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Factors Influencing Sexual Role Selection in Gay and Bisexual Men in Yogyakarta City: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract. *Sexual role identity (top, versatile, bottom) among gay and bisexual men is a complex phenomenon shaped by psychosocial and familial factors. Understanding these influences is crucial for nursing practice, particularly in mental health and community care. This study aimed to explore the factors that influence sexual role selection among gay and bisexual men in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. This qualitative research employed Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Twelve informants were recruited using purposive sampling, with inclusion criteria of being gay or bisexual men, sexually active in the past six months, and familiar with the terms top, versatile, and bottom. Data were collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews and analyzed thematically. Four main themes emerged: (1) father's role in identity formation, including father absence and dominance; (2) relationship with mothers, covering emotional attachment and maternal protectiveness; (3) past trauma, such as sexual violence and social rejection, influencing role preference; and (4) psychosocial factors, including seeking comfort in relationships and the influence of community norms. These findings revealed that sexual role selection is not merely an individual preference but a product of family dynamics, early experiences, and sociocultural environment. Sexual role identity among gay and bisexual men is socially and psychologically constructed. This study provides insights for nursing implications, emphasizing the importance of trauma-informed care, family education, and culturally sensitive interventions to improve mental health outcomes in LGBTQ+ populations.*

Keyword: *Male, Mental Health, Social Status, Sexual and Gender Minorities.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Sexual roles likes top, versatile, and bottom, for gay and bisexual men are not merely preferences in intimate activities, but also reflect gender identity construction, power dynamics, and socio-cultural transformations (Ayunisa, 2021). In Indonesia, research on sexual identity has primarily focused on reproductive health or HIV epidemiology, while the psychosocial dynamics shaping the choice of sexual roles remain understudied, particularly in urban contexts such as Yogyakarta.

According to Ghazali et al. (2021), childhood experiences, especially relationships with parents, have a profound influence on the construction of gender identity and sexual preferences in adulthood. Research in East Asia also shows that the absence of a father or the dominance of a mother figure often creates internal narratives that lead to more feminine or passive gender expressions (Zheng et al., 2022).

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Additionally, the first sexual experience is considered a 'blueprint' for sexual psychology, regardless of position and context, this experience shapes long-term patterns of role preference (Tan & Iskandar, 2021; Carpenter & Acosta, 2023). On the other hand, some studies show that early trauma, particularly childhood sexual abuse (CSA), can influence sexual orientation and identity patterns, although it does not directly determine sexual role preferences such as bottom or top (Fergusson et al., 2005; Briere & Elliott, 1994).

Within the LGBTQ+ community in Indonesia, the influence of media and community norms is very strong. Pornography and representations of masculinity or femininity in the media serve as frameworks for sexual role identification (Chowdhury & Lin, 2022; Zheng & Wong, 2023). For example, the top role is often projected as a symbol of masculine strength, while the bottom role is associated with concepts of softness or femininity, particularly in homosocial community narratives, as studied by Ayunisa (2021).

Overall, the process of forming sexual roles among gay and bisexual men is influenced by several dimensions, including early family relationships (father absence vs. maternal dominance), first sexual experiences and their quality (positive vs. traumatic), exposure to childhood sexual trauma, community dynamics and gender stereotypes, and media representations and the internalisation of norms.

However, there has been no academic study that phenomenologically combines these five approaches into a single framework in the local Indonesian context. Therefore, this study aims to address this gap with a qualitative, in-depth approach, exploring how gay and bisexual men in Yogyakarta express their subjective experiences and how those experiences shape their sexual role choices.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a qualitative approach with interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore the factors that influence gay and bisexual individuals in determining their sexual roles, particularly the bottom role. The research location is Yogyakarta City, known for its active and relatively open LGBTQ+ population. The sampling technique used purposive sampling with the following inclusion criteria: (1)

men who identify as gay or bisexual, (2) sexually active in the past six months, and (3) understand the terms top, vers, and bottom.

