

Family Dynamic in the Construction of Malay Pengkids' Identity

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Abstract

The increasing phenomenon of Malay pengkids has been seen as an alarming situation in Malaysia. Family is the immediate social influence on a child's identity. Thus, the objective of this study was to explore how the family dynamic constructed the identity of Malay *pengkids* in Malaysia. This study employed a phenomenology framework. The inclusion criteria were Malay females that self-identified as *pengkid* and were aged from 18 to 60 years. By purposive and snowball sampling, fifteen participants were virtually interviewed with a semi-structured interview guide. The in-depth interviews were recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were entered into Atlas.ti 8 software and were coded accordingly using inductive and deductive approaches. Results revealed three themes of family dynamics that inclined Malay *pengkids*' identity, which were parental attitudes, perceptions of masculinity, and imprinting masculine character. Parental attitudes comprised bad-tempered and neglectful parents. Perceptions of masculinity described parents' preference for a boy, masculinity as a protector, and that a man is a terrible person. Imprinting masculine characteristics include being brought up as a boy and imitating male family members. In conclusion, the dynamic in a family environment plays a vital role in constructing Malay *pengkids*' identity.

Keywords: Family dynamic, Malay, *pengkid*.

1. INTRODUCTION

Malaysia is a multiracial country with Islam as the federal religion and Malay as the majority ethnicity (Federal Constitution 2010). Based on the federal constitution, Malay is defined as those who speak Malay, embrace Islam as the religion, and follow Malay customs (Federal Constitution 2010). Most Malays want to be known as Muslims first and foremost, as being Muslim provides a greater sense of belonging than being Malay (Teo 2015). This is consistent with how Malays are raised by their parents. Malays parents are firm and responsible, ensuring that their children comprehend and practice Islamic teachings in their daily lives, to achieve happiness both in the world and hereafter (Rusuli and Muhammad Daud 2019).

Malays must adopt Malays cultural and Islamic expectations of masculinity or femininity in the establishment of Malay Muslim gender identity (Hashim 2006). A Malay Muslim man is nurtured to be a husband that can protect and provide for his wife and children. A Malay Muslim woman is expected to fulfill her nature by being a wife and mother. Thus, Malay girls are introduced to the feminine role within the household as early as four years of age. The girls start to do feminine work at the age of seven or eight. They have also been taught to speak, move, and groom in a feminine manner so that they are prepared to be good wives (Omar 1994). Malay women are

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expected to conform to society's image of a sexually pure woman, in which sex only occurs after legal marriage between opposite sexes (Fazli Khalaf et al. 2018). On top of that, in Islamic teaching, same-sex sexual activities and imitating gender that is opposite from the sex born is prohibited as mentioned in Quran and hadith (Abdul Kadir et al. 2020).

However, despite the Malay cultural values and Islamic prohibition, there were increasing numbers of users on lesbian social media, which indicated that the number of lesbians in Malaysia is on an increasing trend (Juaini et al. 2017). In Malaysia, lesbians with masculine characteristics or butch are identified as *pengkids*, and their presence has also been increasingly worrisome to the public (Dzulkifli, Rokis, and Abdul Rahim 2018). Physically, a *pengkid* resembles a man by speaking with a husky voice, wearing masculine clothing, and hiding their breasts with a binder (Dzulkifli, Rokis, and Abdul Rahim 2018). In addition, *pengkids* are inclined to participate in dangerous behaviours such as reckless driving, smoking, clubbing, and substance abuse (Dzulkifli et al. 2018; Zhooryati and Intan 2014).

Being in a minority group that practises same-sex sexual behaviour and expresses in masculine, which is against the law, culture, and Islamic teaching, *pengkid* is at risk of having conflicts that may lead to mental illness such as depression, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts (Aziz et al. 2019; Jamal et al. 2019; Zhooryati and Intan 2014). For mental health professionals, in managing cases of Malay *pengkid* with mental illness, it is important to understand the contributing factors that are involved in the construction of Malay *pengkid*. Studies showed that unstable family, peer pressures, history of bad experience with man, loose in religiosity and social media inclined Malay women to socially constructed into lesbianism (Ahmad et al. 2015; Juaini and Azman 2021).

