

## **Early Adolescent Thais' Perceptions of Sexual Identity**

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**Abstract:** Early adolescents face many changes during their transition from childhood to adulthood. Key developmental tasks, during this period of potential risk and instability, include acquiring a sense of sexual identity. This descriptive qualitative study sought to explore early adolescents' perception of sexual identity and related factors. Qualitative data were gathered from early adolescents via focus group discussions ( $n = 84$ ) and interviews ( $n = 12$ ). Data, from both the focus group discussions and interviews, were analyzed, using content analysis described by Morse and Richards.

Findings revealed sexual identity was perceived by Thai adolescents to include: biological sex; gender role; gender identity; and, sexual orientation. Biological sex was perceived as female or male, based on one's sexual organs, while gender role, feminine or masculine, was perceived through external appearances including clothing, personality and manners. With respect to gender identity, girls expressed pride in potentially becoming a mother and being protected, but were conflicted about female characteristics and being disadvantaged when compared to males. Boys were proud of being strong, being gentlemen and having freedom. Regarding sexual orientation, all adolescents were sexually attracted to the opposite sex. Family upbringing, the media and school environment were factors perceived to be related to sexual identity. The results may help school health providers, parents, nurses and others better recognize and address early adolescent vulnerabilities, and develop appropriate programs that promote sexual identity.

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### **Background**

Early adolescence is a significant developmental period when children may have doubts regarding their sexual identity and how they fit into the world, as well as experience potential risk to, and instability of, their self-concept.<sup>1</sup> Adolescents' self-perceptions have revealed this to be a frustrating time in regards to: change, accompanied by confusion; unstable emotions; unrecognized feelings; difficulty developing

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a sense of sexual identity coherent with self-concept;<sup>2</sup> identity formation difficulties; and, feelings of insecurity and vulnerability.<sup>3</sup> Thus, it is a time when adolescents need help in understanding and developing their sexual identity.

Sexual identity has been described as: an expression of human thought related to attraction to the same or opposite sex based on experiences, attitudes and reactions;<sup>4</sup> one's concept of self as a sexual being;<sup>5</sup> and, a major subsystem of "self-identity" closely tied to one's sexual value system and sexual self-concept.<sup>6</sup> Hence, sexual identity is one's evaluation of sexual feelings and actions based on life experiences.<sup>5-6</sup>

Early adolescents have been recognized as being at risk of increased health and behavioral problems because of sexual behavior and unstable sexual identity.<sup>7-9</sup> In Thailand, early adolescent girls have been found to be conflicted and frustrated during their transition from early adolescence to adulthood.<sup>8</sup> Thai adolescents of both genders have been found to: a) have ambiguous feelings about gender stereotypes and not be proud of their gender, leading them to lack self-confidence; and, b) have low self-esteem and attempt to seek an anchor to make them appear better.<sup>8</sup> More than 4% of Thai boys and 14% of Thai girls, between 10 and 12 years of age, have expressed dissatisfaction with their gender. In addition, girls have stated it is difficult being female due to physical constraints, while boys have expressed not being proud of their maleness because of requirements by society to be dedicated to others.<sup>10</sup> Girls also have been found, based on social expectations, to experience more tensions and conflicts than boys, as well as have internalized negative attitudes about being female.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, concern exists that attainment of unstable sexual identity among Thai adolescents may lead them toward manifestations of inappropriate sexual behavior.<sup>7</sup> This descriptive qualitative study, therefore, sought to explore early adolescent Thais'

perceptions of sexual identity and what they believed to be factors related to their sexual identity.

## Method

A qualitative descriptive approach, using both focus group discussions and in-depth interviews, was undertaken to address the purpose of the study.<sup>12</sup> To gain legitimized insight into adolescents' perceived sexual identity and its related factors, an interpretive paradigm was employed as the study's philosophical underpinning.<sup>13</sup>

**Participants:** So as to maximize the diversity and cross-contextual variety of information, purposive sampling was used to select potential early adolescents (12-14 years of age) from three types of secondary schools (public, private and municipal) in a metropolitan city in northeastern Thailand. Inclusion criteria were being: able to express personal thoughts and opinions regarding femaleness and maleness; able to expressively and proficiently speak Thai; and, willing to participate. Exclusion criteria included verbally indicating being a transvestite or tomboy, when directly asked by the primary researcher (PI), or unwilling to participate.