A total of 12 informants were interviewed in-depth, with a predominance of bottom roles (5 informants), vers (3 informants), and top (4 informant). Interviews were conducted in person in a private room or via Zoom, with an average duration of 45–60 minutes. The researcher used a semi-structured interview guide covering childhood experiences, relationships with parents, early sexual experiences, sexual role preferences, and psychosocial aspects.

Data were analyzed using IPA techniques through the following steps: (1) verbatim transcription, (2) reading and rereading, (3) coding, (4) identification of main themes, and (5) interpretation of the meaning of experiences. Data validity was maintained through triangulation of sources, member checking, and peer debriefing.

3. RESULT & DISCUSSION

Table 1. Characteristic Informants (n=12)

Code	Age	Orientation	Role Selection
I1	24	Gay	Bottom
I2	27	Gay	Vers
I3	21	Bisexual	Top
I4	29	Gay	Bottom
I5	35	Gay	Top
I6	26	Bisexual	Vers
I7	22	Gay	Bottom
I8	30	Gay	Top
I9	25	Bisexual	Bottom
I10	28	Gay	Vers
I11	23	Gay	Bottom
I12	31	Bisexual	Top

The majority of informants in this study were gay men with a preference for the bottom role. However, there was variation in roles based on orientation and age. Younger informants were more likely to take the bottom role, while older informants tended to be more flexible, even showing dominance in the top role. These findings indicate that sexual role preferences are not only influenced by orientation, but may also be related to factors such as age, experience, and individual psychosocial dynamics.

Table 2. Thematic Analysis

Main Theme	Sub-theme	Quotes from Informants
The role of fathers in the formation of sexual identity	Father absence	*"My father is at home, but we rarely talk. If I tell him anything, he gets angry right away. So I'm closer to my mother than my father."* (I3)
		"I never felt like I got any attention from my father. Maybe that's why I tend to seek affection from other men." (I7)
	Father dominance	"*My father was very strict; everyone had to obey him. So from a young age, I got used to obeying dominant men.*" (I5)
Relationship with Mother	Emotional attachment to mother	"*I always talk to my mother. She accepts me as I am, even though she doesn't know about my orientation."* (I2)
	Mother as a protective figure	*"My mother is possessive and often controlling. So I feel more comfortable with a partner who is more directive."* (I8)
Past Trauma	Experience of sexual violence	*"When I was in middle school, I was harassed by an older student. Since then, I feel safer in the 'bottom' position because I don't have to be aggressive."* (I4)
	Experience of social rejection	*"I was bullied because I was feminine. So I eventually accepted my bottom identity to align with what others see."* (I6)
Psychosocial Factors	Seeking comfort in relationships	*"Being bottom makes me feel calmer; I feel cared for and protected."* (I1)
	Influence of social environment	*"In my community in Yogyakarta, the bottom role is more common. So over time, I also got caught up in the atmosphere."* (I9)

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that the factors influencing the formation of sexual roles among gay and bisexual men in Yogyakarta are influenced by a complex interaction between family experiences, past trauma, and psychosocial

dynamics. The figure of the father emerges as an important aspect: the absence of a father or a dominant father shapes informants' tendencies to seek out dominant or attentive male figures. Conversely, emotional closeness with the mother and the mother's role as a protective figure make some informants feel more comfortable taking on a passive role in sexual relationships.

In addition to family factors, traumatic experiences also contribute significantly. Informants who have experienced sexual violence or social rejection tend to choose the bottom role as a form of self-defense mechanism and a way to find comfort in intimate relationships. Psychosocial factors also reinforce this tendency; some informants choose the bottom role because they feel calm, protected, and cared for by their partners, while the social environment in Yogyakarta, which normalizes the bottom role, further reinforces their sexual identity choices.

Overall, sexual roles are not solely chosen based on sexual preferences but are the result of the construction of childhood experiences, relationships with parents, traumatic experiences, and norms developed within the social environment. This underscores that role identity within the gay and bisexual community is the result of a combination of personal, family, and socio-cultural factors.

