue and empathetic engagement, to acknowledge other realities while fostering imagination and reflection.

Studies intersecting phenomenology with queer theory are not unprecedented. Ahmed (2019) reinterprets Merleau-Ponty's 'orientation' and 'queer' perception concepts to understand sexuality and gender as spatial phenomena that explain how bodies orient towards each other and become 'disoriented' in regard to compulsory heteronormativity. Subsequent works have applied phenomenological approaches to analyze the storytelling of 'queer' historical figures (Mossop, 2025) and fictional creations (Towle et al., 2025); others have applied it to examine the lives and experiences of queer people nowadays in regard to diverse phenomena such as parenthood (Cohen & Oreg, 2025; Levy & Middleton, 2025), spirituality (Kerney et al., 2025), education (Sáenz Macana et al., 2025), social media (Eickers, 2024), among others. Phenomenology links the study of cultural practices and life trajectories. What these studies have in common is a qualitative approach that relies on case studies and ethnography to gain insight into these experiences and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) as a method for interpretation.

Experiences create individual and social meaning by the repetition of events that gain significance over time. Ahmed (2019) argues that orientations and trajectories are culturally mapped and developed through repetition and performance. The queer experience, therefore, can be studied by observing repetitive practices, their spatial and temporal contexts, the meanings assigned by individuals, and their personal narratives.

Figari (2012) defines 'queer semiotics' as a way of understanding bodily performances that resignify the symbolic order of sex/gender norms. Corporality, gender, and desire are shaped by symbolic orders such as the male/female dichotomy, heteronormativity, customs, rituals, and language. Our bodies are configured as much by what we do (performance) as by what we say (language). Queer subjectivities become a place for semiotic tensions because they resignify these ideological orders through different mechanisms such as symbols (Wolowic et al., 2017), words (He, 2011), cultural consumption (Peele, 2011) or political and personal statements (Leap, 2012; Parhuc, 2012). Although there is a long tradition of semiotic studies that approach queer identities, representation, symbols and political discourse, the most significant for this research was Martínez's proposal of a semiotic-phenomenology as a theoretical and methodological framework that approaches particular experiences without essentializing them:

> Semiotic phenomenology achieves this because of the way it understands the relationship between a given moment of experience, our awareness of that experience, and the semiotic systems within which those experiences and awareness are situated (Martínez, 2003, p.120).

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[4] The term 'appropriation' is here understood from a semiotic perspective, which defines it as the process of internalizing meaning of a certain social or cultural practice. It does not possess a negative significance because people appropriate meaning constantly from their surroundings (Verón, 2014).

The methodological framework intertwined concepts and epistemological perspectives from phenomenology, semiotics and queer theory to examine the symbolic dimensions of queer people's experiences. Its design was flexible in terms of the techniques for data collection and analysis. The sample consisted of participants from two reading book clubs who self-identify as *marica* (queer) in Quito, Ecuador. Fieldwork began in January 2022 in an existing club until October 2023. The second club was created in July 2023 and data was obtained through workshop sessions from July to November 2023. The first club was chosen as a relevant site for analysis because it was a newly formed community comprised by a heterogeneous population in terms of age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic background. It included people who identify within the spectrum of sex/gender diversity and others self-identified as cis-heterosexual, yet they all expressed scientific, political and literary interest regarding queer and feminist discussions. The second club was designed in collaboration with a public library, becoming an experimental space with the aim of fostering reading habits and discussions regarding gender and sexuality. The library invited participants through its social media and broadcast, so the group comprised a diverse population of people between the ages of 21 and 35. The study was announced to this group during the first session, and they all consented to participate.

The ethnography was carried out through participatory observation on both groups. My role in the first group was that of a participant, whereas in the second club, I actively mediated discussions and implemented a workshop protocol Sessions were registered through written logs that reflected on the group interactions, discussions, creations, and interpretations (Berná, 2011; Abu-Lughod, 2019). The logs contributed to preliminary interpretations, they were written down immediately after each session, which help orienting the analysis later on. Audio recordings of the first club's sessions started on the second year of observation when my insider status was consolidated. It is important to note that my role in the first group was that of a participant, whereas in the second club, I took on the role of an active mediator and implemented a workshop protocol.

Sixteen in-depth interviews were conducted with eight participants (four from each club) to gain deeper insight into their life trajectories. These participants were chosen based on their engagement with the group, regular attendance, and diverse sociodemographic background. Two interviews were conducted with each participant using a questionnaire of open-ended questions. In the first session, they were asked about their reading habits, motivations for joining the group, and perceptions of the book club and its methodology. The second session focused more on their experiences related to sexuality and gender identity. Each interview was divided into two parts. The first involved answering the questionnaire, while the second applied a timeline methodology inspired by Ahmed's (2019) approach to studying trajectories. Participants were instructed to draw a timeline with their significant readings (session 1) and significant queer experiences (session 2). No specific definition was given for what accounted as 'significant' or 'queer experience'. Instead, participants were encouraged to freely interpret these terms, allowing for deeper understanding of how they made sense of their experiences and the connections they formed.