A total of 84 adolescents (49 males and 35 females), who ranged in age from 12-14 years (mean = 12.8 yrs.), consented to participate in one of the ten possible focus group discussions. Nine females and nine males were from the public secondary school; 14 females and 20 males were from the private secondary school; and, 12 females and 20 males were from the municipal secondary school. From the 84 adolescents, seven females and five males (two females and two males from the public school, three females and two males from the private school, and two females and one male from the municipal school), based on the PI's assessment of their suitability, were purposively recruited to participate in in-depth interviews. Suitability was determined by intelligence, spontaneity and

self-knowledge displayed during the PI's visits to the adolescents' respective schools.

More than half the adolescents ( $n = 50$ ; 59.70%) received a monthly allowance of 1,000-2,000 baht from their mothers, while 12 (14.20%) received more than 2,000 baht/month and 22 (26.10%) received less than 1,000 baht/month. Although more than half ( $n = 47$ ; 55.9%) reported having good family relationships and over two-thirds ( $n = 57$ ; 67.9%) said their parents were married, only 62% ( $n = 52$ ) lived with both parents. In addition, although 75% ( $n = 63$ ) had 1-2 siblings, only 60% ( $n = 47$ ) reported having 3-4 family members living in the same household. All adolescents were in the 7<sup>th</sup> grade of their secondary school.

**Procedure:** Approval to conduct this study was granted by the: Research Ethics Review Committee, Faculty of Nursing, Chiang Mai University; Educational Area Office Director; and, each respective school administrator. The PI met with each school's respective administrator and the teachers who were instructing the adolescents in the classroom; introduced herself ; explained the purpose of the study; discussed the time involved; and, identified the means of data gathering that would be used. Each respective teacher then gave the PI a list of students' names.

After meeting with each potential participant and explaining the nature of the study, as well as informing him/her that participation was voluntary, identity and responses would be kept confidential and withdrawal could occur at any time without repercussions, each adolescent was asked to sign an informed assent form. Approval also was sought from each assenting adolescent's parents /guardians to allow him/her to participate. This was accomplished by way of a consent letter sent home with each assenting adolescent. Those parents/guardians giving consent were asked to sign the letter and have it returned to the PI by way of their respective adolescent. After assent and consent was obtained

from each potential participant and respective parent/guardian, an appropriate time and setting were agreed upon for the focus group discussions and interviews. The PI encouraged the participants to cooperate in generating data, until the research project was completed (a total of seven months). Participants were provided a non-monetary (stationery gift set) compensation upon completion of the study.

**Data Gathering Methods:** Focus group discussions, interviews and field notes comprised the methods used for data gathering. The PI conducted a total of ten, one-session focus group discussions. All sessions were tape-recorded (with each participant's approval) and held in a private location (classrooms, libraries and conference rooms). Each of the 84 adolescents participated in one focus group discussion (six to ten participants) which lasted for 60 - 90 minutes. The PI developed focus group discussion guidelines based on existing research and literature related to sexual identities of early adolescents.<sup>5, 7, 10-11, 16</sup> The guidelines, which consisted of five questions designed to explore early adolescents' perceptions of sexual identity and factors related to sexual identity, were reviewed and agreed upon by all members of the research team. The initial question was: "From your perspective, please tell me your sex?" The second question was: "What do you think about sexual characteristics?" The remaining three questions were: a) "Where mainly did you learn about being male (or female)?"; b) "How do you feel about being male (or female) yourself?"; and, c) "Which gender do you like or are you interested in?" Each participant was encouraged to express his/her opinion regarding each of the five questions posed. None of the adolescents expressed discomfort discussing their sexual identity during the discussions, nor did any withdraw.

The one-on-one interviews, lasting 60 - 90 minutes, were conducted by the PI in private locations (a conference room or an empty

classroom) and involved 12 (7 females and 5 males) adolescents from the focus group discussions. With permission from each adolescent, his/her interview was tape-recorded. Interview guidelines, developed by the PI, were reviewed and agreed upon by all members of the research team. Like the guidelines for the focus group discussion, five questions were designed to begin exploration of the early adolescents' perceptions of sexual identity and factors related to sexual identity. The questions included: 1) "What kind of sex do you perceive yourself to be?"; 2) "How do you feel about being the sex that you are?"; 3) "What characteristics, behaviors, personality or demeanor do you think show femaleness (or maleness)?"; 4) "Where or from whom did you learn about being female (or male)?"; and, 5) "For which sex do you have feelings of love or attraction and interest in?" To further explore and clarify phenomena of interest, as each interview progressed, probing questions were posed. Examples of probing questions/comments included: a) "Please explain why you think you are male (or female)."; b) "Are you satisfied with being a male (or female)?"; and, c) "Why do you feel that way?" Throughout the interviews, a non-judgmental manner was portrayed by the PI. At no time did any participant express discomfort being interviewed about his/her sexual identity or withdraw from the interview process.

