

Sexual Identity Development of Sexual-and-Gender Minority Among Malay Women in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Understanding the sexual identity development of the sexual and gender minority among Malay women (SGMMW) is necessary for providing them with appropriate services. However, owing to a paucity of studies on this subject, the present study thus explores the sexual identity development of SGMMW. A phenomenology study was performed on 30 SGMMW. In-depth, semi-guided virtual interviews were conducted, each lasting 45–90 min. Recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim. Subsequently, all transcriptions were added to ATLAS.ti 8 for analysis and coding. Three themes were elucidated from the study: awareness of incongruence, exploration of self-identity, and consolidation in the L Community. These three themes represent three phases of the sexual identity development of SGMMW. In Phase 1, SGMMW becomes aware of their sexual orientation toward

females. In Phase 2, SGMMW explored information, community, and partners that could affirm their identities. In Phase 3, SGMMW consolidated itself into a new community that aligned with its new identity, also known as the L Community. Sexual identity development is influenced by environmental factors such as family, friends, institutions, and social media; personal factors such as a belief that men are bad; and behavioral factors such as

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behaving like a man to protect the self and others. In conclusion, SGMMW identity development involves three phases and is influenced by environmental, personal, and behavioral factors.

Keywords: Gender minority, identity development, Malay women, sexual minority

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a multiethnic country where the Malays constitute the majority, and Islam is the federal religion (*Federal Constitution*, 2010). According to the Federal Constitution, a Malay person is defined as someone who speaks Malay, embraces Islam, and follows Malay customs. In traditional Malay culture, parents follow Islamic teachings and raise their children according to their gender at birth. Accordingly, Malay girls are taught to behave and dress in a manner that aligns with feminine norms. Islamic teachings prohibit gender imitation that does not align with one's birth sex and same-sex sexual activities, as clearly stated in the Qur'an and Hadith (Kadir et al., 2020). According to Islamic rules, sex only occurs after a legal marriage between opposite sexes or heterosexuals. However, not only Islam but other religions in Malaysia, such as Christianity, Buddhism, and Sikhism, do not accept homosexuality or transgender people (Kaur & Kaur, 2022; Yeo et al., 2021). Nevertheless, younger generations have rationalized homosexuality and transgender acceptance because human rights and, according to Buddhism, love

are the basic teachings (Jerome et al., 2021; Kaur & Kaur, 2022; Yeo et al., 2021).

The sexual minority among Malay women includes those who are sexually oriented toward women (lesbian), men and women (bisexual), or all genders (pansexual; Mahon et al., 2021). Meanwhile, lesbians who express themselves in feminine characters are known as *femme* or *lessy*, and those who express themselves in masculine characteristics are identified as *pengkid* (Aziz et al., 2019). Lesbians with masculine and feminine characteristics are referred to as *andro*. Andro-butcht individuals appear more like men with some feminine characteristics, and andro-femme individuals appear more like women and behave like *femme* (Upe et al., 2022). Malays who are born female but identify as men or have a strong desire to be men are transwomen. Therefore, the sexual-and-gender minority among Malay women (SGMMW) includes Malay women who identify themselves as lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, *pengkid*, *femme*, *andro*, or transmen.

Although laws, culture, and religions in Malaysia do not accept homosexual and transgender people, the numbers of SGMMW are growing (Juaini et al., 2017). The mental health burden in Malaysia is increasing because SGMMW is at risk of developing mental illnesses (Ibrahim et al., 2022; Juhari et al., 2022). Therefore, service providers should understand the process of the sexual identity development of SGMMW so that they can assist (Degges-White et al., 2000). However, the lack of knowledge among service providers about the sexual

identity development of SGMMW stems from the scarcity of previous studies on this topic. Therefore, this study explores the sexual identity development of SGMMW in Malaysia. The findings help service providers better understand the sexual identity development process of SGMMW and facilitate their plans to provide them with appropriate services.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In Islamic teachings, parents are the main individuals who mold the sexual or gender identity development of their children (Hermawati et al., 2020). Gender identity development begins once a child is born and identifies their sex. A father will recite the call to prayer (*azan*) into a boy's right ear or the *iqamah* into a girl's left ear. Subsequently, parents raise their children according to Islamic teachings, including aspects such as clothing choices, the expectations of males as leaders or protectors, and participation in rituals. Islam prohibits women's adoption of male appearances and *vice versa*, as referenced in the following Hadith: Narrated from Ibn 'Abbas R.A. that the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said: "The Prophet cursed effeminate men and those women who assume the similitude (manners) of men" [Hadith al-Bukhari: Book 7: Volume 72: Hadith 774].

In terms of sexual behavior, Islam prohibits premarital and extramarital affairs and same-sex sexual activities, as mentioned in the Qu'ran (7:80–84), regarding the punishment of men who have sex with men. Islam emphasizes prevention, such

as avoiding things that can lead to illegal sexual conduct. The Qur'an (17:32) clearly states this aspect: "And do not approach unlawful sexual intercourse. Indeed, it is ever an immorality and is evil as a way."

Likewise, other religions in Malaysia, such as Christianity, Buddhism, and Sikhism, do not agree with the promotion and acknowledgment of the sexual and gender minority (SGM; Jerome et al., 2021; Kaur & Kaur, 2022; Mokhtar & Yapp, 2021; Yeo et al., 2021). Homosexuality is a grave sin in the Catholic Church (Adejuwon, 2020). The Bible explicitly states that homosexuality is incompatible with God's intention for humanity. In addition, the Old Testament mentions the judgment executed against Sodom and Gomorrah in Genesis 18 and 19. However, progressive Christian groups comprehend the Bible in a way that includes everyone, focusing on love, kindness, and justice. They also support SGM rights and work toward accepting and including SGM people in the church (Bayne et al., 2021).

