

# I Am Who I Am: Navigating Identity, Faith, and Family as a Gay Man in Indonesia

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**Abstract.** This qualitative study explores the formation of sexual identity, internal–external conflicts, and the self-acceptance process of a homosexual man within the Indonesian socio-cultural context shaped by religious and heteronormative values. Using an intrinsic case study approach, data were collected through in-depth interviews with a 28-year-old male participant who had undergone the coming out process and were analyzed thematically. Findings reveal the ambivalent role of family dynamics: the mother’s emotional support functioned as a protective factor, whereas the father’s rigid religious stance intensified internal conflict. The participant experienced early identity confusion compounded by stigma, discrimination, and religious pressure, contributing to minority stress and suicide attempts. Self-acceptance developed through selective coming out, social support, and romantic relationships, culminating in an ego-syntonic state characterized by integration of sexual identity, spirituality, and future aspirations. The study underscores the complexity of homosexual identity development in Indonesia, emphasizing the central influence of family and religion. It highlights the need for inclusive family support, culturally sensitive psychosocial interventions, and safe spaces to promote healthy self-acceptance among individuals with minority sexual orientations.

**Keywords:** Homosexuality, sexual identity, internal conflict, family role, coming out, self-acceptance, egosyntonic.

## 1 Introduction

Global attention to minority sexual identity and sexual orientation (LGBTQ+) issues has increased significantly in recent decades. This is reflected in the growing number of interdisciplinary studies that examine the psychological, social, economic and health aspects of sexual minorities [1], [2], [3], [4], [5], [6]. These issues are now not only the concern of academics, but also the center of debates in politics, social movements, and human rights discourses in various countries [7], [8], [9], [10], [11], [12].

Several studies have consistently shown that individuals with minority sexual orientations face a higher risk of various mental health disorders, including depression, anxiety, and suicidal behaviour. This condition is largely triggered by minority stress that arises from experiences of discrimination, social rejection, and microaggressions in daily life. These factors create a chronic psychological burden that suppresses an individual's ability to adapt healthily to their

environment. In addition, social stigma and normative pressure are not only implicated in psychological aspects, but also impact the quality of interpersonal relationships, as well as general psychological well-being. Many individuals with a minority sexual orientation feel compelled to conceal their identity as a coping strategy, but this often exacerbates feelings of isolation, triggers internal conflict, and reduces opportunities for positive social support [13], [14], [15], [16], [17], [18], [19], [20]. Ultimately, the combination of external stigma and attempts to internalize majority norms can exacerbate mental health vulnerabilities and impede healthy self-acceptance processes [21], [22], [23].

Homosexuality is often placed in a marginalized position in culturally and religiously conservative societies, mainly due to cultural norms and religious teachings that reject the existence and expression of LGBTQ+ identities. The rejection, stigma and discrimination against homosexuals is strongly influenced by dominant traditional and religious values. Many Christian, Islamic and other religious communities explicitly reject homosexuality, deeming it contrary to scriptural teachings and traditional morality. This reinforces stigma and justifies discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals [24], [25], [26], [27]. In countries like Indonesia and India, government policies are often unsupportive of LGBT rights and even repressive, reinforcing their marginalized position in society [28], [29]. Religious leaders are often key actors in anti-LGBT campaigns, supporting discriminatory policies and reinforcing the narrative that homosexuality is a threat to the social and religious order [30], [31], [32].

In Indonesia, social and religious norms, especially those propagated by conservative Muslim movements, significantly dominate public discourse on sexuality [33], [34], especially LGBTQ+ [35]. Ultimately, homosexuality is seen as a perversion, making them face stigma, discrimination, and social pressure [36], [37].

The family as the main agent of socialization has a major influence in the formation of individual identity, including sexual and gender identity. From childhood, the family becomes the first environment where values, norms and interaction patterns are instilled and internalized. Emotional support, acceptance, and open communication within the family can strengthen a sense of security and facilitate positive identity development. Conversely, rejection, rigid control, or lack of understanding from family members often lead to internal conflict, psychological stress, and even identity crisis. In the context of individuals with a minority sexual orientation, the family can play a dual role: on the one hand it can be an important source of support, but on the other hand it can exacerbate the stigma and discrimination experienced. Recent research confirms that parental socialization patterns regarding sexual orientation play an important role in shaping the identity of LGBTQ+ youth, and that non-heteronormative family representations can validate and strengthen their self-acceptance [38], [39].