Field notes were written to document aspects of interest regarding interactions, situations and activities that occurred during the focus group discussions and interviews. Notes were kept brief (one or two key words) in order to maintain maximum attention during the sessions. Upon completion of the focus group discussions and interviews, field notes were expanded in order to capture all impressions and details of observations made and were used to supplement and complement understanding of the transcription of the tape-

recorded focus group discussions and interviews.

**Data Analysis:** Data collection and analyses were consecutively conducted. Qualitative data management and analysis followed Morse and Richards' analysis guide,<sup>14</sup> including the process of coding, categorizing and conceptualizing. Data were transcribed verbatim as soon as possible after each focus group discussion and interview, and the field notes were read and thoroughly reviewed. Reading of transcripts and field notes was repeated numerous times to gain insight into the adolescents' experiences within their context and background. Transcript coding involved reading the data line-by-line to identify a unit of analysis. Topic codes were clustered into categories (similar codes were sorted and grouped together). Mappings were used to gain a visual picture of emerging categories and linkage among categories. Core categories were monitored and revised for consistency.

To establish rigor in qualitative research, Guba and Lincoln<sup>13</sup> propose use of the techniques of: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability. Credibility of the data was addressed throughout the research process by way of triangulation.<sup>15</sup> Member checking was employed through use of seven participants who were representative of the sample. They verified content from their respective focus groups, as well as summarization of their respective interviews. Upon completion of data analysis, the same seven participants were asked to validate categories and subcategories. To ensure transferability, the PI explicated the setting of the study, sampling techniques, and characteristics of the sample. Additionally, demographic data and method of selecting participants were clearly explained in order to provide guidelines and viability for those interested in using this research as a reference. Dependability was ensured by interview transcripts and a personal journal used to record the decision-

making process. Members of the research team served as auditors, examining the process and product. Confirmability was addressed by way of discussions and critiques conducted by the research team.

## Results

**Perceptions of Sexual Identity among Early Adolescents:** Early adolescents' perceptions of sexual identity encompassed biological sex, gender role, gender identity and sexual orientation.

**Biological Sex:** Biological sex was described by having the early adolescents identify themselves by way of physical appearance and sex organs. The female adolescents indicated they were different from males in that they were shapely and curvy, with enlarged breasts, wide hips and slim waists. In addition, unlike males, they have ovaries which produced the menstrual cycle. As one female adolescent explained:

A woman has a figure like this. It's curvy...the narrow waist...wide hips...women also have menstruation... I'm a woman because I have breasts – the thing that shows I'm a woman.

By comparison, the male early adolescents identified themselves as different from females in that they have a penis, testes that produce sperm, body hair, an Adam's apple and more body strength than females. As one male adolescent indicated:

A man...has a penis, testes...sperm that can make a woman pregnant. He has hair over many areas of the body including underarms, nose, legs and chest. Particularly, he has a beard and mustache...as well as an Adam's apple.

**Gender Role:** Gender role was described by having the early adolescents identify themselves through feminine or masculine appearance. Female early adolescents indicated that females differ from males in that they: wear feminine attire, attract people's attention (particularly the opposite sex), engage in feminine activities, show emotion, are polite and gentle, and are inclined to be silent. The wearing of feminine attire was supported by the following statements from several of the female adolescents:

The style of clothing between men and women is different. A girl wears a skirt and braids or binds her hair with a hair clip like this.

Women like wearing sexy clothes to show their figures and look sexy...in clothes, skirts, short shorts, spaghetti tank tops...They prefer tight blouses, tank-tops and revealing clothes. They are more fashionable.

The need or preference for females to make themselves attractive, so as to catch people's attention (particularly males), was supported by the following statement from one female adolescent as she described herself:

I like to make myself attractive and highlighted. I want people to look at me and to pay attention to me by making loud noises and screaming. It's like a woman wants others' attention. If she is unnoticed, she'll try to make herself interesting.

Most female early adolescents recognized their own female characteristics from having beauty consciousness. As one adolescent said:

A woman enjoys applying lotion, combing her hair, getting dressed up, putting on lipstick, eye shadow,

powder, looking at her reflection in the mirror.

Female early adolescents identified female behaviors and activities, such as playing with dolls or things that are small, as reflected in the following comment:

Girls like dolls, enjoy playing with dolls, like Barbie dolls, and making doll clothes...for me, I'm a girl...A girl likes dolls and my mother always buys one for me. Girls like playing with small things.