Buddhists' attitudes toward homosexuality vary depending on the society in which they practice. Buddhism accepts homosexuality, arguing that it is important to pay attention and intention to sexuality as per the Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path (Alfian, 2022). However, based on the Buddhist Five Precepts, Buddhist scholars reject homosexuality, arguing that wrong sexual relations and homosexuality are deviations from Buddhist teachings and can lead to self-harm and harm to others (Alfian, 2022). Despite

the core teachings of Buddhism, cultural aspects of a society can be reasons to reject homosexuality.

The Malaysian Sikh community primarily relies on *Guru Granth Sahib* as an authoritative figure to comprehend sexual orientation and gender relationships (Kaur & Kaur, 2022). Sikhism values husband-wife and parent-child bonding as well as heterosexual marriage. Kaur and Kaur (2022) reported that most Malaysian Sikh youths have a positive view and can accept the existence of SGM in Malaysia despite their belief in the significance of maintaining a heterosexual marriage.

Studies have revealed that the inclination factors for the development of SGMW are family, peers, lack of Islamic knowledge, schools, and social media (Aziz et al., 2019; Hesamuddin et al., 2019; Juaini & Azman, 2021). Lack of affection from family and a history of having bad experiences with men pushed Malay women to seek affection from their peers (Jaapar et al., 2023). Receiving greater affection and emotional validation from peers or same-sex partners can lead Malay women to engage in lesbianism. Moreover, nurturing influences, such as a lack of Islamic teaching and appreciation, schools, and social media, further inclined the process of lesbianism (Jaapar et al., 2023).

The process of lesbianism or the development of SGMW can be elucidated through the lens of the social cognitive theory (SCT). Bandura (1986) extended SCT from social learning theory, emphasizing the role of cognitive processes, including attention, memory, and judgment, in mediating the

interaction between environmental inputs and behavior (Bandura, 1986). SCT acknowledges the impact of evolutionary mechanisms on human adaptation and change. In SCT, the reciprocal triad comprises three elements: (1) environmental factors, including culture, religion, politics, and laws; (2) personal factors, which involve cognitive, affective, and biological events; and (3) behaviors, which include actions, verbalizations, and decisions (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). In the “reciprocal triad interaction model” (Figure 1), people can construct their environment, be influenced by external environmental stimuli and personal factors, and opt whether to proceed with actions (Bandura, 2012). These triad factors influence each other bidirectionally, molding people’s thoughts, actions, and experiences. However, the bidirectional influence varies depending on each component’s time, situation, and action.

According to SCT, modeling is an environmental factor that influences gender development, which has been present since birth. Infants are sensitive to modeling and can learn from it, especially in interactive situations. A person learns about sexual

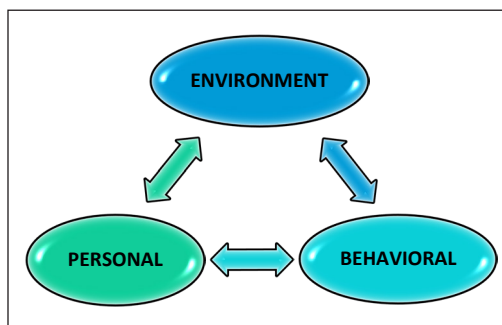


Figure 1. Reciprocal triad interaction model of social cognitive theory
Source: Bandura (2012)

identity, gender roles, and behavior by observing role models in their immediate environment, such as parents, peers, and significant figures in social, educational, and work settings. In addition, enactive experience and direct tuition influence gender development, although the impact varies by person and social structure (Bussey & Bandura, 1999). Enactive experience is based on understanding the gender dynamics of conduct rather than the outcomes of an individual's conduct. Societal acceptance mainly influences gender development. Meanwhile, direct tuition or education for individuals or small groups is an easy way to inform gender-related conduct.

Furthermore, SCT emphasizes the significance of self-efficacy in developing gender and sexual identity (Figure 1). Bandura (1986) highlighted that self-efficacy beliefs are crucial for motivation, performance, and resilience. High levels of self-efficacy contribute to increased effort, persistence, and performance, whereas low levels can lead to self-doubt and avoidance of challenging activities. Self-efficacy pertains to an individual's belief in their ability to effectively execute a particular behavior or task. Self-efficacy can influence how individuals navigate and express their gender roles and sexual orientation within the context of gender and sexual identity (Bussey & Bandura, 1999).

The number of users on lesbian social media is growing, which indicates an increase in the number of SGMMW in Malaysia (Juaini et al., 2017). This phenomenon would increase the mental health burden because

SGMMWs experience discrimination, internalized homophobia, and violence due to their sexual identity (Ibrahim et al., 2022). Furthermore, compared with heterosexual women, SGMMW is at a higher risk of substance abuse, depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation and attempts (Jamal et al., 2019; Juhari et al., 2022). However, SGMMW hesitated to seek help owing to internalized homophobia, mental health illiteracy, and the perception that mental health professionals are incompetent (Hta et al., 2021).

The lack of knowledge and understanding of the development of SGMMW's sexual identity contributes to mental health professionals' incompetency in dealing with SGMMW (Jamal et al., 2018). Understanding lesbians' sexual identity development facilitates the intervention of mental health professionals. This understanding can guide the approaches used (Degges-White & Myers, 2005; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Sophie (1986) described the development of a lesbian's sexual identity as follows: sexual identity should be considered a flexible rather than a linear process, which involves progression and regression. Although some lesbians progress fluidly through stages, others may skip a stage or arrive at a different stage without a set pattern. Sophie (1986) reported four stages of lesbians: (1) awareness, (2) testing and exploration, (3) identity acceptance, and (4) identity integration (Table 1). However, lesbians may change their sexual orientation at any point and may not proceed toward identity integration.