Family support, especially from more supportive figures such as mothers, is an important protective factor in the coming out process of individuals with minority sexual orientation. The presence of family members who are able to provide acceptance, empathy, and open communication space can reduce psychological pressure and strengthen an individual's confidence when revealing their sexual identity. Conversely, a lack of support or rejection from the family can exacerbate the experience of stigma, increase the risk of internal conflict, and even hinder self-acceptance. Recent studies have shown that affirmative family interaction patterns contribute to improving the emotional well-being of LGBTQ+ youth and reducing the risk of mental disorders due to social discrimination. Support from figures considered close and supportive, such as mothers, is often the starting point for individuals to open up their identities to wider social circles [38], [39].

Family as the main agent of socialization has a major influence in the formation of individual identity, including sexual identity. Family support, especially from more supportive figures such as mothers, is an important protective factor in the coming out process. The presence of family members who are able to provide acceptance, empathy, and open communication can reduce psychological pressure and strengthen an individual's confidence when revealing their sexual identity. Conversely, rejection or neglect from the family can exacerbate the experience of stigma and increase the risk of internal conflict. Recent research suggests that parental socialization patterns regarding sexual orientation play an important role in shaping the identity of LGBTQ+ youth and providing validation that strengthens their self-acceptance [38], [39]. In addition, family involvement in supporting adolescents' identity development and mental health also plays a significant role in preventing the negative impacts of social stigma, discrimination, and even the risk of suicidal behavior. Emotional support and parental involvement have been shown to protect sexual minority adolescents from chronic psychological distress and help them build resilience [40].

Homosexual individuals often experience a dilemma between their self-identity and the religious teachings and social norms prevailing in society. On the one hand, they try to accept and express their sexual identity authentically, while on the other hand they are faced with religious and social pressures that judge homosexuality as a deviation or sin. This tension often leads to deep inner conflict, feelings of guilt, and anxiety about acceptance from family and social circles. Identity concealment strategies used to maintain harmony with family and community values can actually exacerbate psychological isolation and hinder the process of self-acceptance. Recent research confirms that the intersection of religion, social norms and sexual orientation is one of the main sources of minority stress experienced by homosexual individuals, and empathic understanding from family and social institutions is needed to reduce the psychological impact [41], [42].

Adaptive strategies used by homosexual individuals in the face of social and religious pressure include concealing their identity, restraining their self-expression, or selectively coming out. These efforts are generally intended to protect themselves from stigma, discrimination, and potential rejection from family and community environments. Research shows that these strategies can be short-term coping mechanisms, but prolonged concealment of identity can increase internal conflict and worsen mental health [43], [44]. Other findings also confirm that experiences of identity concealment in the transition to early adulthood are often correlated with depression, anxiety, and emotional dysregulation [45].

Coming out to close relatives or friends is an important stage that is full of risks and opportunities for acceptance. At this stage, individuals with a minority sexual orientation often select who is considered safe and supportive for the first time to know their identity. Positive support from friends or close relatives can provide emotional validation, increase selfconfidence, and serve as a protective factor against anxiety and depression. Conversely, rejection or negative responses can exacerbate psychological distress and reinforce feelings of alienation [46], [47]. This disclosure process, as recent research has shown, is not just a disclosure of identity, but rather a complex journey that determines the quality of interpersonal relationships, mental well-being, and individual identity development [48].

In the advanced phase, individuals can achieve ego-syntony when they are able to fully accept their sexual orientation as an integral part of the self, including in relation to spiritual beliefs. This process often involves a reconciliation between sexual identity and religious values or spirituality that may have previously been perceived as conflicting. Research shows that the

integration of sexual identity with religious and spiritual aspects is associated with increased self-esteem, psychological well-being, and reduced internal conflict [49]. In this framework, self-acceptance is not only about sexual orientation, but also includes spiritual meaning that allows individuals to live life more authentically and in balance [50]. Thus, the syntonic ego can be understood as the culmination of the identity process in which individuals successfully unite sexuality, personal values, and spirituality without feeling divided.

Studies on homosexuality in Indonesia are still relatively limited, especially those that depart from the perspective of deep personal experience. Most studies highlight the issue of homosexuality in terms of morality, law, or public health, while the subjective dimensions related to identity experience, internal conflict, coming out process, and self-acceptance have not been revealed. The lack of research with a qualitative approach that explores individual narratives has led to a less comprehensive academic understanding of the dynamics of homosexual life in Indonesia. In fact, a more contextualized understanding based on personal experience is very important to formulate psychosocial intervention strategies and policy advocacy that is more inclusive. Recent research in Indonesia, for example, highlights how family conversations influence the experiences of homosexual individuals in managing their identities and relationships [51]. Meanwhile, in a regional context, a study in the Philippines shows how intersectional stigma related to sexual orientation and HIV status shapes the everyday experiences of gay and bisexual people and how they reinterpret identity and social relationships [52].