Moreover, the female adolescents acknowledged females must be mild-mannered, polite, humble and respectful, as one explained:

A girl tends to be sweet. It's a gender of kindness and politeness, which is different from a boy, who enjoys showing manliness.

Some girls acknowledged females are often sensitive, tearful, weepy, temperamental, worried about trivial matters and serious. As one young lady indicated, regarding herself:

A girl is quite tearful...only a few words can make her cry. She likes being pleased while a man is quite stiff. For me, if I get blamed slightly, I could be quite pessimistic and cry easily.

Being shy and inclined to be silent was a comment made by many of the female adolescents. As one adolescent stated:

I've got a woman's manner that shows shyness...timidity...a woman is not an extrovert.

A high proportion of male early adolescents recognized their masculine appearance through clothing,

pro-aggressive behaviors, quick temper, and a love of challenges. Based on the views of male early adolescents, men wear trousers and adopt a casual style, as a boy explained:

A man must wear trousers, like slim fitting jeans. My clothing style is like most boys.

In addition, most male early adolescents acknowledged their male sexual characteristics as being expressed by way of pro-aggressive behaviors, such as enjoying a fight, playing energy-intensive sports and a growing tendency to have a temper.

A man likes violence, sadism and power...he likes fighting and sparring with his friends aggressively.

I always quarrel and fight with my friends. I'm pretty quarrelsome...I gang up to fight against others every day...I'm hot-tempered...difficult to please....and demanding. I'll kick out at something when I don't get what I want.

Male early adolescents also recognized their male sexual characteristics as including a love of challenges (competitions and experimentation). As seen from the following comments, these challenging activities included motorcycle racing, tattooing and body piercing.

I can do something challenging... challenge is car racing...motorbike racing...it's speed racing.

I like yantra tattoos, design tattoos, lip-piercing, ear-piercing, navel-piercing... eyebrow-piercing and nose-piercing.

**Gender Identity:** Gender identity was perceived by the early adolescents as associated with feeling they are either proud of their gender (femaleness or maleness) or in conflict with being female or male. Female early adolescents stated they were proud of their femaleness (i.e. being able to become a mother and being protected). They went on to indicate a female can become pregnant, give birth and nurture her own child. According to the female adolescents, because females are more attuned to consoling a child who is in distress or trouble, nurturing is done better by females than males. One adolescent commented:

I feel good. I feel proud to be a woman. When I have my own child, I will develop a good relationship with him/her, whereas a man pays little attention to a child. A woman cares about her child's feelings. If the child feels sad, the mother will soothe him/her...it's good because a woman can increase the number of children. I'm happy that I was born a girl and a woman who can bring up my own child.

Additionally, female adolescents acknowledged they were proud of being taken care of and protected by others, as seen in the following excerpts:

I'm happy because I'm the only daughter. I have a brother who is supposed to protect me. I don't need to protect him.

I'm proud to be a woman. One of the many good things about being a woman is that I can get whatever I want. My parents please me more than a boy. I don't know how to say it, but my mother mostly cares about girls more than boys.

Some female early adolescents described how they were conflicted with their own gender, had unsatisfied feelings regarding female characteristics and had more disadvantages than male adolescents. They realized they disliked or felt unsatisfied with their enlarged breasts. These adolescents did not like their female sex organs or the uncomfortable feelings encountered as a result of their menstrual cycles (i.e. stress, uneasiness, discomfort, pain, irritability and moodiness). Thus, they had feelings of disgust when it came to menstruation and being female, as shown in the following excerpts:

I feel dissatisfied and uncomfortable with my breasts. Why do I have breasts? A woman's breasts, I don't like them.

I don't like being a woman because of menstruation. I don't want to have a period. It's painful and disgusting. I don't feel well during a period.

Some female early adolescents felt they experienced more disadvantages than their male counterparts. They indicated such disadvantages as: being unable to do what a male can do; being restrained from going out at night; having limited freedom compared to males; being blamed or punished as a result of arriving home late; and, facing stricter supervision than a male. These feelings were expressed in the following statements:

I don't have much freedom. I have a younger brother and he won't be blamed by my mother for getting home late. But for me, she told me to get home before my brother, so I can't play outside the house for a long time.

I can't go out with my friends as a girl isn't allowed to go out at night. If I get home late at night, I will be beaten or scolded. Men can hang out at night and protect themselves, whereas women can't, even though they can take care of themselves.....but not as well as men.