This methodology was tested in previous research (Polo-Rojas, 2018). Although the linear structure of the timelines might seem at odds with Ahmed's (2019) more iterative view of trajectories, they were merely used as a didactic and representational tool. They help to identify significant events based on certain goals and aspirations. Causality is observed in retrospect, encouraging participants to represent their own memory. After completing their timelines, participants reflected on the meaning of their experiences through follow-up questions based on their own explanations. In practice, their interpretations were iterative and nonlinear, despite the linear format of their graphical representation. Thus, this methodology proved a useful empirical application of Ahmed's concept.

It is important to note that my involvement with the groups comes from an epistemological stance that does not aim for positivist objectivity. Instead, it recognizes that self-awareness and subjectivity are integral to what Haraway (1995) calls 'situated

knowledge'. This is not fixed but delimited by the material and symbolic orientations that influence how individuals create meaning. Haraway promotes a localized epistemology, where partiality and the absence of universality are inherent aspects of rational knowledge production.

Identifying myself as a queer/*marica* person allowed me to connect with these groups and enabled mutual understanding. In a way, the knowledge produced by these interactions is not only situated but communal. This statement elicits a knowledge that takes advantage of direct-shared experiences to establish an empathetic dialogue with others. Ethnography was chosen as a method precisely because of its participatory design. Furthermore, from a feminist perspective, ethnography is a situated method where the researcher acknowledges both their differences and similarities in relation with the people they study. As Abu-Lughod (2019) explains, ethnographers recognize their affinity and responsibility toward the community they study and, rather than distancing themselves, embrace that connection. Similarly, the interviews were conducted as dialogic interviews, searching for shared experiences and common narratives (Berná, 2011). Thus, acknowledging my own subjectivity during this project was not incidental, but intentional. It is both a privileged position from which to explore a community from within and a scientific responsibility to recognize them as individuals rather than objects.

Conceiving a queer experience
From a phenomenological perspective, every experience reflects a structured and meaningful process. It is shaped by how we perceive and exchange perceptions, which allows us to grasp the thoughts and intentions of others in a given context. We make sense of reality through the awareness we develop from our immediate experiences and life trajectories (Husserl, 2015). The timeline methodology was developed to explore participants' sense of reality in relation to their own life trajectories. Awareness, however, is an intentional projection, directed toward objects as part of the environment we inhabit, which in turn gives meaning to our experiences (Ahmed, 2019). Participants pointed out ordinary objects (such as books, films, or clothing) as having a significant role in their trajectories. Figure 1 displays the queer timeline drawn by Safo, a participant who declares themselves as non-binary and asexual, and balances a dual persona as a school teacher and drag queen with an elicit interest in philosophy and literature. Their shows are filled with literary and aesthetic symbolism referring to their experiences. As shown on their timeline, objects such as sandals and dresses, or spaces like school and side streets played a significant role in the development of Safo's sense of identity and drag character.

Objects, people, and spaces leave impressions on us that both are individual and collective. For example, when we see a body that attracts us, it leaves an impression on our minds (aesthetic, sexual, or emotional), shaped by unconscious discourses that influence what we are drawn to. Ahmed (2019) suggests that orientation is a way of perception that depends on our position within space. It acts as a 'locus of enunciation' because bodies and objects gain their orientation depending on how they are pointed to one another.

Figure 1. Safo's queer timeline
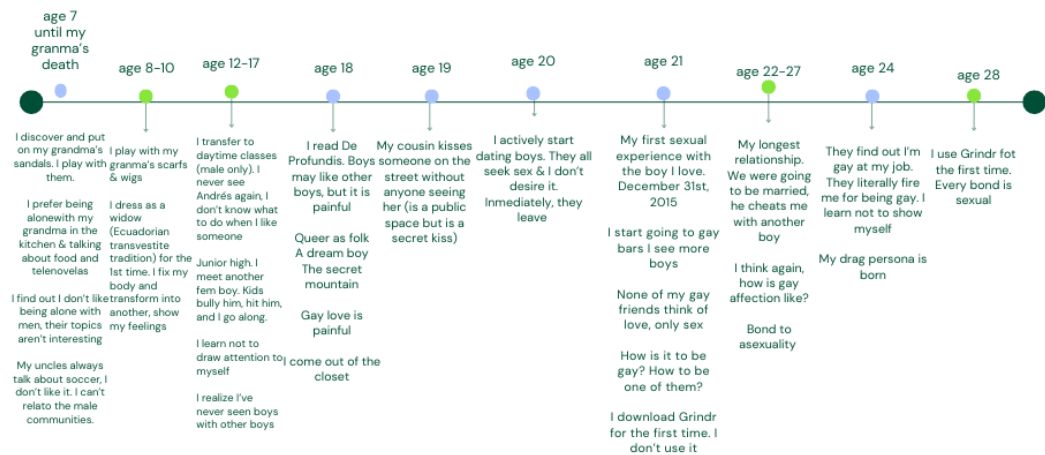
Note: Digitized from the participant's elaboration and translated by the author. Own work.