Qualitative research is needed to describe in more depth the dynamics of identity, conflict, and self-acceptance processes of homosexual individuals who are strongly influenced by the Indonesian socio-cultural context. This approach allows the exploration of subjective experiences that are often unreachable by quantitative surveys or statistical analysis alone. Through personal narratives, qualitative research can reveal how individuals negotiate their sexual identity amidst the pressure of religious norms, family values, and strong societal stigma. In addition, this method also provides space to understand the adaptive strategies used, such as identity denial, selective coming out, and reconciliation between sexual orientation and spirituality. Thus, qualitative research not only contributes to the enrichment of academic literature, but also provides an empirical basis for psychosocial interventions and public policy formulation that is more inclusive and in accordance with social realities in Indonesia.

## **2 Method**

This research uses a qualitative approach with an intrinsic case study method to deeply understand the dynamics of identity, conflict, and self-acceptance process of a homosexual individual in the Indonesian socio-cultural context. The qualitative approach was chosen because it allows researchers to explore subjective experiences holistically through personal narratives that are rich in meaning [53]. The research subjects were determined using purposive sampling technique, which is the selection of participants based on certain criteria relevant to the research objectives.

The research subject is a 28-year-old homosexual man who is in the early adult phase and has come out. He was born and grew up in Padang Panjang, West Sumatra, a city known to be religious with strong Minangkabau cultural nuances, based on a matrilineal kinship system and strong matriarchal social norms. The environment in which she grew up upholds moral and

religious values, and emphasizes clear gender roles between men and women. Within the family, she was emotionally close to her mother and older sister, although relations with her father and brothers tended to be more rigid. From an early age he began to realize his differences from other boys, but the limited space for open discussion about sexuality made him suppress this identity. This situation led to identity confusion, inner distress, and experiences of depression in adolescence. The turning point came when he migrated to Bandung to continue his higher education. The more heterogeneous and pluralistic environment of the big city provided a safer space to express himself, build the courage to come out, and accept his sexual identity more openly.

Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews, which provide flexibility for researchers to explore information according to participants' responses, while maintaining a focus on issues of identity and lived experience [54]. Meanwhile, data analysis was carried out using thematic analysis techniques, starting from transcription of interview results, coding, identification of themes, to interpretation of meaning [55].

The coding process in qualitative research is generally an iterative cycle aimed at organizing and interpreting data. The initial stage (First Cycle Coding) involves assigning detailed codes to the raw data to capture details of meaning. The next stage (Second Cycle Coding) groups the initial codes into more abstract categories or themes through a process of selection, merging, or linking codes. According to Saldaña [56], this process can involve more than two cycles depending on the complexity of the data, with additional cycles to refine themes, build theoretical propositions, or test category consistency.

## **3 Result**

### **3.1 The Role of Family**

The role of family is very dominant in the formation of identity and the coming out journey of the subject. The dynamics of family relationships are mainly seen in the stronger emotional closeness with the mother who is considered supportive, compared to the father who is more rigid and religious. The subject conveyed, "I am closer to my mother... more solutive when talking about feelings" and "My father is more strict... I am a bit awkward". Family emotional and financial support became the foundation that allowed the subject to develop, even though sexual orientation did not receive full support: "I was born into a supportive family... very financially supportive".

### **3.2 Identity Confusion**

The journey of identity confusion begins at an early age with a perceived attraction to the same sex, a mismatch with the prevailing gender norms, and a feeling of difference that gives rise to inner conflict. The subject revealed, "I used to like my older brother... I was also attracted to my male friends" and "I felt there was something wrong inside me". Identification with feminine characteristics and jealousy of other men's attention are also part of her emotional experience: "I want to be close to men... in the spoiled part" and "When my male friends play with other friends, I can't stand it". Awareness of sexual orientation was reinforced through independent information searches on the internet since junior high school, such as "I started looking for information about same-sex couples... I'm a bottom".

### **3.3 Internal and External Conflict**

The subject experienced intense inner conflict due to the pressure of social norms and religious teachings that consider homosexuality a grave sin, and also faced bullying and psychological isolation. He said, "I didn't want to disappoint my family, nor did I want to betray my God" and "I tried to end my own life because I felt so heavy". In addition, there was pressure from the family who had not fully accepted her orientation: "Mom felt I was still in the process of finding myself... they must have been disappointed". To deal with social pressure, the subject uses the strategy of masking identity and restraining feminine expression: "I hold back all ethics or behaviours that might look very feminine" and "I'm starting to be able to play a role... limiting what I can share with my family".