Some female early adolescents recognized, as a result of female burdens (i.e. pregnancy and delivery), they are disadvantaged when compared to their male counterparts:

I feel quite dissatisfied. A woman is liable to be pregnant while a man isn't.

Why is a woman pregnant? Why not a man? Why me? Why isn't it a man who can be pregnant?

The male early adolescents reported they were proud of their maleness in terms of being stronger than females, being gentlemen by helping weaker people and others, and having freedom, as seen in the following excerpts:

I'm proud to be born a man, unlike a woman who is weak. As men, we're strong...we're stronger than women..either stronger or healthier. I feel good that I can help weaker people... being a man, it's easier to help others.

I'm proud. I'm independent. I don't have to be careful. I'm free to go anywhere I want and my parents don't stop me, unlike girls.

**Sexual Orientation:** Sexual orientation was perceived by adolescents as being sexually attracted to the opposite sex. All identified themselves as being heterosexual. The girls realized they were interested in and preferred to fall in love with boys,

since the males were fun and unserious, but needed to pay attention to their studies. The girls felt males understood females and respected them by being gentlemen. As one female adolescent explained:

I like a funny man who is not quite serious, but he must pay attention to his studies as well. A man is easily understandable and reliable. He sort of understands a woman and respects her. I now have a boyfriend. He fits my expectation that he must be a gentleman. Simply speaking, a man in my estimation should have the same ability as me and should be good-looking.

The boys indicated they had an interest in and desire for girls because of their physical attractiveness. One male adolescent indicated:

I have a girlfriend. I have desire and interest in a woman because it's the opposite sex...it's a man's instinct...a girl is pretty and cute. I want to say I love her, but I don't dare tell her or talk to her. I'm not gay. I don't like men.

#### **Perceived Factors Related to Sexual Identity:**

Among early adolescents, family upbringing, the media and school environment were factors perceived to be related to sexual identity.

**Family Upbringing:** Participants indicated they were taught, by their families, about their sexual identity. The females were encouraged, mostly by their families, to have feminine behaviors in that they must be polite, wear concealing clothing and be able to carry out household tasks. This is reflected in the following excerpts:

Girls should wear concealing clothing.  
I saw a woman in my neighborhood

that always puts on revealing clothes. I think she does it to provoke men. Girls are supposed to be polite. At first, I didn't care about it, thinking it was not a problem at all, but later that woman couldn't finish her studies. Then my mom told me to behave well.

Cooking, doing housework, and washing clothes and dishes are all tasks that a woman must be able to do. My mom said...a girl like me should be able to sweep the floor and wash the clothes and dishes. When I'm grown up, I must do all kinds of domestic tasks. My mom is an example for me as she cooks for us every day. She wants me to be able to cook when I grow up, so she has told me to help her in the kitchen, since I was a little girl.

The males were taught their sexual identity mostly by family members. They were supposed to: sacrifice, speak politely, be helpful, be generous, pay respect to the opposite sex, and be patient and strong. Some of these characteristics are reflected in the following comments:

What my dad does, I follow. A man must sacrifice for a woman...My dad told me not to bully girls and others.

My dad told me to say "krub" (ครับ). He taught me to speak these nice words to be polite.

**Media:** The media was perceived as influential, since early adolescents learned many aspects of femininity and masculinity from what they saw, heard and/or read. As seen in the following

statements from females, they learned their femininity by following clothing trends manifested by their favorite actors, movie stars, models and singers (Thai and foreign).

I follow actresses' and female singers' trends. I like them. They're pretty in cute clothes. I dress like them. I wear child-like stylish clothes, trendy blouses and pants and all the hit items that appear on TV...and websites. I follow those trends and copy the actresses' styles. They wear only beautiful clothes and I want to wear clothes like that too.

I copy their clothing styles...I follow the Korean trend...get my puffy hair in Korean style...I imitate foreigners' styles. Foreigners mostly wear revealing clothing, such as spaghetti strap tank tops and I wear them too. I prefer short shorts and long blouses. It's fashionable. Sometimes I wear a tank top with a necklace or when I wear a short dress that covers my hips, I'll wear shorts too. I follow Pancake's (actress) style of clothing.

As reflected in the following excerpts, males learned about some aspects of masculinity from the media, including wearing the same style of clothes as their favorite actors or singers, and having body tattoos.

I learned from the media, mostly TV programs about actors. I like copying the actors in the way they dress. They wear jeans, sneakers, and long-sleeved shirts with prints. I imitate the style of Golf and Mike (the duo singers).

I had my tattoos done, following my favorite actors. I also copied the style of my favorite singers in the way they dress.