Orientation is a key concept to understanding the 'queer experience'. Imagine again that body perceived as attractive: it orients us by drawing our attention, but it also disorients us because that attraction defies what we've been taught is natural desire. Throughout their timeline, Safo ponders upon the nature of gay desire and affection: 'gay love is painful', 'I think again how gay affection is like'. Many people experience same-sex attraction as disorienting because it disrupts the path set by heteronormativity. How we respond to this orientation—whether we act on that attraction or not—depends on our own sense of identity. Someone whose sense of self is conflicted by this orientation may struggle to act on it, or may do so in a negotiated manner (such as men who have sex with men but do not identify as gay). Safo stated being asexual because they consider affection rather than physical desire as a driving force behind their sexual orientation. Thus, orientation influences how our bodies inhabit space—not by telling us exactly where we're going, but by shaping our possible actions in specific situations.

Space itself is an 'action field' where our bodies interact with other bodies and objects, based on how familiar they are to us. Familiarity results from engaging with objects that are already within our reach. The issue with queer orientation is that certain people and experiences are often pushed into the background of what is considered familiar (Ahmed, 2019). Embracing a queer identity often means stepping outside the realm of familiarity. Participants described a sense of confusion in their youth due to the lack of role models in their environment. Pol, a non-binary person attracted to women, explains feeling like a tomboy while growing up, struggling to come to terms with their identity until being in college where they became part of political groups and artistic communities:

> I did not feel comfortable being intimate with a male body. I also struggled socially. I started writing as a way of saying it, of sharing. Reading was very important because I became part of other spaces, of cultural houses. (…) They became a way of understanding myself better. I think it is easier to go through that emotion, to make a connection between what I feel and think, and also the chance to share it (Pol, personal communication, August 31st, 2023).

It is difficult to claim an identity or subjectivity when there are few symbolic references or role models to identify with. Queer subjectivities exist on the edges of the masculine/feminine norms, which makes them harder to define. Viewing orientation under this phenomenological

approach breaks out of the ordinary understanding of what is familiar and makes room for such experiences.

Ahmed refers to 'compulsory heterosexuality' to explain how it becomes the norm through 'a set of institutional practices that require men and women to be heterosexual' (2019, p. 121). Heteronormativity is not natural; it is a form of social organization. We inherit it from our ancestors (history), reinforce it through familiar practices (society), and solidify it through discourse (culture). If gender and sexuality follow the 'straight line' of heteronormativity, queer expressions and desires take different routes.

Dolores is a cis-heterosexual afro woman. She grew up in a coastal province of Ecuador with a majority of afro population. When she was little, her parents separated and each became engaged with same-sex partners. However, their family remained united by speaking openly about the situation. Dolores recalls that her doubts regarding homosexuality came from a different source:

> I had a friend who said to me: 'your parents are prostitutes.' At home, my dad had talked to me about this since I was little. My dad said: 'sit down, sit down.' Because I thought it was just my friend, but there were also other girls, and I would tell them what was happening at home. (…) Everyone can choose, let's say, within my household, what we expect. In society, it is a different matter, and a load of crap. The thing at home was that I could always choose, I would never feel judged (Dolores, personal communication, November 27th, 2023).

While queerness is often tied to sexuality, it can be applied more broadly to challenge heteronormative assumptions, social conventions, and orthodox thinking. Any practice or subjectivity that strays from heteronormative expectations can be interpreted as queer. For instance, heterosexual couples who choose not to have children can be viewed as 'misaligned' in Ecuador because they break from the discourse of family. Camila, a cis-heterosexual woman, was raised in a conservative middle-class household controlled by a dominant father figure. She received critiques from her family for moving with her partner without marrying and announcing that she would not have children. Despite having a male partner, she was estranged from them for violating what are considered 'family values.' However, she described these decisions as liberating despite that rupture.

'Disorientation' has both positive and negative effects on how individuals understand the queer experience. It can lead to feelings of rejection, often stemming from exclusion by family or society, but it can also be liberating. Seeing queerness as an experience expands our possibilities for selfhood— it is a personal and collective reorientation. These moments are significant because they spark meaningful changes, shaking our trust in the foundations on which we build our lives, and opening us up to new directions.