Discussion

1. The Role of Father in The Formation of Sexual Identity

Many informants emphasized the role of the father figure in the formation of their sexual identity. One informant stated, “My father is at home, but we rarely talk. If I tell him anything, he gets angry right away. So I’m closer to my mother than my father.” (I3). This quote highlights the absence of emotional closeness with the father. Recent research confirms that the absence of a father in emotional aspects can increase the psychological vulnerability of gay boys, who tend to seek affection from other men (Kranz, 2021). Additionally, Bell et al. (2023) state that authoritarian or distant father-child relationships often reinforce attraction to dominant masculine figures, thereby influencing the sexual role chosen.

Another informant added, “My father was very strict; everyone had to obey him. So from a young age, I got used to obeying dominant men.” (I5). This reinforces the

theory of gender role socialization, which states that experiences with dominant figures from an early age can shape passive-active patterns in sexual relationships (Brown et al., 2021).

The absence or dominance of fathers appeared to strongly influence role preference. Informants who lacked emotional closeness with their fathers reported seeking comfort and protection from male partners, often aligning with a bottom role, "I never felt like I got any attention from my father. Maybe that's why I tend to seek affection from other men" (I7). This aligns with Kranz (2021), who found that absent fathers are associated with submissive role adoption in MSM populations.

Conversely, some informants with dominant fathers reported either internalizing submissiveness or replicating dominance by becoming tops, "My father was very strict; everyone had to obey him. So from a young age, I got used to obeying dominant men" (I5). Similar patterns were reported by Brown et al. (2021), who argued that paternal dominance can produce both mimicry (becoming top) and resistance (becoming bottom).

2. Relationship with Mother

Closeness to one's mother is another important factor. One informant said, "I always talk to my mother. She accepts me as I am, even though she doesn't know about my orientation." (I2). This quote illustrates the emotional attachment to one's mother that provides a sense of security, so that the passive role (bottom) is perceived as a form of protection and safety. Recent studies confirm that strong maternal bonding can shape more cooperative and relational interpersonal behavior tendencies (Chen et al., 2022).

However, overly protective relationships also emerge in the narratives, "My mother is possessive and often controlling. So I feel more comfortable with a partner who is more directive." (I8)

This shows that overprotective parenting can influence preferences for seeking a more dominant partner. This finding aligns with Garcia-Iglesias's (2025) research, which explains how attachment patterns with parents correlate with sexual role selection in gay men.

Maternal attachment also shaped role development. Informants with emotionally supportive mothers emphasized comfort in relationships, "I always talk to my mother.

She accepts me as I am, even though she doesn't know about my orientation" (I2). This reflects Chen et al. (2022), who demonstrated that maternal warmth fosters openness in sexual identity development.

On the other hand, protective or controlling maternal behaviors led some informants to prefer partners who are directive, "My mother is possessive and often controlling. So I feel more comfortable with a partner who is more directive" (I8). This duality echoes Garcia-Iglesias (2025), who noted that maternal control can reinforce passive role preference in gay men.

3. Past Trauma

Some informants linked traumatic experiences to role selection. For example, experiences of sexual abuse, "When I was in middle school, I was harassed by an older student. Since then, I feel safer in the 'bottom' position because I don't have to be aggressive." (I4).

This quote aligns with Marchi's (2023) research, which found that LGBTQ+ individuals with a history of trauma tend to adopt sexual roles that give them a sense of control or security.

Additionally, experiences of bullying also emerged, "I was bullied because I was feminine. So I eventually accepted my bottom identity to align with what others see." (I6)

These findings support the concept of internalized stigma (Pachankis et al., 2020), where social pressure reinforces the acceptance of certain sexual identities as a survival strategy.

Traumatic experiences, such as sexual violence or bullying, were reported to significantly affect role preference. One participant shared: "When I was in middle school, I was harassed by an older student. Since then, I feel safer in the 'bottom' position because I don't have to be aggressive" (I4). This supports Marchi (2023), who found that past sexual trauma often leads to role adoption associated with safety and passivity. Social rejection also shaped identity, as another informant recalled: "I was bullied because I was feminine. So I eventually accepted my bottom identity to align with what others see" (I6). These findings align with Salas-Wright et al. (2023), who reported that bullying reinforces internalized identities consistent with social labeling.