The male participants also learned about violence against women from the media:

I saw movies and TV series and learned that both leading actors and villains always rape the leading actress...and abduct her. The leading actor also hugs, kisses and rapes the actress. It seems he falls in love with her, but dares not tell her, so he ironically decides to abduct and confine her.

**School Environment:** The school environment influenced early adolescents' sexual identity because of what they were taught by teachers and learned from peers. As reflected in the following comments, girls were taught to have good manners and to wear concealing clothing.

At school, I always see my friends or seniors wearing trendy clothes. When I was walking with my teacher, she told a student passing by to dress appropriately. My class teacher is strict about students' clothing and manners.

A girl should speak less and be polite...My teacher taught me about the wai (ไหว้) and social etiquette for women. She said when seeing an elder person passing by, a girl should stop and give that elder a wai (pay respect: ไหว้). That would be a nice wai. It's about women's manners.

Boys were taught to have good manners by their teachers. However, they learned from senior students and peers about: being masculine, wooing girls, drinking alcohol, smoking, hanging out at entertainment places at night and ganging up to fight others. This is revealed in the following excerpts:

My teacher told me to be manly. As a man, I must not touch a girl as it's not appropriate. I'm a man so I have to honor girls because they are weaker than me.

A man must have a girlfriend...he must be interested in women, the opposite sex. I use the seniors and my friends as an example. They smoke and drink. The seniors have girlfriends, so I think that being a man is to have a girlfriend. A few friends in my group also smoke, saying that it's chic. Most do what their friends do...at school. I always spend time with my male friends, so what they do I'll mostly follow them. They also hang out at night. When the seniors go to some interesting places, they recommend it to others. If I don't go there, I wouldn't be a man. A man must hang around with his friends. Those who fail to do so cause gossip and bring suspicion upon themselves for not talking and hanging out with their gangs. I talk with my friends and they update me on what men mostly do.

## Discussion

The findings of this study add to the body of knowledge regarding Thai early adolescents'

perceptions about their sexual identity, which is composed of biological sex, gender role, gender identity and sexual orientation. Where biological sex was concerned, early adolescents perceived themselves as either female or male because of having sexual organs and a specific physical appearance. Females described their biological sex in reference to body shape (i.e. curvy, slim hips, enlarged breasts) and the presence of ovaries (menstruation), while males described themselves in reference to the presence of testes (sperm), body hair (on face, legs, chest and underarms) and an Adam's apple. These findings are consistent with prior published material on the biological development of early adolescents, which addresses sexual characteristics of both females and males.<sup>16-18</sup>

As for gender role, the results of this study indicate early adolescents acknowledge their gender roles by way of their feminine and masculine appearances, which are manifested through attire, behavior and activities. The females described the presence of: feminine clothing and activities, attention seeking, emotions, politeness and shyness. Males, however, described the presence of: masculine clothing, aggressive behavior, a temper and a need for challenges. This is congruent with previous findings in that female early adolescents are expected, by Thai society, to be polite and gentle.<sup>7,19</sup> Historically, the Thai tradition has defined a kulasatrii, virtuous woman, (คุณสตรี) as one who is pleasant and unassuming in social manners.<sup>20</sup> In addition, prior research has indicated female early adolescents tend to be conscious of their physical appearances because they believe beauty is an indication of the value of women.<sup>21</sup> Thus, girls try to make themselves beautiful, sexy and fashionable in the belief that it will build their self-confidence and charm so they are appealing to the opposite sex.<sup>7</sup> Like this study, prior studies have found Thai female early adolescents to be more sensitive, temperamental

and touchy compared to their male counterparts.<sup>7</sup> Similar to the findings of this study, prior research has noted Thai male adolescents like to quarrel and fight with others to show off their physical strength<sup>7</sup> and to dress in masculine-styled clothing in order to attract the attention of females.<sup>7,11</sup>

With respect to gender identity, the adolescents were asked to express their feelings about being female or male. The girls expressed pride in potentially becoming a mother and being protected, but were ambivalent about certain female characteristics (enlarged breasts, menstruation and the potential for pregnancy) and not having the same freedom as their male counterparts. The fact that females were proud of potentially becoming a mother was not surprising given that the Thai culture holds motherhood in high regard. The findings were similar to those of previous studies which found girls who enter their sexual lives without discussing potential sexual conflicts may feel ambivalent about being a woman.<sup>7, 8</sup> In addition, female early adolescents have been found to have negative and shameful feelings about their changing bodies, menarche and physical limitations, as well as not having the same freedom to do things as their male counterparts.<sup>7, 10, 11</sup> Male early adolescents, in this study, were found to be proud of being strong, being able to help those that are weaker and having freedom to do things. In contrast to prior studies, male early adolescents, in this study, felt conflicted with their maleness. They were not satisfied with their gender belief that a man must exhibit strength, toughness, violence and aggressiveness, while having to take care of others.<sup>11</sup> Also, their perception of society's expectation of being a male appeared to affect them, leading them to be reluctant to assume such a role.<sup>10</sup>