In this study, the term 'queer' has been used to describe non-heteronormative sexual and emotional practices and identities. But the goal is to understand queerness as a living experience, a trajectory formed by certain affinities, orientations, and subjectivities. The queer experience can be seen as the intersubjective construction of shared paths, shaped by material conditions and symbolic factors, such as representations. In this context, self-expression is a strategy of negotiation to develop and re-signify the sense of identity (Muñoz, 1999). The queer experience involves a departure from heteronormativity, expressed through practices and connections that lead individuals toward different bodies, objects, and interactions.

Analyzing queer experiences
The goal of this research is to demonstrate that queer experiences are broader than identity and sexuality —although they play an orienting role— but encompass ways of perceiving and interpreting reality through shared experiences. The following results are based on the interviews conducted with the participants and the analysis of their timeline. The excerpts

from their trajectories highlight how these experiences shape their understanding of the world and their place within it.

This analysis is organized into three dimensions, representing milestones (shared experiences) found in the participants' narratives: 1) disorientation, 2) statement and reorientation, and 3) aesthetic experiences. A fourth dimension is posed as a discussion to frame these experiences in a local context. While these milestones emerged as common patterns, the analysis does not generalize but rather provides interpretive insights for understanding these trajectories through the lenses of phenomenology.

Disorientations

Disorientation may manifest in various ways. Safo (whose drag persona was named after the Greek poet) says they were attracted to men from a young age. They grew up in a low-income household in Quito with a hardworking mother and an emotionally distant father. Safo explains that it took years for their attraction to fully take shape, and they now identify as asexual:

> As for my sexual orientation, I define myself as a gay and asexual person, or *marica*, because I have an emotional attraction to men but (…) I'm not interested in sex or penetration. (…) I have a spectrum that doesn't fit the typical gay radar, which is also important; not all views on sexual identities are penetrative, as they are marked by the act of possessing and dominating the other, even in lesbian love (…). So, acknowledging that I don't have sexual desire, that I lack libido, seems important to me. (Safo, personal communication, August 17, 2023)

Growing up in an environment marked by prohibition —homosexuality was decriminalized in Ecuador while they were still a child— meant facing both familial and social disorientation. From a heteronormative perspective, queer experiences are often dismissed as a 'phase' or 'confusion'. However, as Safo explained, recognizing their asexuality has become a defining feature in relation to others: 'It is important because in the context we are socialized, from a young age (or at least for me), relationships were always framed by a sexual component.' Queer subjects often find themselves negotiating their identity with norms and expectations both from outside and within their so-called 'communities' (Muñoz, 1999). They experienced a dual disorientation —first, as a deviation from heterosexual norms, and second, from the conventional understanding of sexual desire.

Muñoz (1999) explains that disidentification is a 'process of self-actualization come into discourse as a response to ideologies that discriminate against, demean, and attempt to destroy components of subjectivity that do not conform or respond to narratives of universalization and normalization' (p. 161). Throughout their trajectory, Safo shows a sublimation of libido towards emotional closeness. Their first sexual experience is described as an idealized sentiment:

> The first time I felt sexual desire for someone was when I was deeply in love with a person who was my best friend… I felt a lot of affection for him, but it was like a great desire to care for and love him (Safo, personal communication, August 17th, 2023).

They note that their lack of libido has influenced their romantic and sexual relationships. Safo disidentifies from what they call 'white gays', they negotiate their identity in regard to body stereotypes, relations, and desires. Safo critiques the tendency to normalize desire only in terms of penetrative sex. They believe that maintaining roles like 'top' and 'bottom' within the LGBTIA+ population reinforces heteronormative rules that constrain the queer experience. For Safo, this meant an ongoing questioning and reconfiguration of their own

desires and identity. However, reconsidering their desires has opened up new possibilities for experiencing affection.

This disorientation is further accompanied by a sense of rejection toward the father figure. The relationship with the father is described in several instances as a denial of Safo's interests. Their trajectory shows a symbolic rejection of masculinity in favor of an idealized view of femininity, particularly through their grandmother:

> I liked being here with my grandmother, talking about domestic things, cooking, learning to make hot sauce with her. Being alone with her, I also learned about solitude, silence, and the private sphere, which is not a masculine experience (Safo, personal communication, July 29th, 2023).

The abjection resulting from the rejection of a paternal figure is a recurring element in the participants' narratives. In some cases, it is elicited even with a violent denial of the father's existence. Charlie identifies as a cis-gay man, he was raised in a middle-class home and works as a medic. Being closeted was an experience that caused him depression and anxiety. He got outed by accident when he was in his early twenties: 'My coming out was not well received at home, especially by my dad. (…) I don't have a relationship with my dad at all.' He describes the outing as a kind of relief, although the break-up with his family caused him a lot of pain and confusion, and recounts it with both anger and resignation.

