

Exploring the Resilience Strategies of Adolescent Men Who Have Sex with Men (MSM) in an Educational City

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Abstract

The phenomenon of men having sex with men (MSM) in adolescence is becoming a hot topic in almost all levels of society. This is because MSM certainly experiences psychological and sociological burdens. The purpose of this research is to find the configuration of MSM. This research uses a qualitative, phenomenological approach. Data collection was carried out using interview techniques (in-depth interviews) and documentation of 6 key informants and 4 supporting informants who met the criteria. Data were analyzed using MAXQDA software. Data validity testing used triangulation techniques and sources. The findings show that the MSM configuration comprises three phases fundamental, central, and dependency consistent with the theory of MSM identity formation. The fundamental phase is the initial phase; the central phase is the transitional phase; and the third phase is dependency, during which MSM adolescents begin to be active in MSM relationships. In this phase, adolescents experience sociological and psychological burdens. This study addresses the gap in scientific research by exploring the stages that MSM adolescents undergo in forming their identities. By doing so, it enriches the academic literature and serves as a foundation for future researchers in designing appropriate interventions for MSM adolescents.

Keywords: resilience, adolescents, MSM

Abstrak

Fenomena lelaki seks lelaki (LSL) pada remaja tengah menjadi perbincangan hangat hampir di seluruh lapisan masyarakat. Pasalnya LSL dipastikan mengalami beban psikologis dan sosiologis. Tujuan riset ini untuk menemukan konfigurasi LSL. Riset ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan metode fenomenologi. Pengumpulan data dilakukan dengan menggunakan teknik wawancara (in-dept interview) dan dokumentasi kepada 6 informan kunci dan 4 informan pendukung yang memenuhi kriteria. Data dianalisis menggunakan berbantuan software MAXQDA. Uji keabsahan data menggunakan triangulasi teknik dan sumber. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa konfigurasi pada LSL terdiri dari tiga fase yaitu fase fundamental, sentral dan ketergantungan yang sesuai dengan teori pembentukan identitas LSL. Fase fundamental merupakan fase permulaan, fase sentral merupakan fase peralihan atau transisi, dan fase ketiga yaitu ketergantungan dimana remaja LSL mulai aktif dalam hubungan LSL dan pada fase ini remaja mengalami beban sosiologis dan beban psikologis. Penelitian ini mengisi minimnya kajian ilmiah yang mengeksplorasi tahapan-tahapan yang dilalui oleh remaja LSL dalam membentuk identitas mereka menjadikan riset ini penting untuk memperkaya literatur akademik serta menjadi dasar bagi peneliti berikutnya untuk merancang intervensi yang tepat bagi remaja LSL.

Kata kunci: resiliensi, remaja, MSM

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INTRODUCTION

The high prevalence of HIV/AIDS cases in East Java Province represents a grim reality that must be collectively acknowledged. A significant proportion of these cases is attributed to homosexual behavior, accounting for 30.2%, with 28.8% specifically linked to men who have sex with men (MSM) (Ditjen P2P, 2022). MSM is categorized as a type of sexual disorientation, referring to males who are emotionally, personally, and sexually attracted to other males (Alhidayati, 2020). Malang City, known as an educational hub, has emerged as a major contributor to the rise of HIV/AIDS cases stemming from same-sex relations among MSM throughout 2022. Alarmingly, this phenomenon has increasingly involved adolescents. Empirical counseling data from several schools indicate that student behavioral issues have stemmed from same-sex romantic relationships, with all counselees actively engaged in Malang's gay communities. Adolescent MSM are often considered part of a highly "hidden" sub-community. This group tends to isolate itself from the general population, making it extremely difficult to identify through visible nonverbal cues, behaviors, or lifestyle patterns (Afrityayeni & Angraini, 2019; Tanjaya et al., 2022).

The emergence of MSM behavior among adolescents has triggered new societal stigmas and growing concerns. Adolescence is inherently a transitional phase marked by identity exploration, changes in relationships, social roles, body image acceptance, and the pursuit of autonomy (Nugraha et al., 2020). This stage is also characterized by poor emotional regulation and low self-control, rendering adolescent MSM vulnerable to psychological and sociological pressures. Such individuals frequently experience societal stigma, intense psychological turmoil, such as low self-esteem, confusion regarding sexual orientation, disappointment, and even suicidal ideation (Azhari, 2019; Prahastami & Winta, 2022).

The adolescent journey toward fully identifying as MSM can be understood through Cass's (1984) six-stage model of identity formation: (1) identity confusion; (2) identity comparison; (3) identity tolerance; (4) identity acceptance; (5) identity pride; and (6) identity synthesis. Among these, the identity tolerance stage is the most critical, as adolescents often lack self-control, leading to risky sexual behavior (Ananda, 2021). Effective self-control in MSM adolescents can act as a protective factor against such maladaptive behaviors (Endang et al., 2018). Therefore, efforts to cultivate resilience during this early phase are essential to facilitate positive adaptation to their environment. In the present study, resilience refers to the capacity for self-control among adolescent MSM to maintain their quality of life and function typically within society.