Regarding sexual orientation, the results indicated participants were sexually attracted to the opposite sex and identified themselves as being

heterosexual. Female adolescents preferred males because they were fun and not serious. However, females felt it was important for males to pay attention to their academic studies. Male adolescents preferred females because they were physically attractive. The fact adolescents, in this study, verbally identified themselves as heterosexual was incongruent with previous studies in which self-identification of being homosexual or heterosexual was not found among early adolescents<sup>22-24</sup>. This might be because early adolescents mainly pay more attention to changes in physical and sexual development than to sexual attraction. Therefore, they may not be interested in identifying their sexual attraction to the opposite or same gender. In addition, Thai children are taught by parents about femaleness and maleness, with sexual diversity being frowned upon due to cultural beliefs.

This study found factors influencing sexual identity were: family upbringing, media and school environment. Most participants lived with both parents, had very good relationships with family members and were taught by family members about gender roles. For females, teaching about sexual identify focused on feminine manners, such as politeness, wearing concealing clothing and being able to carry out household tasks. This was congruent with prior research that found female early adolescents learned, from their mothers, about performing household tasks (i.e. cleaning, cooking, and caring for young children) and behaving appropriately.<sup>7, 11, 25, 26</sup> In the Thai culture, virginity and feminine behavior are still valued and respected. Therefore, young girls are taught to take charge of household chores and are prevented from going out and making friends with people of the opposite sex.<sup>27, 28</sup> By comparison, in this study, male early adolescents were taught to sacrifice, speak politely, be helpful, pay respect to members of the opposite sex, and be patient and strong. These findings are somewhat similar to prior research that found male Thai adolescents are taught

to be brave, patient, gentle, masculine and to do anything that was not feminine.<sup>7, 11</sup> All of these findings suggest the importance family members play in developing the sexual identity of both male and female early adolescents.

The influence media had in this study, regarding sexual identity, was manifested in both male and female adolescents by their copying the manner of dress of favorite celebrities. In addition, the media influenced males regarding obtaining tattoos, as well as learning about violence against women. Some of these findings are congruent with previous studies<sup>7, 11, 29-32</sup> that found the media has a materialistic influence on teenagers' thoughts and behaviors, as they make decisions on how to spend money. This materialistic influence drives the adolescents' beliefs that they must be trendy, fashionable and attractive to the opposite gender. Unfortunately, media influences on the thoughts and behaviors, among early adolescents, has also been found to place them at risk for delayed cognitive development and to impose deleterious temptations, which could lead them to engage in risky sexual behaviors.<sup>2, 9</sup> However, risky sexual behaviors was not noted as a finding in this study. Since early adolescents are at the age of exploration and development of their true gender role, through selective learning and imitation of their favorite role models, they are affected by media values regarding consumption, which often leads to poor judgment.

The influence the school environment played, on early adolescents' sexual identity, was manifested through the impact both teachers and peers had on what the adolescents learned. Teachers taught both males and females to have manners, in addition to teaching females to cloth themselves in a non-revealing manner. Peers seemed to have a great influence on the boys. The males indicated they learned, from their peers, about being masculine, wooing girls, drinking alcohol, hanging out at places of entertainment and ganging up to fight others.

These findings are congruent with prior research that found adolescents tend to copy the behaviors of peers and older students,<sup>7</sup> as well as learn from teachers about being respectful to members of the opposite gender.<sup>11</sup> As a result, teachers and peers play an important part in shaping portions of early adolescents' sexual identity.

## **Limitations**

Discussing aspects of sexual identity with early adolescents can be a sensitive undertaking. Thus, adolescents may not fully express their true feelings and beliefs about their sexual identity, even though they verbally indicate they are comfortable in discussing such an issue. The fact that the PI was an adult may have influenced the truthfulness of the participants, since they possibly wanted to please her with their responses. In addition, sexual identity is a complex issue to talk about with early adolescents, whose cognitive development is just beginning to move from concrete to abstract thinking. This factor may have influenced how they responded during the focus group discussions, as well as during the in-depth interviews. Finally, the participants were from one region (northeastern) of the country and identified themselves as heterosexual. Thus, generalizability of the findings is somewhat limited.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The knowledge gained from this study may prove helpful to school nurses, teachers and other professionals working with early adolescents during their sexual identity development. Understanding the process and factors that influence the development of early adolescents' sexual identity can prove helpful in assisting: a) early adolescents to understand their own sexuality, as well as how to take on a sexually appropriate role; and, b) adults to foster positive influencing factors that affect early adolescents' sexual identity.