Figure 2. Dolores' queer timeline
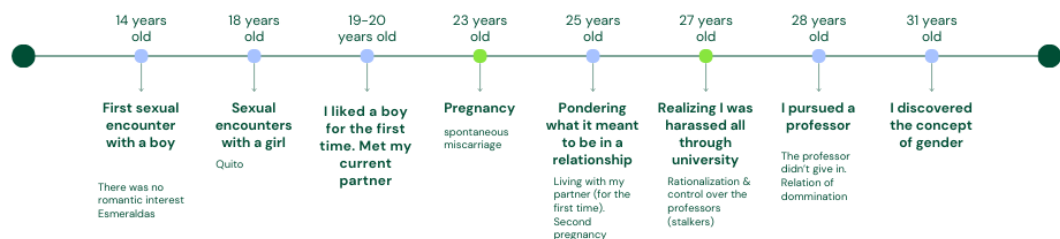
Note: Digitized from the participant's elaboration and translated by the author. Own work.

The deviation from compulsory heterosexuality implies questioning and rejecting heteronormativity. Dolores explained that her parents choosing to have same-sex partners did not affect her bond with them because there was open communication about it, and the family unity did not fall apart in spite of critiques from outside. What was acceptable sexual and emotional behavior at home was questioned in her wider social environment. She describes Esmeraldas (her coastal hometown) as an environment dominated by structural misogyny, racism, poverty, and homophobia. Eventually, her parents got back together, and she grew up with a conception of sexuality free from taboos. She had her first sexual encounter with a man while living in Esmeraldas, driven by curiosity, with no romantic interest (see figure 2). When she moved to Quito (the capital city), she experienced a sense of liberation and allowed herself certain explorations such as being intimate with a woman. Both relationships were described as forms of experimentation. Her trajectory reflects sexual and emotional practices motivated more by curiosity than sexual desire. At age 20, she met her current partner, a man with whom she has been in a relationship for over 12 years. She admitted having little interest

in questioning her desire until she was in her thirties, yet she acknowledged her sexual openness as something that set her apart from the others:

> Don't you ever feel 'weird'? Like, what are you in this world? I always feel like the odd one out, standing on the other side of heteronormativity. But that doesn't stop society from labeling you as the 'queer one' (Dolores, personal communication, November 27th, 2023).

The word 'queer' here represents a sense of not fitting in. For Dolores, sexuality has been a secondary issue because her open, communicative family environment meant she never felt disoriented about her fluid desires. During the interviews, she identified as pansexual, though she admits she only learned the term after joining the book club. She said her attraction is based on intellect, not gender.

What is interesting about Dolores' experience is the lack of questioning around her sexuality and gender identity. Her focus has been more on racial (as an Afro woman) and political issues. 'It was curiosity, not a need. When something is clear, you do not see it as a problem' she explains. Her queer experiences are proof that having open conversations about sexuality from an early age can prevent disorientation regarding heteronormativity, allowing people to form their subjectivities without shame or confusion.

Statements and reorientations

Practice precedes identity —we act first, and then we define ourselves. Another common topic that emerged from the interviews was that participants engaged in behaviors that could be considered queer and felt their bodies and desires 'out of place' from an early age. This eventually led them to explore and develop their own subjectivities, which culminated in a moment of self-definition.

Pol grew up a girl in a home surrounded by male relatives and was encouraged to engage in activities traditionally considered non-feminine, like climbing trees and wearing pants. These actions led them to question traditional gender roles:

> I've never felt comfortable being told, 'You have to sit with your legs closed' or 'You need to be quiet,' 'You shouldn't answer back,' or 'You need to help in the kitchen.' It always felt super uncomfortable and unfair to me because I grew up with two brothers, and I felt like they could do the same things. In my case, it was a bit more balanced, but I would see in other places how sisters had to serve their brothers, and I just couldn't wrap my head around it (Pol, personal communication, August 31st, 2023).

Pol identifies as a non-binary trans person. Their process of building a sense of identity has not been linear, but rather marked by constant personal and political questioning. When asked 'how would you define 'non-binary', they explained:

> Well, I really love the term trans, because it is like you are in transition. And I feel like when you say 'non-binary trans', it speaks to that —to being in that flow of what is said to be feminine and what is said to be masculine. But the idea is to break away from that, right? (Pol, personal communication, August 31st, 2023).

Although they are primarily attracted to women, they also believe that bisexuality is a way of reclaiming desire. For the participants, building their gender identity and sexual orientation stems from disorientation but slowly develops along their trajectory as an act of reorientation. However, this usually does not happen in isolation, but through exploring different places, engaging with diverse role models, and forming social circles where these identities are celebrated. Pol commented that their exploration began in university when they connected

with feminist groups and through artistic practices. Currently, they are involved in a cultural collective that uses art to discuss diversity. They say they have found safe spaces within these groups to socialize and truly be themselves.