Table 1
Development of lesbian identity

Sophie (1986)	McCarn & Fassinger (1996)	
	Individual	Group
Stage 1: Awareness	Phase 1: Awareness	Phase 1: Awareness
Stage 2: Testing and exploration	Phase 2: Exploration	Phase 2: Exploration
Stage 3: Identity acceptance	Phase 3: Deepening/commitment	Phase 3: Deepening/commitment
Stage 4: Identity integration	Phase 4: Internalization/synthesis	Phase 4: Internalization/synthesis

Source: Authors' work

McCarn and Fassinger (1996) established a linear model of lesbian identity development that proposed two separate dimensions of sexual identity: individual and group. Both dimensions have the same four phases of development: (1) awareness, (2) exploration, (3) deepening or commitment, and (4) internalization or synthesis (Table 1). According to the model, a person can progress through all four phases of unique identity development. It is more inclusive than others because it is influenced by race or ethnic and gender identity development models.

In the individual dimension, the awareness phase involves recognizing that her desire or feeling may differ from the heterosexual norm (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). In the exploration phase, a person may have strong relationships with other women but may not necessarily explore sexual behaviors. The deepening or commitment phase involves a person exploring her sexual identity and identifying as bisexual, heterosexual, or lesbian. In the internalization or synthesis phase, a person experiences more self-acceptance of her desire or love for women as part of their identity.

Likewise, the group dimension identity development process proposed by McCarn and Fassinger (1996) consists of four phases. In the awareness phase, women become aware of the lesbian community and realize that heterosexuality is not the norm (Table 1). In the exploration phase, they actively seek knowledge about the community and the possibility of belonging to it. In the deepening or commitment phase, they become more aware of the value and oppression of being part of the community. They are obliged to form a personal relationship with it. Finally, in the internalization or synthesis phase, they redefine their identity, internalize it, and synthesize it into their overall self-concept as a member of a minority group.

While exploring sexual identity development, the fluidity of sexuality and gender should be understood. Sexual fluidity refers to the ability of individuals to adapt their sexual response according to the situation, enabling them to experience shifts in their desire for same-sex and other-sex partners, whether in the short or long term (Diamond, 2016). However, gender fluidity refers to the tendency of a person's gender expression to shift throughout their

life (Gosling, 2018). This concept relates to a change or transition in sexual orientation and gender expression, even if it is just temporary, with women having more fluidity than men (Diamond, 2016, 2020).

Diamond (2008) conducted a longitudinal study on women's sexual identities that introduced the concept of sexual fluidity, in which sexual orientation and attractions can be more flexible and change over time. Diamond (2016) posited that sexual fluidity capacities vary considerably between individuals, with some experiencing periodic variations in their patterns of sexual attraction throughout their lives and others exhibiting remarkably stable patterns. Campbell et al. (2021) reported that the incidence of sexual identity change in Australian women was approximately 19%, with one-third altering their sexual identity at least once throughout the 4-year observation period. They also noted that the expectation of conforming to heteronormativity often decreases during emerging adulthood, as young people have more sources to explore during their development process. People whose sexual orientation was toward both sexes or who identified as (pluri)sexual were more fluid than those whose sexual orientation was toward only one sex or who identified as having an exclusive sexual identity (Campbell et al., 2021).

Furthermore, Hiestand and Levitt (2005) proposed seven stages in the butch identity development model. Stage 1 is gender conflict, in which a sense of gender difference dates back as early as

preschool years. Stage 2 is the collision of gender conformity and sexual pressures. At this stage, the pressure to be feminine intensifies as they go through puberty. Stage 3 is gender awareness and distinguishing differences, in which women search for role models in the SGM group. Stage 4 is acceptance of the lesbian identity, leading to gender exploration. Stage 5 is gender internalization and pride in sexual orientation, in which they adopt a butch identity. Stage 6 is gender affirmation and pride. The final stage is the integration of sexual and gender differences.

Identifying the stages of sexual identity development is crucial for guiding psychosocial interventions for SGMMW (Degges-White et al., 2000). However, to the best of the authors' knowledge, no study on sexual identity development has been conducted on SGMMW in Malaysia. Therefore, this study explores this aspect.

METHODS

This study employed a phenomenological approach to explore the essence of identity development of SGMMW in Malaysia (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach is the best choice because phenomenology research studies lived experience and describes the common meanings of an individual's experience as a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Phenomenology research focuses on describing the common lived experience of all participants by reducing individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence. An epoché process was

applied to better understand participant experiences by refraining from or bracketing preconceptions, assumptions, and biases. Accordingly, researchers could uncover the underlying essence of phenomena as they are lived and experienced by human consciousness, which led to deeper insights into the nature of reality and human existence (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling with the help of key informants. These key informants assist in identifying and inviting a sensitive and minority group like SGMMW to participate in the study. The key informants mediated the information on the study to the potential participants in their community and conveyed the details of the agreed participants to the researchers. Thirty Malay females between 18 and 60 years who identified as SGMMW (lesbian, bisexual, pansexual, femme, *pengkid*, and andro) were interviewed. Those who could not comprehend Malay or English or were too unstable to be interviewed were excluded.