As the first socialisation agents for Malay girls, family is the most important influence on their sexual and gender identity. A cross-sectional survey by Ahmadian et al. (2014) found that poor family communication, structure, and discipline are associated with sexual risky behaviours in Malaysian rural female adolescents. Likewise, a longitudinal study among rural African American youths found that sexual risky behaviour can persist up to adulthood (Murry et al. 2013). Ahmad et al. (2014) also found that lesbian teens were less attached to their parents than heterosexual female teens.

In Northern Florida, Hiestand and Levitt (2005) interviewed 12 butchs to explore the development of butch identity. Butch modelled his masculinity after his fathers. In a family without fathers, daughters formed masculine characteristics to fill in the masculine role of fathers in the family. Apart from that, modern mothers were more independent and more aggressive compared to more traditional mothers, which portrayed some masculine traits. Yet, these masculine traits were admired and imitated by the daughters. Family acceptance further encouraged the butch identity development (Hiestand and Levitt 2005).

However, studies pertaining to family dynamics contributing to masculine characteristics among Malay *pengkids* are scarce. Therefore, this study aimed to explore how the family dynamic constructed the identity of Malay *pengkids* in Malaysia.

2. METHODOLOGY

This study applied a phenomenological approach to explore the essence of family dynamics in Malay *pengkids*' life experiences (Creswell and Poth 2018). To aid the recruitment of participants via purposive and snowballing sampling, key informants were identified to ensure transferability (Palinkas et al. 2015). Purposive sampling was done by inviting *pengkids* that attended care services. Some were referred by other service providers that researchers had shared information about the study with them. For snowball sampling, participants became the key informants who introduced other participants to the researcher. They shared the same inclusion criteria and provided more credibility compared to purposive sampling (Valerio et al. 2016). It worked better than purposive sampling because most of the *pengkids* trusted and got along well with the key informants.

A total of fifteen Malay female between the ages of 18 and 60 who identified as *pengkids* were included in the in-depth interviews. Those who could not comprehend in Malay or English, as well as those who were too unstable to be interviewed, were excluded.

As the data collection was done during the COVID-19 pandemic and Malaysia was under a movement control order (MCO), the communication with participants was done through email, WhatsApps, and video calls. The participants were informed about the procedure of the study and that the interviews were recorded for transcription and analysis purposes. A Google form incorporating informed consent and sociodemographic information of the

participants was used. The link to the Google form was sent to each of the participants. After getting informed consent and demographic questionnaires from the participants, each of them was interviewed for 50 to 90 minutes virtually using Cisco WebEx and a semi-structured interview guide. The use of an in-depth interview allowed for more probing, as well as a deeper explanation and more specifics of the participants' experiences (Creswell and Poth 2018). This study was carried out in compliance with the Helsinki Declaration and cleared by the Ethics Committee of Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM/JEPeM/20070361).

2.1 Data management and analysis

All the recorded verbatims were transcribed by listening and relistening to allow the thoughts, feelings, and stories of the participants to filter through and to make sure that they were transcribed correctly. Then, the transcriptions were sent back to each participant for the member-checking process. Later, all the transcriptions were entered into Atlas.ti 8 software for analysis. The data was read and reread line by line for the coding inductively and deductively. Inductively, new codes emerged during the analysis, while deductively, the predetermined codes were built from the literature reviews and research questions. The codes were grouped to develop the subthemes. Then, the subthemes were grouped into themes.