Understanding the subjective development of queer experiences involves exploring the relationship between representation, sociability, and practice. People shape their identities through symbolic references, which also help them build and establish social connections. According to Butler (2017), expressing a queer identity materially affects how individuals build their identities and interactions. This statement is not a starting point but a turning point, resulting from exchanges with others and the adoption of a narrative that marks a significant shift in their personal trajectories.

Participants describe this moment as both emotionally intense and liberating. It represents the opportunity to live freely and find meaning in their lives beyond heteronormative expectations. This new trajectory is seen as a negotiation against heteronormative pressures and, therefore, as an act of rebellion.

The queer experience is essentially about reclaiming dissent. For instance, Camila experienced her 'disorientation' as a rebellion against family expectations. Growing up in a military household, she faced various challenges from this structure, which felt like a weight on her own aspirations. At 24, she left a steady job in the city and moved to a small coastal town where she met her current partner. They have lived together without marrying for the past three years. Even as a heterosexual woman, Camila has felt the need to question traditional family structures that persist in Ecuador. Her choice to live with someone and not have children is seen by her family as an act of defiance.

Assuming a public identity through self-expression is a key act of reorientation in the queer experience because, without it, personal trajectories are often constrained. Charlie said that he faced paternal and social rejection from a young age due to his feminine mannerisms. With the support of his friends, he managed to cope with his feelings of loneliness, but this also led to severe depressive episodes. Mental health issues are commonly associated with homosexuality and transgender identities, and while they may be present, they are a result of concealment and rejection. Although Charlie's rift with his father and siblings is recounted as a painful experience, he also describes it as liberating:

> My family found out. So, after that, I said, 'okay'. By then, my friends already knew, and I was in a relationship, and they knew him. So, it was like, I no longer had to hide. I didn't have to keep feeling ashamed. (…) Eventually, I found peace; it stopped hurting, it stopped mattering (Charlie, personal communication, December 7th, 2023).

Charlie has since reconciled with his mother and sister, has been in a stable relationship for three years, and has not experienced further depressive episodes. Though the queer experience often involves ruptures, it is also conceived as a way of regaining control over one's personal narrative to find a new sense of direction. This reorientation represents more than just a political or personal stance; it is about reclaiming the possibility of being and developing, which is often interpreted as a personal victory.

Aesthetic experiences
Affinity is a multifaceted experience. While queer theory has extensively explored the dimensions of sexual and emotional desire (Ahmed, 2019; Jagose, 1996), this article argues that affinity can also be understood as a broader experience of aesthetic consumption. Pierrot founded the book club *Estxs que leen* (Those Who Read) in early 2021:

> After everything that happened with the pandemic, (…) people were worried about social distancing and safety protocols. So, this became a new way to connect and share, and it was really fun. Plus, getting to know new people, since I didn't already

know everyone, was a great way to hear different opinions and discover other literary tastes (Pierrot, personal communication, February 25th, 2023).

Although this paper focuses on the queer trajectories of the participants, the fact that they were part of book clubs is relevant as it suggests an initial aesthetic connection. In this context, aesthetic affinity is the encounter between a person and an object, it is a form of identification where they are drawn to each other, leading to processes of symbolic appropriation. Books, movies, music, fashion, sports, cultural consumption often transcend practical values, giving rise to socialization and developing personal subjectivity.

Pierrot identifies as a cis-gay man from a working-class home. He performs as a drag character (Pierrot is the name of one of these drag personas) and has become engaged with several activist and artistic groups throughout the years. He explained that the book club has become a space of affinity where friendships have formed and extended beyond the initial purpose. It has grown into a space for meaningful social interactions, something many members deemed a necessity. 'Honestly, yes, all those connections with others have helped create new projects through reading and art, whether physical, visual, or musical' (Pierrot, personal communication, February 25th, 2023).

Currently, Pierrot is involved in *La Emancipadx*, a self-run cultural center that promotes diversity through art. It operates out of a squatted house in Quito's historic center. Queer spaces for social interaction are still scarce in the capital. Although in recent years, some cultural centers and events that brand themselves as 'diversity-friendly' have emerged, *La Emancipadx* stands out for its concept and the variety of activities it offers, such as film screenings, theater, dance workshops, and poetry gatherings, as well as for its location. Placed in the city center, it draws people from all economic backgrounds, fostering a diverse social space in a setting where being openly queer is shaped by intersecting social dynamics.