This study was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic and the movement control order. Therefore, participants were contacted *via* email, telephone, and WhatsApp. They were informed about the study procedure, including recording the interviews for transcription and analysis. A Google Form was used to obtain informed consent and socio-demographic information from the participants, and a link to the Google Form was sent to each participant.

Each participant was interviewed online via WebEx for 45–90 minutes using a semi-

structured interview guide. The online interview reached participants all over Malaysia without the need to travel, thereby minimizing the cost (Deakin & Wakefield, 2014). This method also added flexibility to the times and places of the interviews. The use of an in-depth interview enabled further probing, as well as a deeper explanation and more details of the participants' experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Ethical Approval

This study complied with the principles indicated in the Helsinki Declaration and was cleared by the Universiti Sains Malaysia Ethics Committee (USM/JEPeM/20070361).

Data Management and Analysis

All verbatim recordings underwent repeated listening to accurately capture the narratives. Subsequently, ATLAS.ti 8 software was used to analyze all transcriptions, which were repeatedly read line by line for deductive and inductive coding. Deductive coding was performed by developing predetermined codes based on the literature review and research questions. In addition, inductive coding was conducted by creating additional codes throughout the analytical process. Subsequently, the codes were categorized into themes. Meanwhile, the data were translated from Malay into English.

Trustworthiness

This study's confirmability, credibility, transferability, and dependability were ensured to establish its trustworthiness

(Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Confirmability was ensured through a reflexive journal and audit trail. All interview sessions were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed cautiously, one by one, to preserve credibility. Purposive sampling and using the key informants ensured the transferability of this study (Palinkas et al., 2015). Participant information, reflective journal, and audit trail of data collection were preserved, and continuous discussion among researchers was conducted to confirm dependability (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

RESULTS

Thirty SGMMW with a mean age of 36.8 (SD of 7.33) participated. Most participants were from Selangor ($n = 12$, 40%) and Kuala Lumpur ($n = 6$, 20%). Almost all participants received tertiary education ($n = 22$, 73%). Most participants were single ($n = 24$, 80%) and identified as *pengkid* ($n = 17$, 17%; Table 2).

The study emerged with three themes: awareness of incongruence, exploration of self-identity, and consolidation in the L Community.

Awareness of Incongruence

Awareness of incongruence refers to the process by which and when participants realize their attraction toward same-sex or preference to be male rather than female. As early as age 5 to early adolescence, participants were aware of their sexual attraction toward females. They realized they had special feelings for girls and were not interested in boys. An andro femme

stated, “During standard 4, I realized that I was attracted to a girl,” (L22, andro femme).

At that point, almost all participants were confused, unsure, and unable to accept their feelings. One participant reported, “Why is it that I don’t even feel wow when I talk about men? From there I started asking about myself. Why? Do I have a problem with myself?” (L20, *pengkid*).

Many participants shared their early life crises that predisposed them to sexual identity development and awareness. Some claimed that their parents’ expectations and preference for a son rather than a daughter developed in them the perception that it is better to be a man than a woman: “Father always prefers male [my brothers]. It’s like everything, the brothers are the right one. Until maybe [I] feel like rebelling,” (L21, *pengkid*).

In addition, other participants revealed their experiences of observing and imitating male figures in the family, slowly imprinting masculine traits on them. For example, performing numerous “tough” activities with their fathers encouraged daughters to model them and express themselves as men: “Probably because the relationship with father was close. So, I behave more masculinely. He took me fishing... taught me a lot about how to make a kite... about wiring,” (L16, *pengkid*).

In contrast, the absence of a father figure constructed a negative perception of men because they noticed that men did not fulfill their roles as leaders or protectors of the family. Consequently, participants took the place of a father figure and the family’s

Table 2
Characteristics of sexual-and-gender minority among Malay women (SGMMW; n = 30)

Participants	Age (year)	Education	Marital status	Self-identify
L01	45	Tertiary	Single	Lessy
L02	40	Tertiary	Single	Pengkid
L03	39	Tertiary	Single	Pengkid
L04	42	Secondary	Single	Lessy
L05	42	Tertiary	Single	Pengkid
L06	34	Tertiary	Married	Pengkid
L07	41	Secondary	Single	Pengkid
L08	39	Tertiary	Single	Andro
L09	38	Secondary	Single	Pengkid
L10	38	Secondary	Single	Lessy
L11	38	Tertiary	Divorced	Lessy
L12	43	Tertiary	Single	Pengkid
L13	23	Secondary	Divorced	Lessy
L14	36	Tertiary	Single	Andro
L15	26	Secondary	Single	Pengkid
L16	45	Tertiary	Single	Pengkid
L17	47	Tertiary	Married	Pengkid
L18	40	Tertiary	Married	Andro
L19	33	Tertiary	Single	Pengkid
L20	34	Secondary	Single	Pengkid
L21	35	Tertiary	Single	Pengkid
L22	34	Tertiary	Single	Andro
L23	56	Secondary	Single	Pengkid
L24	28	Tertiary	Single	Pengkid
L25	25	Tertiary	Single	Andro
L26	25	Tertiary	Single	Lessy
L27	39	Tertiary	Single	Pengkid
L28	30	Tertiary	Divorced	Lessy
L29	39	Tertiary	Single	Lessy
L30	30	Tertiary	Single	Pengkid

Source: Authors' work

breadwinner: “I work hard. I will give the money to my mom [to replace father role],” (L09, *pengkid*).