4. Psychosocial Factors

Emotional comfort and community influence were other dominant aspects. One informant said, “Being bottom makes me feel calmer; I feel cared for and protected.” (I1)

This statement supports the minority stress theory, which emphasises the need for security and support in intimate relationships as a form of coping (Meyer, 2003; Wheldon, 2024).

Additionally, the local social context also influences role, “In my community in Yogyakarta, the bottom role is more common. So over time, I also got caught up in the atmosphere.” (I9)

This quote highlights the role of community norms in shaping sexual preferences. Vytniorgu & Garcia-Iglesias (2025) found that gay community norms often divide sexual roles based on masculinity-femininity, and individuals tend to conform to dominant norms.

Psychosocial needs and community norms further shaped role identity. Several participants reported choosing bottom roles due to feelings of comfort and security: “Being bottom makes me feel calmer; I feel cared for and protected” (I1). This finding aligns with Wheldon (2024), who highlighted the role of psychological comfort in role adoption. Community influences were also prominent, as one informant explained: “In my community in Yogyakarta, the bottom role is more common. So over time, I also got caught up in the atmosphere” (I9). Such findings are consistent with Vytniorgu and Garcia-Iglesias (2025), who showed that cultural and community norms strongly shape role preferences in MSM populations.

An important dimension revealed in this study is the process of identity seeking. Several informants described trying different roles before finding the one that best fit their personality and emotional needs: “At first, I tried to be top with some partners, but I realized I’m more comfortable as bottom” (I11). This fluidity reflects Tan and Iskandar (2021), who noted that sexual role identity often evolves through experimentation and is not fixed. Similarly, Zheng and Wong (2023) emphasized that bisexual men in particular often navigate multiple role identities before stabilizing in one. Such findings reinforce

the idea that sexual roles are not merely preferences but outcomes of ongoing negotiations between personal history, psychosocial needs, and social context.

4. CONCLUSION

This study shows that the choice of sexual roles (top, vers, and bottom) among gay and bisexual men in Yogyakarta is influenced by multidimensional factors. Relationships with the father figure (absence or dominant attitude), emotional bonds with the mother, past traumatic experiences (sexual abuse and bullying), as well as psychosocial factors such as the need for security and the influence of the local community have been proven to play an important role in the construction of sexual identity. The narratives of the informants reinforce that roles are not static or purely biological, but rather the result of interactions between personal experiences, family dynamics, and social norms.

These findings underscore that sexual identity and role within the gay and bisexual community are complex products shaped by relational and contextual factors. Thus, this research provides deeper insights into the psychosocial dynamics underlying sexual preferences and opens avenues for mental health and social interventions. A man who loses his father figure will tend to become a bottom, and someone who loses his mother figure will tend to become a top.

Nursing Implications of this research are:

1. Trauma-Informed Care

Nurses need to integrate a trauma-informed approach into healthcare services for LGBTQ+ individuals, especially those with a history of abuse or bullying, as these experiences have been shown to affect sexual identity and role.

2. Psychosocial Support and Counselling

Mental health nurses can play a role in providing a safe space for counselling, helping patients explore their sexual identity in a healthy way, and reducing the impact of internalised stigma.

3. Family Health Education

Nursing interventions should include family education, particularly increasing the sensitivity of parents (both fathers and mothers), to create more supportive emotional relationships and prevent negative psychosocial impacts.

4. Community Empowerment

Community nurses can collaborate with LGBTQ+ organisations in Yogyakarta to develop peer-support programmes that enhance self-acceptance and mental health among their members.

5. Inclusive Policies and Clinical Practices

The findings of this study can serve as a basis for developing more inclusive nursing practice guidelines that are sensitive to sexual orientation and consider role dynamics within the gay and bisexual population.

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