Since this research was carried out on early adolescents from the northeastern region of Thailand, future studies are needed to examine the sexual identity of adolescents' from multiple regions across the country. In addition, future studies need to include adolescents who verbally identify themselves as homosexual, since this groups of adolescents was excluded from this research.

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## การรับรู้อัตลักษณ์ทางเพศของนักเรียนวัยรุ่นตอนต้น

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**บทคัดย่อ:** วัยรุ่นตอนต้นเป็นช่วงวัยที่เปลี่ยนผ่านจากความเป็นเด็กสู่ความเป็นผู้ใหญ่ พัฒนาการที่สำคัญในวัยนี้คือการเริ่มต้นพัฒนาอัตลักษณ์ทางเพศ ซึ่งคุณค่าด้วยความอ่อนน้อมของเด็กวัยรุ่นตอนต้น การศึกษาเชิงคุณภาพโดยวิธีการพัฒนาค่ารังส์นี้ มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่ออธิบายการรับรู้อัตลักษณ์ทางเพศ และปัจจัยที่มีผลต่ออัตลักษณ์ทางเพศตามการรับรู้ของเด็กวัยรุ่นตอนต้น ข้อมูลเชิงคุณภาพได้จากเด็ก วัยรุ่นตอนต้นโดยการสนทนากลุ่ม จำนวน 84 คน และโดยการสัมภาษณ์เด็กวัยรุ่นตอนต้นจำนวน 12 คน วิเคราะห์ข้อมูลจากการสนทนากลุ่มและการสัมภาษณ์โดยวิธีการวิเคราะห์เนื้อหาของมอร์สและริชชาร์ด

ผลการศึกษาพบว่าอัตลักษณ์ทางเพศตามการรับรู้ของเด็กวัยรุ่นตอนต้นประกอบด้วย 4 ส่วน คือ 1) เพศสรีระ 2) บทบาททางเพศสภาพ 3) อัตลักษณ์ที่เกี่ยวกับเพศสภาพ และ 4) วิถีทางเพศ ด้านเพศสรีระ เด็กวัยรุ่นตอนต้นรับรู้ความเป็นหญิงหรือความเป็นชายของตนเองจากการมีอิทธิพลของเพศ ด้านบทบาททางเพศสภาพ เด็กวัยรุ่นตอนต้นรับรู้ความเป็นหญิงและความเป็นชายจากลักษณะภายนอก ได้แก่ เครื่องแต่งกาย บุคลิกภาพและกิริยาท่าทาง ด้านอัตลักษณ์ที่เกี่ยวกับเพศสภาพ เด็กวัยรุ่นตอนต้นหญิงรู้สึกภูมิใจที่มีโอกาสได้เป็นแม่ และได้รับการปกป้อง แต่รู้สึกขัดแย้งเกี่ยวกับการมีลักษณะของเพศหญิงและรู้สึกเลี้ยงเปรี้ยบเพศชาย ในขณะที่เด็กวัยรุ่นตอนต้นชายรู้สึกภูมิใจในความแข็งแรง ความเป็นสุภาพบุรุษและความเป็นอิสระ และด้านวิถีทางเพศ เด็กวัยรุ่นตอนต้นทั้งเพศหญิงและเพศชายทุกคนมีความรู้สึกดึงดูดใจทางเพศกับเพศตรงข้าม การอบรมส่งสอนจากครรภ์ สื่อและสิ่งแวดล้อมในโรงเรียนเป็นปัจจัยสำคัญที่มีผลต่อการรับรู้อัตลักษณ์ทางเพศของเด็กวัยรุ่นตอนต้น ผลการศึกษาครั้นนี้สามารถช่วยให้ผู้ให้บริการสุขภาพในโรงเรียน บิดามารดา พยาบาลและบุคลากรอื่นๆ ทราบถึงความสำคัญและสนใจในความเสี่ยงของเด็กวัยรุ่นตอนต้นในระยะเปลี่ยนผ่านของพัฒนาการทางเพศ และพัฒนาโปรแกรมการส่งเสริมอัตลักษณ์ทางเพศสำหรับเด็กวัยรุ่นตอนต้นต่อไป

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