Furthermore, observing family members practicing same-sex sexual relationships pulled the participants into the same behavior:

“My older sister is also a *pengkid*. I witnessed her transformation from A to Z since I was small. The way she treated her girlfriend made me think that it is ok if I do not have a man. There is someone who can treat me like that,” (L13, bisexual)

The affirmation of family members further strengthened the development of sexual identity: “My sister was angry with my ex-husband for beating me. My mother asked why I was with a man if there was no responsibility. It is preferable to remain with the current *pengkid*,” (L13, bisexual).

In addition to family influence, peers contributed to the development of sexual identity. Participants imprinted masculine characteristics by mingling with boys from early childhood, playing with boys’ toys, and engaging in rough physical activities such as fishing, riding bicycles, climbing trees, and playing shooting games. Once they entered kindergarten and primary school, they met and mixed with more friends. L21 stated, “Before school, I played a lot with boys. Because there are many friends who are close to home, there are also mixed up, but there are many males. With my brother, I play a lot with boy toys,” (L21, *pengkid*).

Some participants mentioned that their traumatic experiences, such as being victims and witnesses of abuse by men, whether physical, mental, or sexual, caused them to despise and disrespect men. Later, they did not have a sexual desire for men but rather developed a sexual desire for women. For example, L09 shared that her father was abusive to her mother and siblings. Her uncle, who was a drug addict, also forced her to have oral sex when she was in kindergarten. In addition, her older brother peeped while she bathed and sexually abused her two younger sisters: “From childhood until now, I did not like my older brother ...[he] was irresponsible. I felt

vengeful toward him till the day he died,” (L09, *pengkid*).

Moreover, Islamic teaching in the family contributed to the development of sexual identity. Some participants did not think it was important to follow Islamic teachings because they did not see good examples of them from their parents. L14 said, “My own mother did not pray. My mother did not even tell me to pray,” (L14, andro).

Nonetheless, even some parents who properly practiced Islam did not instill in participants the importance of Islamic teaching. Therefore, some participants poorly practiced the teachings: “My parents did not put much emphasis on religion. They gave freedom to their children,” (L04, *lessy*).

However, nearly all participants who diligently followed Islam’s requirements at home did not practice religion as they used to once. They were no longer under their parents’ supervision: “When I left home, I started not praying. Even in secondary school, sometimes, when I was asked to pray, I went for ablution and went into the room without praying. I knew it was obligatory, but I made fun of it,” (L07, *pengkid*).

Most participants were aware of Islamic laws prohibiting same-sex sexual behavior (SSB). However, they disregarded these rules because of their apathy toward Islam: “I know this thing is wrong. But the feeling of knowing is not strong; it is kind of vague, and it is unclear what the law is. So, I just ignore it,” (L18, andro).

Exploring Self-identity

Exploring self-identity is the stage at which participants search for their identities. They were curious about their identities and wanted to try new things, usually when they started secondary school. Their peers easily influenced them throughout their adolescence. For example, they were more comfortable interacting with women who expressed masculine characteristics or were tomboys. In addition, they participated in sports and rough physical activities. They had the opportunity to explore more during this period.

Meanwhile, participants mentioned that their female peers and partners, who understood, supported, and loved them, were pulling them into same-sex relationships. These female peers and partners fulfilled their longing for love that they did not receive from their family, especially their mother, and gave them happiness and appreciation. L16 stated, “She also treated me well. None of the people that I knew in my life at that time (treated me like this). I should get all the love from my mom, right?” (L16, *pengkid*).

Outside the house, several participants reported that they had been sexually groomed by their female teachers, seniors, and peers and had their first sexual relationship at secondary school. Once their partners left the school, they would find new partners among the juniors. In schools with several lesbian couples, mostly in all-girl schools, having same-sex partners seems normal. Consequently, they proudly pursued these lifestyles without feeling guilty: “In

secondary school, the most critical time... I liked to dress like a boy, wanted to be a boy, was friends with all the boys, and was interested in girls,” (L02, *pengkid*).

Subsequently, they continued exploring their identities when they entered college or university. Being away from family members, particularly at university, allowed them to explore, discover new things, and engage in same-sex activities without restriction. Some even stayed in the same room or house with their partners: “I met a *pengkid* while I was in the university. It means more exposure to things that I have been looking for. Apparently, there were other people who were the same as me,” (L12, *pengkid*).

Moreover, a few participants studying or traveling outside Malaysia, particularly in countries allowing same-sex marriage, had an extensive opportunity to explore and affirm their identities. They dated local women and publicly expressed themselves in a masculine manner: “I stayed at the university, many international students there. I became part of the guys... smoked cigarettes... smoked pot. I can kiss in public areas. No problem,” (L08, *andro*).

Furthermore, several participants explored lesbianism through pornography, novels, and books about sexuality. L01 said, “I watched light porn. My ex-boyfriend gave me a book about sex scenes. There were many stories about the lesbian scene and all those things. I do not have to worry about pregnancy,” (L01, *lessy*).

Pornography is easily accessible through social media. Accordingly, social media

has become a platform for participants to search for and explore more information and activities related to their identities. Most participants communicated on social media and found their partners there. They also shared their problems and received support from the virtual community, further affirming their sexual identities: “We were chatting in the mIRC. We met in the chat... the *pengkid* group,” (L21, *pengkid*).

Consolidating in L Community

Consolidating identity as L Community refers to how participants engrossed themselves in the minority group, which they identified as “Komuniti L” or L Community. L Community is a lesbian community that includes women with sexual attraction toward women, including bisexuals and pansexuals. They also refer to themselves as “senget” (nonstraight or slanted).

In the L Community, a lesbian who expresses herself in a feminine character identifies as *lessy* or *femme*. A lesbian who expresses herself in masculine characteristics identifies herself as a *pengkid*. In addition, “*abam*” is a term used by lesbians who express themselves as males: “*Abam-abam*, she already thinks that she is completely a real man. Even her mind thinks she is a man. I mean, she is at the same level as a man. I am lesser than that level,” (L15, *pengkid*).