Aesthetic affinity is not just a means for socializing; it is also a resource for developing subjectivity, as the experiences of the participants demonstrate:

> Charlie: I have always been drawn to *The Little Mermaid*. Always, always, always.
> Interviewer: Why?
> Charlie: Thinking back to when I was a kid (...) I cannot really say for sure, but as an adult, I think it was that feeling of not fitting in. She had this urge to break free. And then there is the father figure. The story —well, not the book, but the movie— shows her dad being super strict, wanting his daughters to follow a certain path, just like in my house. So, I always really identified with *The Little Mermaid* (Charlie, personal communication, December 7th, 2023).

Self-identification with characters, stories, and particular aesthetics is a common theme in these trajectories. However, as this example shows, it goes beyond queer representation. It involves symbolic elements like disorientation, desire, or emotion. This identification is based on an empathetic projection with certain experiences rather than merely recognizing specific features. In a context where representative role models are often lacking, cultural consumption becomes both a tool for shaping individual subjectivities and a space for collective interaction.

It is important to remember that sexual and romantic desire is not neutral, it is influenced by the symbolic objects and references in a person's environment (Ahmed, 2019; De Lauretis, 1989). Queer experiences reveal aesthetic affinities that manifest in cultural consumption, sensitivities, and identification. However, this does not mean that cultural products inherently represent gender or diversity— avoid essentializing cultural references— but they are filled with representations that, because of the discourses surrounding them, lead to shared forms of identification and appropriation.

Building a *marica* experience: a discussion

Throughout both the ethnographic work and interviews, one element that came to attention was the rejection expressed by several participants toward the terms 'gay' and 'queer'. Safo noted that these words are rooted in a 'white' (Anglo-Saxon) discourse that does not accurately reflect their realities. Several authors have pointed out the challenges of applying concepts from queer theory to different contexts (He, 2011; Viteri et al., 2011; Falconí Trávez, 2018). This is not only a matter of translation, because these terms convey representations tied to specific imaginaries and lifestyles that, according to participants, did not resonate with them. Pierrot commented: 'it could go beyond just classifying us and connecting the LGBTI+ population, not just as LGBTI+ but as part of the whole population… being queer isn't strictly homosexual'.

Butler (2017) defines gender identity and sexual orientation from a post-structuralist perspective as flexible, symbolic, and performative constructs. Gender emphasizes the inequalities in social experiences among individuals as a complex system of economic, political, symbolic, and sociocultural relationships. It is a structural category shaped by context that defines our social values regarding what we conceive as 'masculine' and 'feminine' (Lamas, 2013). Queer authors challenge essentialist views of identity and conceive gender as a set of regulatory practices that conform identities within a hegemonic binary model.

Queer theories deconstruct the imposition of hegemonic identities, give a non-essentialist character to gender (Jagose, 1996), and a perspective with philosophical, political, aesthetic, and social implications (López Penedo, 2008). Identity is the product of the positions a person takes to relate to their environment. They are always evolving, shaped by contingencies, discourses, and underlying structures. As Muñoz (1999) states, queer people live in constant negotiation with a public sphere that punishes them for not adhering to cultural mandates: 'the fiction of identity is one that is accessed with relative ease by most majoritarian subjects. Minoritarian subjects need to interface with different subcultural fields to active their own sense of self' (Muñoz, p.5). Thus, queer subjectivities serve as points of articulation between social and individual positions, embodying both freely chosen and externally imposed characteristics. The performative and changing nature of queerness implies a dynamic process of recognition in which people can position themselves within a broad spectrum of practices and subjectivities.

To self-identify as gay, lesbian, trans, bi, or non-binary involves subjective self-recognition influenced by socially positioned discourses. Queer theory views gender and sexuality as dynamic yet normalized practices that maintain a sense of coherence and continuity (Butler, 2017). Identity regulates and produces bodies, but practices are the spaces where these norms are disrupted and individuals may emancipate themselves.

Subjectivity responds to a cultural framework that provides the structures and language used to define ourselves. However, these constructs are limiting and do not reflect the diversity of empirical practices and identities. Sexual difference is enculturated through everyday experiences and the symbolic organization of social life (Lamas, 2013). We identify and express ourselves within systems of meaning shaped by power, where representations are influenced by gender, ethnicity, and social class (Crenshaw, 1994).

Subjective development is more closely aligned with the concept of identification than identity (De Lauretis, 1989). It is tied to how we perceive others, where representation acts like a mirror that allows us to experience social reality from different perspectives, which in turn shapes social attitudes and fosters imitation and empathy. Thus, queer is not an identity but a critique to identity itself. Historically, the queer movement emerged as a counterpoint to 'identity politics'. It sought to liberate sexuality for all by subverting sexophobic and normalizing culture, while broadening the spectrum of possible desires and subjectivities (List Reyes, 2016). Queer is an attitude that manifests in practices that resist systems of domination (Butler, 2017). Shifting from identity to identification expands the possibilities for individuals to develop their subjectivities. This understanding of 'queer'

highlights that identity is not about being, but about becoming, as it is in constant symbolic and practical motion. We are not queer; rather, we 'do queer' in different moments of our lives and in response to our personal and collective contexts.