To date, research on MSM resilience has largely focused on general internal and external factors (Sandi, 2017; Mubarak, 2022). This is evidenced by the absence of relevant studies using search terms such as "MSM configuration," "MSM characteristics," and "categorization" on platforms like Publish or Perish and Google Scholar. Despite this, identifying the unique characteristics of MSM individuals is essential before any meaningful exploration of resilience strategies can occur.

Given the issues above, this study emphasizes the importance of analyzing the characteristics of adolescent MSM based on Cass's (1984). From this analysis, a configuration of characteristics will be derived, which will then inform the resilience strategies appropriate to each profile. The resulting findings will be further analyzed through the lens of Reivich and Shatté's resilience framework. A notable research gap exists in examining the specific developmental stages in identity formation among adolescent MSM. Most existing studies focus predominantly on psychological and social



aspects, whereas systematic analyses of identity development dynamics within this group remain limited. This gap highlights the need for deeper, empirically grounded research to enrich the academic literature and serve as a foundation for the development of effective, evidence-based interventions targeting adolescent MSM.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative, phenomenological research design to explore, analyze, and uncover new facts about the research subjects (Creswell, 2003). According to Moran (2017), phenomenological research actively seeks to interpret a problem and attempts to understand it through the researcher's lived experience. Phenomenological research aims to uncover in-depth subjective experiences related to a specific event as a form of interaction with one's environment (Bryman, 2012; Creswell, 2003; Mappiare, 2013).

This approach is particularly suited to gaining a thorough understanding of resilience among adolescents experiencing sexual disorientation. Participant selection in this study followed a purposive sampling approach, targeting both key and supporting informants based on specific criteria (Creswell, 2018). The criteria for key informants included: (1) having a same-sex attraction; (2) aged between 12 and 21 years old; and (3) being active on gay-specific social media platforms. Supporting informants comprised community leaders from the Malang gay community (IGAMA), individuals identifying as MSM survivors, as well as counselors and psychologists who had conducted interventions with MSM adolescents.

Including a range of informants from diverse backgrounds was intended to ensure the data were representative. Data collection techniques involved in-depth interviews and documentation (Miles et al., 1994). The data analysis process followed the model proposed by Miles et al. (1994), which consists of four components: data collection, data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing/verifying. During the data reduction phase, the researcher applied coding and categorization to the collected data, adhering to the research objectives and focus, utilizing the qualitative data analysis software MAXQDA.

To ensure data trustworthiness, several validation strategies were employed, including internal validity (credibility), external validity (transferability), dependability, and confirmability (Miles et al., 1994). The research process was conducted from June to October 2023.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Configuration Results of Sexual Disorientation Among Adolescents in an Educational City

The diversity of experiences shared by the informants enabled this study to construct a comprehensive and representative configuration of adolescent MSM (men who have sex with men). Based on in-depth interviews with six key informants, varying levels of identity development were observed. Informant 1 remained confused about his sexual identity, while Informants 2 and 3 had begun to form a clearer understanding of their identity as MSM. Meanwhile, Informants 4, 5, and 6 had already defined themselves as MSM. The following are selected excerpts from the in-depth interviews with key informants.



“...Honestly, I’ve always felt confused...confused about being like this... I want to be normal.” (DU/inf1//16)

“...My sexual identity developed because I often hang out with boys...” (DU/inf2//15)

“...I think this (MSM relationship) has many positive aspects, why should it be ended?” (DU/inf4//20)

Adolescent MSM exhibit distinct characteristics at each phase of their identity development. Based on the identified traits, adolescent MSM are categorized into three domains: cognitive patterns, emotional responses, and behavioral tendencies. From the conceptual findings, three configuration phases were identified: the Fundamental Phase, the Central Phase, and the Dependency Phase. These phases are visualized as follows.

Table 1.
 Phases of Adolescent MSM Configuration

Phase	Cognitive Patterns	Emotional Responses	Behavioral Tendencies
Fundamental	Confusion Initial same-sex attraction Fear of being exposed Fear of social encounters	Anxiety over sexual identity Fear of being discovered	Starts using social media Identity concealment (e.g., fake accounts) Watching gay-themed videos
Central	Clearer understanding of sexual identity Thoughts about safe relationships	Sexual desires Anxiety and concern about identity	Uses social media Begins expressing identity Dares to meet partners in person Proud of being MSM Uses dating apps Openly expresses in public
Dependency	Identifies role within same-sex relationships Positive view of MSM orientation	Presence of sexual urges Easily triggered	Engages in sexual activity Has sex without much thought Uses real/personal identity

The first configuration phase, known as the Fundamental Phase, represents the initial stage during which adolescents begin to experience same-sex attraction and grapple with the implications of these feelings. At this stage, their cognitive patterns are marked by confusion, as they struggle to understand the changes they are undergoing. Emotionally, they begin to feel attraction toward individuals of the same sex, accompanied by anxiety and fear about the potential exposure of their identity. These emotional struggles often lead to avoidance behaviors, such as reluctance to meet others in person. Behaviorally, adolescents tend to rely on indirect forms of interaction, such as engaging with others through social media using fake accounts or consuming gay-themed



video content without direct involvement. This phase is typically characterized by internal conflict and psychological ambivalence, a phenomenon previously observed in studies on sexual identity formation during adolescence (Cass, 1984; Novita et al., 2021; Rahmawan & Sujadmi, 2021; Ilahi et al., 2022).