Pengkids behave, walk, and portray themselves as men. They usually have short hair and bind their chests to hide their breasts. Most of them smoke, and some abuse substances. They enjoy tough activities

such as riding, fishing, and climbing. The difference between a *pengkid* and a tomboy is that a tomboy is sexually attracted to men, whereas a *pengkid* is sexually attracted to women. Conversely, transmen take testosterone for a masculinizing effect or undergo top or bottom surgery to change their biological sex, whereas *pengkids* do not. Most *pengkids* prefer *lessy* or *femme*. *Pengkids*’ partners are called “*awek peng*.” However, a few *pengkids* also prefer *pengkids*, called “*gaypeng*” or “*GP*.”

Andro members of the L Community express their gender in feminine and masculine characteristics. There are two types of andro: *femme* and *butch*. Andro *femme* is more feminine, whereas andro *butch* is more masculine or tougher. Moreover, andro *femme* is referred to as soft *butch* and prefers *femme*. Situationally, andro can be dominant or non-dominant in a relationship. For example, P18 explained, “I am not too masculine like a *pengkid* and not very feminine like a *lessy* woman. But my preference is only for women who are *femme* instead of *pengkid*. In English, we call it soft *butch*,” (P18, andro).

Furthermore, a pansexual can play any role in a relationship. For example, she can partner with a *lessy* or a *pengkid*. If she is with a *lessy*, she will play the dominant role, and if with a *pengkid*, the *pengkid* would be the dominant one:

“I’m capable of being everything. If with a *pengkid*, I’ll be more at the bottom, and she’ll be the husband. I become like a wife. If I am with a *lessy*, if I am with a girlfriend, I will

be dominant. She will be my slave,” (L01, pansexual).

A few participants mentioned that their identities have changed throughout their lives. They could change their identities from femme to *pengkid*, from lesbian to bisexual, or from *pengkid* to andro: “I used to couple with *pengkid*. I became a *lessy*. Now I am andro,” (L22, andro).

In addition, participants claimed they could recognize other L Community members, which they named “gaydar.” According to them, “Gaydar, that means we can sense that the person is slanted (*senget*),” (L20, *pengkid*).

Once participants recognized someone with the same sexual identity, they felt comfortable affirming their identities and being in a minority group that shares the same difficulty in contrast to the general majority. They had been accepted into a particular community, appreciated, and understood. In this newfound community, no one judges them or discriminates against them. Alternatively, they share their feelings, gain more information, and receive answers to confusing matters. By receiving support from other members of the L Community, they consolidate into it: “Apparently, there are many more like me. I’m not the only one with this kind of problem,” (L20, *pengkid*).

With affirmation from the L Community, they became part of the community and practiced their lifestyles. They freely practice what they desire in this community and have a companion who can listen to and understand them. A woman is a better companion than a man, as women are

more caring and responsible, especially for bisexuals who had a bad experience with their ex-husbands: “I decided to live like that... we are free... we are away from family. We can do whatever we like,” (L23, *pengkid*).

Most participants decided to “come out” in this phase because they felt comfortable in this community. However, some would “come out” at any phase to whom they were comfortable: “At that time, ignore what others said. We went out together in a big group,” (L21, *pengkid*).

Despite having a few breakups, conflicts, and abuse, the L Community stayed in same-sex relationships for a long time because of love and trust from their partners.

DISCUSSION

This study contributes numerous vital findings to the current body of knowledge. First, SGMMW went through three phases in consolidating their identities (Table 2). Second, a new finding from this study is SGMMW in Malaysia, also referred to as the L Community. Third, the sexual identity development of SGMMW was influenced by environmental, personal, and behavioral factors, as aligned with the SCT concept of socialization (Bussey & Bandura, 1999).

This study identifies three phases of SGMMW identity development: awareness, exploration, and consolidation. In Phase 1 (awareness), SGMMW becomes aware of their feelings toward the female. Hiestand and Levitt (2005) reported that this recognition can begin as early as kindergarten. It starts with admiration

for the individual, such as their female teacher, seniors, or colleagues. Over time, it progresses into same-sex attraction (SSA). Phase 1 is parallel with the first stage of the Sophie (1986) and McCarn and Fassinger (1996) models (Table 3).

In Phase 2 (exploration), SGMMW began to explore, especially when offered more opportunities, primarily through social media or from schools. They began to gather information about their sexual desires and gender identity. They tried to make new friends who could understand and accept them during the process. In addition, they might engage in sexual activities or erotic relationships with women. Sophie's (1986) and McCarn and Fassinger's (1996) models of lesbian identity development describe the same exploration process after the awareness phase.

In Phase 3 (the consolidation phase), SGMMW accepted its new identity, engaged in SSB, and received affirmation from its new minority community. SSA and cross-gender are accepted and validated in this neoculture (Roberts & Christens, 2021). Most have behaviors, values, and feelings consistent with their ideal self-image or egosyntonic.

Phase 3 of this study aligns with the third and fourth stages of the model proposed by Sophie (1986). In addition, Sophie (1986) reported that lesbians might change their sexual orientation at any point and not proceed to identity integration, which is in accordance with the concept of sexual fluidity, in which sexual orientation may fluctuate over time (Diamond, 2016, 2020). In the McCarn and Fassinger (1996) model, Phase 3 or the consolidation phase of the SGMMW identity, is consistent with Phases 3 and 4 of its model, which are deepening or commitment and internalization or synthesis. During this phase, they become committed and can accept their identities.