2.2 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness involves establishing credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability of the research (Lincoln and Guba 1985). All the interview sessions were recorded, transcribed, and analysed cautiously to ensure their credibility. In addition, the participants agreed with member-checking process, as part of ensuring the trustworthiness of this study (Birt et al. 2016). The audit trail of data collection, participants' information, and reflective journal were kept, ensuring the dependability (Creswell and Poth 2018). The confirmability was ensured by continued discussion among researchers.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Sociodemographic data

The mean age of the participants was 38, ranging from 26 to 56 years old. All the participants were single, except one, who was married with one son. Most of the participants were from the western coast of Peninsular Malaysia (n = 9, 60%) and received up to tertiary education (n = 10, 67%). The mean monthly income of the participants was RM2880 per month.

Table 1: Sociodemographic data of participants (n=15)

ID	Age	Occupation	State	Monthly Income (RM)	Marital Status	Education
S01	40	Self-employed Information	Selangor Kuala	1000	Single	Tertiary
S02	39	Technologist	Lumpur	10000	Single	Tertiary
S03	42	Self-employed	Selangor	1400	Single	Tertiary
S04	34	Government Servant	Penang	4000	Married	Tertiary
S05	41	Self-employed	Johor Kuala	3500	Single	Secondary
S06	38	Food & Beverage	Lumpur	2700	Single	Secondary
S07	43	Programmer	Selangor	3500	Single	Tertiary
S08	26	Clerk	Melaka Kuala	2000	Single	Secondary
S09	45	Writer	Lumpur.	4000	Single	Tertiary
S10	33	Customer service	Selangor	2000	Single	Tertiary
S11	34	Self-employed	Kedah.	1000	Single	Secondary
S12	35	Chef	Selangor	3500	Single	Tertiary
S13	56	Receptionist	Melaka	1300	Single	Secondary
S14	39	Self-employed	Kelantan	1000	Single	Tertiary
S15	30	Chef Assistant	Selangor	2300	Single	Tertiary

Data from the in-depth interviews (IDI) discovered three themes, which are parental attitudes, perceptions of masculinity, and imprinting masculine character. All the data was translated to English from the Malay language.

3.2 Parental attitude

There are two subthemes under the parental attitude, which are bad-tempered parent and neglectful parent.

i) Bad-tempered parent

Some of the participants had bad-tempered parents who were always angry toward them and even hurt them physically. For example, S06 claimed that she was beaten by her father for doing things that her father disliked.

“I was always beaten by my father for no reason. He would scatter the clothes that I didn't have time to fold in front of the house. He scolded me and my siblings, even in front of the neighbours. I don't remember anything good about him.”

Beside father, there were also mothers who struck their children. For instance, S09, a writer, stated that her mother was the dominant parent and would physically and verbally abuse her. Later, she realised that her mother behaved that way because of her mother's bad history and had mental health problems.

“My mother was scary with her loud voice and fast hand. She kept and hung an orange-colored rubber pipe against the wall for thrashing.”

ii) Neglectful parent

Several participants claimed that their parents did not really care about them. Their parents were too busy with work or were so abusive that participants did not receive adequate attention, fondness, and teachings from their parents. For example, S10 shared her experience

“My father didn't care much about his children; he was busy looking for money. He was always never at home.”

Because of being neglected by their parents, participants were unable to learn or model the appropriate gender identity or role according to their biological sex. They did not know what the appropriate behaviour for a Malay girl was, especially in some family with dominant mothers and lacking in expressing femininity. On top of that, the parents did not care if the daughter expressed herself as a male. Some parents even affirmed and even encouraged the daughter to behave like that. S12, a chef, shared that her family has no problem with her appearances.

“They didn't bother to argue about what clothes I should wear.”

Thus, the lack of affection towards daughters pushed the daughters to find affection with their female friends. The affection, care, and understanding that they received from their female friends slowly developed into a sexual attraction towards the same sex and ended up with sexual activities.

Nonetheless, some parents were careless in practicing Islamic teaching, such as praying, which reflected to the children that Islamic teaching is not important enough to be practiced. For instance, S06 shared her concern.