### **3.4 Coming Out Process**

The coming out process is gradual, starting from openness to the closest people such as mother, aunt, brother, and friends. When a private conversation was found on the computer, the subject opened up to his mother, "I tried to talk to Mom... the incident was discovered". Openness to an open-minded aunt and brother also encourages the courage to accept oneself. The subject chose the right person and time to reveal his identity: "Determining the right timing ... I openly with my family have opened my identity". In romantic relationships, the subject started a relationship with a man since college and had a satisfying sexual experience, "I was very excited when I saw my partner's body and genitals".

### **3.5 Ego-Syntonic and Self-Acceptance**

In the final phase, the subject achieved full self-acceptance with an affirmative attitude towards his sexual orientation. He stated, "I am firmly and maturely aware that I am a homosexual" and "I feel very grateful to God for giving me this colourful life story". The subject tries to balance spirituality and identity, "I am a Muslim, pray, practice worship, and am open to God's guidance". Self-acceptance and love are characterized by the ability to love and appreciate herself, "I can interpret and accept myself... and love myself". She is also committed to building a future with a vision of legally marrying abroad and maintaining a healthy relationship.

## **4 Discussion**

The results showed that the family has an ambivalent role in the development of the subject's sexual identity. Emotional support from the mother is an important protective factor that provides a sense of security and facilitates the courage to reveal sexual identity. Conversely, the father's rigid and religious attitude strengthens emotional distance and creates internal pressure for the subject. This finding is consistent with the research of Fish et al. [38] which emphasizes the importance of family socialization patterns in shaping the identity of LGBTQ+ adolescents. Family support has also been shown to lower the risk of mental disorders, while rejection increases vulnerability to minority stress [40].

The subject experienced identity confusion from an early age, when he felt attraction to the same sex but had to deal with religious values and social norms that reject homosexuality. This condition causes inner conflict in the form of feelings of guilt, anxiety, and fear of not being accepted. This phenomenon is in line with the findings of Dombo [41] and Warren [42] who highlighted the large role of religious teachings in creating identity dilemmas in homosexual

individuals. Unresolved internal conflicts can exacerbate depression and hinder the process of self-acceptance.

In addition to internal conflicts, subjects also face external pressures in the form of social stigma, discrimination, and bullying experiences since adolescence. The heteronormative and religious social environment further strengthens psychological isolation. This is consistent with the research of Maçik and Kędziora [46], who found that social rejection in the context of coming out increases the risk of anxiety and depression in homosexual individuals. Adhikari [47] also asserts that external pressures from society exacerbate mental distress and delay the process of identity acceptance.

To deal with internal and external pressures, subjects developed adaptive strategies in the form of identity concealment, restraint of feminine expression, and gradual and selective coming out. This finding is in line with the study of Pachankis et al. [44] which shows that identity concealment is often used as a short-term coping mechanism, although in the long run it worsens mental health. Positive support from close friends and relatives became the starting point of courage for the subject in coming out, which is in accordance with the findings of Rabins et al. [48] on the importance of social support as a protective factor in the identity disclosure process. The final stage of the subject's identity journey is characterized by full acceptance of his sexual orientation, which is called ego-syntonic. This process involves reconciliation between sexual identity and spirituality, so that the subject is able to live a more authentic and balanced life. This is in line with Rodriguez and Etengoff's [49] research which shows that the integration of sexual identity with spirituality contributes to increased psychological well-being. The achievement of a syntonic ego gives the subject the strength to build healthy relationships and craft a meaningful vision of the future.

## 5 Conclusions

Based on the results of this qualitative research, it can be concluded that the journey of identity, conflict, and self-acceptance in the case of homosexual individuals in Indonesia is strongly influenced by family dynamics, socio-religious pressure, and the gradual coming out process. The family plays an ambivalent role: emotional support from the mother becomes a protective factor that strengthens the courage to reveal the identity, while the rigid and religious attitude of the father deepens emotional distance and internal conflict. Subjects experienced early identity confusion that was exacerbated by heteronormative religious values and social norms, thus triggering minority stress, depression, and even suicide attempts.

The process of self-acceptance was achieved through selective coming out, social support from friends and relatives, and romantic relationship experiences that validated his identity. In the end, the subject managed to achieve a syntonic ego, which is a full acceptance of his sexual orientation that is integrated with spirituality and life values, so that he is able to build a healthy and meaningful vision of the future.

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