According to McCarn and Fassinger (1996), discovering SSA differs from developing a sense of belonging within the lesbian community. Earlier stages of the process may be associated with anxiety and feeling different from the general majority, leading to confusion, self-disgust, and increased homonegativity (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). In later stages, individuals may experience a sense of fulfillment and peace.

The novel finding in this study is that SGMMW in Malaysia identified themselves

Table 3
Comparison of SGMMW and lesbian identity development

SGMMW	Sophie (1986)	McCarn & Fassinger (1996)	
		Individual	Group
Phase 1: Awareness	Stage 1: Awareness	Phase 1: Awareness	
Phase 2: Exploration	Stage 2: Testing and exploration	Phase 2: Exploration	
Phase 3: Consolidation	Stage 3: Identity acceptance	Phase 3: Deepening/commitment	
	Stage 4: Identity integration	Phase 4: Internalization/synthesis	

Source: Authors' work

as “Komuniti L” or L Community. This community includes lesbians, bisexuals, pansexuals, *lessy*, *pengkid*, andro butch, andro femme, and transmen. This inclusion contradicts the global definition of transmen, which states that transmen are part of the SGM among men (Salway et al., 2021). A possible explanation is that this community among Malay may still be tied to their biological natal female sex, traditional culture, and Islamic teachings on gender expression. In Islamic rituals, such as performing five daily prayers, one must follow the rule for females despite being transmen (Kambol, 2020). Likewise, customs and family expectations influence gender fluidity in India (Azhar et al., 2022). Owing to stigma and discrimination, they change their gender expression to suit their surroundings. As a natal female sex, gender can change from feminine to androgynous to masculine. Their identities can change throughout their lives, as explained by the concept of sexual and gender fluidity (Diamond, 2020; Gosling, 2018; Scheitle &

Wolf, 2018). In addition, sexual orientation and gender identity expression may vary throughout their lives. This concept relates to a change or transition in sexual orientation and gender expression, even if temporary.

Nevertheless, most members of the L Community “came out” once they had established their identities and were self-assured. However, some individuals may “come out” at any phase, depending on the person to whom they disclose their identities. They could disclose their identities during Phase 1 to their peers, who may understand them, or they might disclose them to someone they trust. This finding is consistent with that of McCarn and Fassinger (1996).

This study identified factors that influenced the identity development of the L Community along the phases of identity development, which can be explained with SCT and simplified in Figure 2. The SCT emphasizes the reciprocal influences between environmental, personal, and behavioral factors in the identity

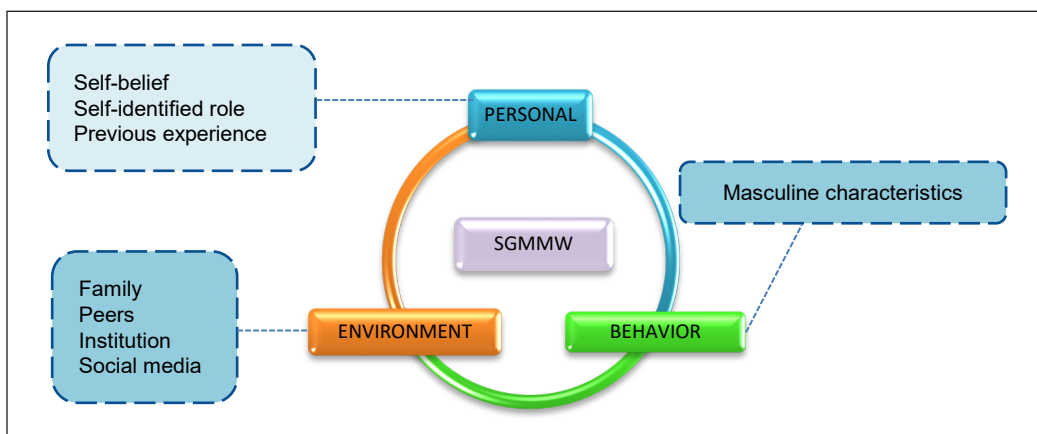


Figure 2. Inclination factors of sexual identity development based on the social cognitive theory
Source: Authors’ work

development of the L Community or SGMMW (Bussey & Bandura, 1999).

At the environmental level, sexual identity development is influenced by family, friends, institutions, and social media (Fajria et al., 2021; Mukhid, 2018; Rushdan & Subhi, 2022). Family environments, including parenting styles such as abusiveness, lack of affection, and ignorance, were identified in other studies (Juaini & Azman, 2021; Upe et al., 2022). When no father figure was present in the family, daughters sought to fill the emotional void by playing masculine roles. They experienced a strong drive to become protectors or providers for their families, which motivated them to adopt masculine characteristics (Craig & Lacroix, 2011). They believed embracing these traits would make them stronger and more secure, perceiving masculinity as a source of strength and safety compared to identifying as women (Hiestand & Levitt, 2005).

Simultaneously, the process of observing and learning from their male family members and peers contributed to the expression of SGMMW in masculine characteristics and the development of SSA. Hiestand and Levitt (2005) and Purnamasari et al. (2019) reported that playing with boys and enjoying games and activities related to boys influenced the expression of male genders among butches. Studies from Indonesia have also agreed upon the role of parents in gender identity development through modeling (Maryam, 2022; Rikhusshuba & Huda, 2020). SSA evolved as they identified themselves as males and learned how to

approach and interact with women from their male acquaintances, as described in Purnamasari et al. (2019) study in Kota Makasar, Indonesia. In addition, once they entered school and met more girls, they became aware of their sexual orientation toward girls. Female friends or peers who provide support, validate emotions and are more understanding inclined Malay women toward lesbianism, as noted by Aziz et al. (2019), Hesamuddin et al. (2019), and Rushdan and Subhi (2022).