As adolescents begin to adapt to their emerging identity, they enter the Central Phase, an intermediate stage in which identity exploration becomes more conscious and deliberate. During this phase, adolescents begin to develop a clearer understanding of their sexual identity and contemplate the possibility of having safe, meaningful relationships with others who share similar experiences. Emotionally, their same-sex attraction becomes more apparent and is now coupled with the emergence of sexual desire. Although concerns about disclosure still persist, they are notably less intense than in the previous phase. Adolescents also exhibit greater confidence in expressing their identity. They become more willing to disclose personal information, including their real name, location, and even personal photographs. Many also begin meeting others in the community in person. This phase reflects a shift in self-perception, from uncertainty to potential self-acceptance. The feelings of social alienation experienced in this phase often motivate adolescents to seek out peer support and affirming social environments (Cass, 1984; Mulia, 2019).

The final stage, referred to as the Dependency Phase, is characterized by full identification as an MSM individual. At this point, adolescents no longer question their orientation; rather, they actively embrace and integrate it into their self-concept. Cognitively, they are able to articulate their role within same-sex relationships and adopt a positive perspective on MSM identity. Emotionally, they experience strong sexual desires and physiological needs that are aligned with their sexual orientation. They may also exhibit heightened sensitivity to same-sex attraction triggers and develop a sense of pride in belonging to the MSM community. Behaviorally, this phase is marked by active engagement in same-sex relationships, often through gay-specific dating applications and participation in online and offline communities. Public expressions of affection, frequent sexual activity, and casual encounters without adequate consideration for safety become more common. Adolescents in this phase also tend to be open about their identities, including personal information such as where they live and their lifestyle choices. This final phase represents the consolidation of identity and the emergence of behavioral patterns that reflect a firm, unambiguous self-definition (Artha, 2023; Novani et al., 2021; Afriandi et al., 2022; Ronda, 2020; Selvina et al., 2019).

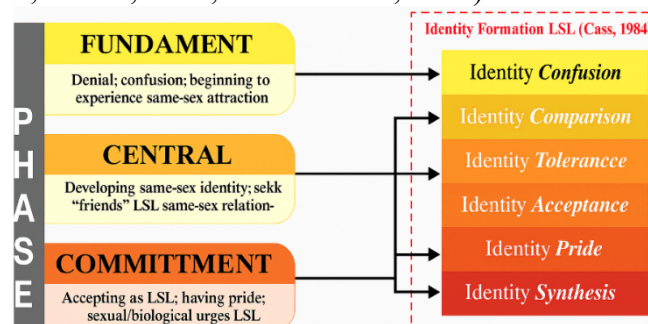


Figure 1. Analysis Results of the Identity Formation Stages of Adolescent MSM (Cass, 1984)

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that the configuration of sexual disorientation among adolescent MSM aligns with the stages of identity



development proposed by Cass, namely: identity confusion, identity comparison, identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and identity synthesis. The fundamental phase corresponds to adolescents who are still experiencing confusion about their sexual identity, which places them within the stage of identity confusion. Adolescents in the stage of identity comparison exhibit characteristics aligned with the central phase, wherein they begin to consider and form initial perceptions of their sexual identity. Finally, the dependency phase represents adolescents who have progressed through the stages of identity tolerance, identity acceptance, identity pride, and ultimately, identity synthesis. These stages collectively illustrate the developmental trajectory of sexual identity formation among adolescent MSM.

CONCLUSION

Adolescent MSM exhibit distinct characteristics across the various phases of their identity development. Based on the identified traits, three configuration phases emerged: the fundamental, central, and dependency phases. The fundamental phase marks the initial stage of identity confusion, the central phase represents a transitional period of exploration, and the dependency phase is characterized by active engagement in same-sex relationships. At this latter stage, adolescents tend to experience significant sociological and psychological burdens. Findings from this study indicate that adolescents demonstrate resilience, particularly in the dependency phase, through the development of effective self-control mechanisms. The implications of these findings highlight the critical need for targeted attention from educators, school counselors, and mental health professionals, especially during the dependency phase, which is both the most vulnerable and the phase in which the potential for resilience is most evident. Future research is recommended to explore in greater depth the factors influencing transitions between these phases and to examine interventions that may strengthen adolescents' self-control while reducing the psychological and sociological burdens encountered during the dependency phase.

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