“I did not even see my father praying...They did not pray, probably because they did not have a proper education. My grandmother, my late grandfather, didn't pray either.”

Thus, they still expressed themselves in masculine characteristics and practised sexual activities with women though the Islamic teaching and laws prohibit them.

3.3 Perceptions of masculinity

Under perceptions of masculinity, three subthemes emerged, which are parents' preference for a boy, masculine as a protector, and man is a terrible person.

i) Parents' preference for a son

Some participants believed that their parents favoured their brothers compared to them. The brothers had more privileges compared to them, so they wanted to be a man and expressed themselves in a masculine way. By doing

that, they believed that they could get their parents' attention just like their brother. S12, a chef mentioned that she preferred to be like a man as her father always blamed and punished her instead of her brothers.

"Dad always prefers sons, and only they were right. I rebelled. If you were a male, you wouldn't get beaten. That's why I think it's not fair."

Unconsciously, differences in affection between a son and a daughter might lead to feelings of low self-esteem, unwanted, and anger in the daughter. Thus, they looked for other attention outside the family that could accept them as they are.

ii) Masculine as a protector

In addition, a few of the participants had a history of being sexually molested by their own close family members. Subsequently, they believed that it was unsafe to express themselves as female, as females are always the victims. Thus, they believed that it was better for them to express themselves as men, as a man is stronger. S15 shared her thoughts on this issue.

"From my childhood experience, even my own flesh and blood, let alone other people, can make me like that...When I dress like a man, I feel safe from men."

Apart from that, some participants expressed themselves in masculine characters because they played the role as the family breadwinner and protector. For example, S06, as the eldest daughter, she needs to take care of her mother and younger siblings.

"I work hard. I will give the money to my mom." (S06)

iii) Man is a terrible person

Some of the *pengkids* had the experience of being abused sexually, physically, or mentally by their immediate family members, such as brothers or uncles. Because of this experience, *pengkids* developed a belief that men are horrible people, and they hate them. For instance, S15 expressed her hatred.

"You are my brother. You should protect me as your sister. But you made me like that. Why?"

As for S06, almost all her immediate male family members were irresponsible. Her father was abusive towards her mother and all of her siblings. She observed how her father treated her mother until her mother asked for a divorce. Her elder brother sexually molested her and her younger sisters. Not enough, she also claimed that her brothers-in-law were also irresponsible. All these bad experiences created the perception that all men are bad and she hates men.

"I saw the cruelty of men. I see what kind of lust they had. It doesn't matter if you're a sister or a friend. The way he handled me; I didn't see any good in front of my eyes."

As a result, *pengkids* did not have affection for men, and they developed a sexual attraction towards women instead of men.

3.4 Imprinting masculine character

Two subthemes identify under imprinting masculine characters, which are being brought up as a boy and imitating male family members.

i) Brought up as a boy

Most *pengkids* started to develop masculine characteristics since childhood because of the way they were brought up as boys by their parents, who installed the masculine characteristics in them. Some *pengkids* shared that they were raised like boys because their parents preferred to have a son rather than a daughter. They dressed the daughters in boys' clothes, played with boys' toys, and did more male activities as shared by S01.

“They wanted a son, so they treated me like a son...They always asked me to climb, did things that boys always did.”

ii) Imitating family members

Apart from that, some of the participants had been imitating their fathers, brothers, or male cousins who were always spending time with them, as shared by S02, an information technologist.

“I have two younger brothers. Growing up, I was very close to them.”