Institutions such as schools, especially all-girls or boarding schools, and assimilation with other lesbians reinforced them in finding their identities during the exploration phase. Some members had been approached by those with SSA and were groomed to be part of this group. With continuous exposure, they were inclined to embrace the SGMMW identity. This exposure also occurred at higher educational institutions with more opportunities because they were away from their parents. Aziz et al. (2019), Hesamuddin et al. (2019), and Rushdan and Subhi (2022) reported a similar factor.

In the digital era, Malay women can easily access global social media to obtain information on SSA. With the information they obtained, they explored and found a community that could support and affirm their sexual and gender identities. Chan (2023) and Upe et al. (2022) explained the role of social media in sexual identity development.

In addition to environmental factors, personal factors such as bad experiences

and the absence of parental figures created a new perception and belief in Malay women. Bad experiences, such as a history of sexual molestation, sexual abuse, physical abuse, and mental abuse, led to negative thoughts, such as an intense hatred of men (Juaini & Azman, 2021). These findings are consistent with those of Juaini and Azman (2021) in Malaysia and Purnamasari et al. (2019) in Indonesia.

In terms of behavioral factors, having an abusive father (environmental), being inclined by their mothers' constant suffering, and being looked down upon also encouraged Malay women to behave in masculinity over femininity. By behaving with masculine characteristics, Malay women felt a heightened sense of power and confidence, enabling them to assert themselves and make decisions without fearing confrontation (Craig & Lacroix, 2011). Furthermore, this feeling of protection became crucial when confronting potential discrimination or scrutiny (Levitt & Hiestand, 2004). They believed that women were vulnerable and prone to victimization.

Simultaneously, sexual attraction toward women evolved as they identified themselves as males and learned how to approach and interact with women from their male acquaintances. This process of observing and learning from their male peers contributed to the development of their sexual attraction toward women. This finding is consistent with the findings of a previous study on butch identity development (Hiestand & Levitt, 2005), which reported that playing with boys

and enjoying games and activities related to boys influence the expression of male genders among butch in northern Florida. Subsequently, once they entered school and met more girls, they became aware of their sexual orientation toward girls.

In summary, the reciprocal interaction of environmental, personal, and behavioral factors in the SCT theory could explain not only the sexual but also the gender identity development of SGMMW (Bussey & Bandura, 1999).

CONCLUSION

The novelty of this study lies in its finding of the L Community as part of SGM among women in Malaysia. The uniqueness of this L Community is that it includes transmen, which contradicts the global concept that transmen are part of SGM among men rather than women. In addition, this study provides a deeper understanding of the identity development process within the L Community or SGMMW in Malaysia. Although previous studies on lesbian identity development have proposed four stages or phases for sexual identity development, this study proposes three phases: (1) awareness, (2) exploration, and (3) consolidation. During Phase 1, SGMMW was aware of their sexual orientation toward females. In Phase 2, they explored information about SSA, the community that accepted their identities, and partners that shared the same orientation. In Phase 3, they consolidated their identities in the SGMMW group, which affirmed them. The development process is flexible rather than

strictly linear, aligning with the fluidity of sexual and gender identities. Based on SCT, this study concludes that the development process of SGMMW's sexual identity was reciprocally influenced by environmental factors, such as family, friends, institutions, and social media; personal factors, such as a history of bad experiences with men and hatred toward men; and behavioral factors, such as behaving like a man to hide the weakness of a woman.

Implications of the Study

The contribution of the knowledge from this study can be explained in terms of theory and practical implications. In terms of the implications of the theory, SCT explained the identity development of SGMMW, indicating that it can be applied to other studies aiming to explore the identity development of other groups of people, which can be SGM among Malay men or non-Malay community or non-Malaysian. The findings of the three phases involved in the sexual identity development of SGMMW outline the sequential stages of self-discovery, exploration, and acceptance of one's sexual and gender identity. These phases align with established identity development models within the SGM and can be applied to better understand their identity development process.

Regarding practical implications, understanding the phases and inclination factors in developing SGMMW identity is vital in aiding the intervention process. In Phase 1, their sexual orientation awareness might cause a confusing state that may lead

to anxiety and depression. Mental health professionals may help them by validating and explaining that sexual orientation is fluid and SSA may be a transient process. They should deviate from SSA by focusing on other things and preventing themselves from engaging in sexual activities. Moreover, service providers should handle anxiety and depression accordingly.

In the exploration phase, SGMMW should focus on the impact of practicing lesbianism and their obligations as Malay and Muslim. They need to be advised correctly rather than being influenced by the advocacy of human rights groups, social media, and those who practice lesbianism as part of their rights. Intervention may be quite difficult during the consolidation phase because SGMMW has already consolidated its identities. However, sexual orientation may change at any time because it is fluid. Consequently, there is still a chance to help them change their sexual orientation or abstain from practicing lesbianism.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study has some limitations. With the help of key informants, using purposive and snowball sampling may introduce selection bias. Exploring the process of identity development that occurred a few years ago may introduce recall bias and subjective interpretations of experiences. In addition, online interviews may not provide the same level of rapport as in-person interviews, potentially affecting the depth of participants' responses.

Research on the mental health of SGMMW during their identity development process is necessary to understand their psychological conflicts during the process. Subsequently, research should be conducted on the approach to dealing with SGMMW mental health and the effectiveness of interventions in each phase of the sexual identity development of SGMMW.

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