Nonetheless, several participants distanced themselves from the word 'queer' as well as from the LGBTIA+ acronym in favor of the term *marica*. 'They didn't call me "gay" in school to insult me, they called me *marica'* (Charlie, personal communication, December 7th, 2023). Though in many ways the word *marica* seems like a perfect translation of the word 'queer', its use is far more spread among Ecuadorians (and even Latin Americans). *Marica* represents homophobic violence in a way that reflects the particularities of these societies (machismo, religious fanatism, an attachment on traditions and family). It also expresses the participants' need for a more familiar term and their disbelief in the existence of an 'LGBTIA+ community' in Ecuador. They described these populations as fragmented and influenced by intersectional differences. Safo narrated experiences of discrimination from gay men, for not fitting certain ideals of beauty or masculinity. Pol emphasized the importance of critically reflecting upon forms of representation and socialization, even within diverse groups:

> I feel that the LGBTI+ label puts us in boxes. It helps identify what each person needs, but it does not mean you will stick to that definition for your entire life. It is similar to what they say about *mestizaje* —it is just a label that the state uses for people to recognize themselves, but we do not really discuss it (Pol, personal communication, August 31st, 2023).

Several participants expressed an affinity to the word *marica* as a playful way to resist and subvert discriminatory slang, but also to create safe spaces for interaction and identification. 'I believe there is an infinite beauty in gathering with *marica* people. They understand your feelings, your experiences. However, it is also, at least for me, somewhat of an internal struggle' (Pol, personal communication, August 31st, 2023). The intention of discussing a *marica* experience is not to add a new category to the already broad spectrum of sex/gender terminology, but to highlight that queer life experiences transcend sexual orientation and gender identity. These trajectories are shaped by power dynamics, including economic, religious, social, cultural, and political influences. Whether we use words like *cuir*, *marica*, or *bollera* [dike], the specific term is not important; what matters is how they are adapted to different contexts based on linguistic and cultural references. The core of this discussion is to acknowledge how the material conditions of a context intersect with social discourses, leading to unique life trajectories.

The goal of presenting these dimensions is not to generalize about queer experiences but to identify recurring elements that may manifest in diverse ways. In essence, the aim is not to essentialize identities but to encourage encounters and understanding (intersubjectivity), showing that otherness is a symbolically constructed experience.

Conclusion

'Being queer involves different ways of relating, perceiving, and being perceived' (Berná, 2011, p. 81). By building a 'phenomenology of queer experience', this study conceptualized a theoretical tool to understand sex/gender diversity. This category takes into account both material determinations and symbolic dimensions, thereby expanding interpretation and knowledge.

The queer/*marica* experience is meant to be an instrument for understanding diversity more broadly. It represents an effort toward comprehension and self-recognition, aimed at discovering new directions and empathetic connections. 'Queering things, undoubtedly, disrupts the order of things' (Ahmed, 2019, p. 222). Phenomenology and semiotics were chosen as analytical frameworks because studying these experiences meant more than just addressing the contingencies of sexuality and identity politics; it involved

understanding how bodies attract each other and create intersubjective spaces and symbolic orders. It prompts us to challenge heteronormative familiarity and develop new perspectives.

What about a '*marica* experience'? The issue with LGBTIA+ categories is that they often fragment identities into specific issues and subjectivities. These identities do not necessarily foster a sense of community and can overlook intersecting dimensions of people's lives (Muñoz, 1999). Looking at these identities as experiences allows us to analyze them as contingent realities that need to be considered within their local and global contexts.

Queer theories free identities from essentialist categories and binary gender concepts. Likewise, the idea of a queer/*marica* experience is not just about critique but about finding new ways of relating and developing subjectivities. What connects people who identify as queer extends beyond sexuality or gender, it comprises shared experiences that shape our lives. Though these experiences are diverse, they can still find points of intersection. This phenomenological approach is grounded on empathy and connection, enabling intersubjective dialogue.

'A queer politics involves a commitment to a certain way of inhabiting the world, even if it is not founded on a commitment to deviation' (Ahmed, 2019, p. 242). Queer/*marica* experiences have personal and collective dimensions; they are sexual, aesthetic, and emotional, epistemological and political. This category is not about criticizing normativity or rejecting trajectories that are not 'disorienting enough', but about supporting lives that go beyond heteronormative conventions. It is conceptualized to enable visible ways of living for those who cannot live openly. Ultimately, its purpose is to explore possible scenarios and create conditions where queer individuals can build their own subjectivities while fostering empathy and sociability.

Conflict of interest
The author declares no conflict of interest.

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