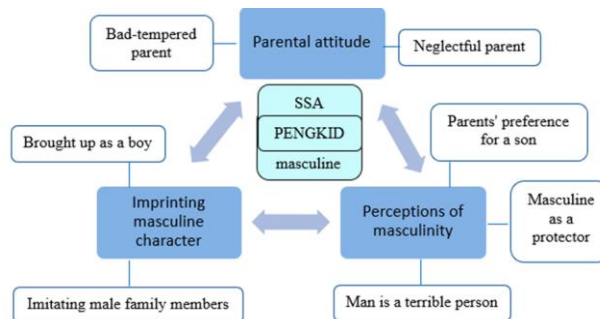
As was mentioned by S09, a freelance writer, and S14, a self-employed business owner, being surrounded by male family members further reinforces masculine characteristics in them. This is particularly the case in families in which there is only one daughter.

“Actually, I am the only daughter; the others are all sons. My relationship with my father is close. As a result, my style is more masculine.”

“My siblings are all male. I was always with my brothers.”

Apart from that, *pengkids* also imitated their parents’ behaviour, as revealed by S03

“I stole my parents’ cigarettes. I tried (without my parents’ knowledge). I felt like trying because I watched them smoking. My mom also smoked.”



*SSA: same-sex attraction

Fig. 1: The construction of Malay *pengkid*'s identity

4. DISCUSSION

This study demonstrates that the construction of Malay *pengkids*' identity consists of two important elements, which are sexual orientation toward female or lesbianism and gender identity expression as masculine. Sexual attraction to females stems from the perception that males are bad, terrible, and untrustworthy, which leads Malay females to prefer sexual desire with a female over a male. The affection, care, and understanding that Malay females got from their female peers further strengthened the desire.

The gender identity expression of masculine characteristics in Malay *pengkids* evolved from a lack of a proper role model of femininity in the family, the perception that sons were better than daughters, being brought up as boys by parents, and modelling masculine characteristics from male family members.

Parental attitudes are the most important social effects that a daughter has during the early years of life. These attitudes, along with the frustrations they cause, the ways they can be controlled, and the trouble they can cause, can have a big effect on a daughter's behavior, especially when she is still small. Similarly, previous studies revealed lack of parental care and inconsistent parenting during childhood were associated with risky sexual activities in female adolescents (Ahmadian et al. 2014; Murry et al. 2013).

Neglectful parents are found to play a role in Malay *pengkids*' identity, which is consistent with a study among six Malay lesbians, ranging from 18 to 25 years old, by Ahmad et al. (2015). Their parents neglected them in that they were always argumentative, busy with work, and had a big family (Ahmad et al. 2015). In western studies, sexual-and-gender minority women (SGMW) also mentioned feelings of being abandoned, disregarded, and

unloved (Apostolou 2020). Daughters of neglectful parents tend to grow up with negative or vague feelings towards their parents as they perceive that their parents abandoned them. They would seek maternal affection from other women in a lesbian relationship (Apostolou 2020).

On top of that, parents' attitudes that accepted the masculine characteristics in their daughters further reinforced the identity of Malay *pengkid*. This is comparable to what Juaini and Azman (2021) discovered when they interviewed 12 lesbians, in which their families were supportive of their relationship with other women.

Apart from that, neglectful parents failed to educate or portray a good example of gender expression to their children, as in the cultural values of Malay and Islamic teaching that prohibit females from imitating males and vice versa. It is important for children that parents enforce the right gender expression for their children and educate them about having sexual intimacy only after a legal marriage with a man. The significance of lowering the gaze and closing their aurat accordingly, even with same-sex, must be emphasised by parents to avoid sexual intimacy (Ashraah et al. 2013).

Expressions of gender identity are constructed through the discreet, conscious, and unconscious relations between parents and children. The relationship may be influenced by how the parents feel about the biological sex of their child. For example, parents that preferred a son compared to a girl tended to dress up, treat, and play with their daughters in masculine ways. Apart from that, the preference for a boy made daughters feel undervalued, unimportant, and unnoticed (Sivak and Smirnov 2019).

A history of witnessing domestic violence, parental conflict, and being raped or molested by a male family member resulted in a dysfunctional cognitive schema, or core belief that all men are bad or terrible. Slowly, a hatred for men and an affection for women consolidated. This affectionate ended up with lesbianism, which showed similar findings to a study among lesbians (Juaini and Azman 2021). Likewise, Aziz et al. (2019) found that *pengkids'* generalisation that all men were horrible was imprinted by a mother's comment that a guy was terrible by pointing to her father. These unpleasant experiences may lead to anticipation of unfavourable outcomes associated to the child's behaviours.

Similarly, Western studies also reported that parental physical abuse and childhood maltreatment were higher among non-heterosexual adolescents compared to heterosexual adolescents (Friedman et al. 2011; Charak et al. 2019). Childhood adverse events, such as trauma, were reported more among lesbians with masculine characteristics compared to feminine (Wright 2018; Lehavot, Molina, and Simoni 2012). Apart from that, childhood adverse events predispose to mental illness in later life, such as depression and suicidality (Creighton et al. 2019; Kuzminskaitė et al. 2021; Charak et al. 2019).

On top of that, imitating male family members' characters is similar to Hiestand and Levitt (2005)'s findings. Likewise, in a family without a father, daughters fill in the masculine role as protectors in the family (Hiestand and Levitt 2005). The acceptance or ignorance of other family members, especially mother further strengthens the *pengkids'* identity (Hiestand and Levitt 2005). Thus, proper guidance from family members is important in imprinting the appropriate gender expression in daughters. A mother role is important to model femininity in daughters, as in traditional Malay women (Hashim 2006). Yet, the trend in this millennium is the gender role of women not only in taking care of the family but also in their career, whether in education, financial, business, or others. So, it's important for a child's development that they grow up in a good family where both parents do their jobs well and are always tolerant.

4.1 Implication

This study showed that parents need to be educated on parenting skills. Parenting education need to be emphasized in the premarital course, especially sexual education. As the immediate and closest people for a child to imitate, parents need to impose the child's sexual and gender identity appropriately. At the same time, parents need to spend quality time with the child, validate the child's emotion and build a strong relationship with the child.

Parents can strengthen the spiritual and bonding time with the family by praying together (Franceschelli and O'Brien 2014). Father, as the leader in the family, can lead the prayers and spend time together after praying, talking about religion or sharing sessions among family members. Before ending the session, take the chance to hug all the family members as hugging can improve emotional well-being and self-esteem and impart a feeling of security to a child (Forsell and Åström 2012).

As Malay embrace Islam as way of life, parents need to provide sex education according to Islam, which emphasised children to ask permission if they wanted to enter parents' bedroom as mentioned in al Quran "*And when the children among you reach puberty, let them ask permission (at all times) as those before them have done. Thus does Allah make clear to you His verses; and Allah is Knowing and Wise*"24:59). Islam also teaches parents to separate the place for sleep between girls and boys.

Parents also need to educate their child, especially adolescents, about psychosexual development and health, including safe and unsafe touch, to avoid being molested. A child needs to be trained to be assertive, to be able to say no and to know how and when to scream for help or run away if somebody tries to do something bad to them. Additionally, parents need to guide their children on what is allowed and what is prohibited in sexual intimacy

For mental health professionals, it important to take further childhood history, especially in Malay *pengkids* with mental health illness. The dysfunctional thought should be address properly and accordingly. The childhood unresolved conflicts need to be address, probably in psychodynamic therapy. A holistic approach that incorporate psychospirituality need to be deliver to patient.

4.2 Future research

Studies on the lived experiences or the impact of self-identifying as *pengkids* among Malay female need to be carried out to be able to help them. Subsequently, studies on the interventions that incorporate the Malay cultural and Islamic spiritual values are need to help Malay *pengkids* to deal with the impact.

5. CONCLUSION

Family dynamics influence the construction of Malay *pengkids*' identity actively and passively via parental attitudes, perceptions of masculinity, and imprinted masculine character.

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