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Identity Dilemma and Self-Resilience: A Phenomenological Study of Students Working as Commercial Sex Workers

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Original Article

Identity Dilemma and Self-Resilience: A Phenomenological Study of Students Working as Commercial Sex Workers

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Abstract. The phenomenon of students working while attending college is growing, including involvement in informal night work such as the entertainment industry and covert prostitution. The purpose of this study is to gain an in-depth understanding of how students who become commercial sex workers (CSWs) interpret their self-concept, as well as the social, economic, family, and psychological factors that shape this experience. The data analysis technique in this study uses a qualitative approach with the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method, involving three female participants aged 22–25 who are active students and have experience working as “campus prostitutes”. The results show that involvement in this work is influenced by economic factors, broken home conditions, peer pressure, and the search for self-identity. The students experienced psychological conflicts in the form of guilt, moral dilemmas, efforts to maintain their identity, and strategies to balance their roles as students and night workers. Themes such as becoming a sex worker, time management, contraceptive use, worship, stigma, and economic change were recurring findings. This study confirms that informal night work has a significant impact on the formation of students' self-concept and psychosocial well-being.

Keywords: Self-Concept, Student, Commercial Sex Workers (CSWs)

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Introduction

Students generally have a main routine, which is attending lectures, but in between academic activities there is free time that is often used to do various activities according to their interests and needs. The use of this free time provides an opportunity for students to actualize themselves, including working while studying. The phenomenon of students studying while working is becoming increasingly common, with various types of jobs available according to individual abilities and needs (Meiji, 2019). The reasons for students working vary, ranging from financial needs to social needs, so they are required to be able to manage their time and mental condition so that their studies and work can be balanced (Permata & Kunci, 2023).

Among the various jobs chosen by students, there is a certain group that works night shifts in the entertainment sector, including those known as “night butterflies” or “campus chickens.” This term is used to refer to students who sell sexual services. Night butterflies or campus chickens refer to students who are involved in covert prostitution as a form of informal night work (Rimawati, 2010). This phenomenon is not only understood as deviant behavior, but also as an adaptive strategy of individuals in responding to economic pressures, limited job

opportunities, and the demands of educational costs. A number of studies in Indonesia show that student involvement in these practices is influenced by economic factors, dysfunctional family conditions, peer pressure, and a consumptive lifestyle. Previous research has revealed that jobs such as karaoke hostesses or sex workers are considered attractive to some students because of their flexible hours and large earnings in a short period of time (Pratami & Gianawati, 2019). Many of them choose these jobs because they can adjust their class schedules while providing significant income, making them a practical solution for their daily needs.

Various studies and media reports describe the reality of student involvement in covert prostitution with diverse backgrounds. Some students serve several clients per day at rates of millions of rupiah, even reaching tens of millions in certain circumstances (Hazmi, 2024). In major cities like Jakarta and Semarang, the reasons driving students into this line of work include a lack of financial support from their families, environmental influences, urgent economic needs, and psychological factors such as hypersexuality and uncontrolled sexual behavior (Puspita, 2022). Some research respondents even admitted that they initially got involved due to personal experiences or unhealthy intimate relationships, which then developed into dependence and eventually became a source of income. This phenomenon cannot be separated from the pressing social and economic context, where financial limitations force some students to choose a path that is not in line with social norms or moral values. Prostitution, including that carried out by students, has various psychosocial, moral, and emotional consequences (Salim & Irwansyah, 2023). Students who are involved often experience moral dilemmas, inner struggles, and social stigma. On the one hand, they feel proud of being financially independent, but on the other hand, they are overshadowed by shame, inner conflict, and negative self-assessment.

This condition creates deep psychological tension and affects their self-concept, making it an important phenomenon to study as part of the dynamics of student life with their dual roles as students and informal night workers. Based on observations and interviews conducted on May 18, 2025, at a karaoke bar in Semarang, a detailed picture emerged of the journey of a student involved in covert prostitution. The student's involvement began with hanging out at karaoke bars with friends, eventually leading to becoming a "campus prostitute." The emotional factors that weakened his resilience included a troubled family background with divorced parents, an irresponsible father, and the search for his biological sibling who had been adopted by another family. Additionally, the family's dire economic situation, particularly his mother's debt and lack of financial support, further pushed him toward this shortcut. To hide this work, students typically change their identities by pretending to work as waiters, limit social interactions, and present themselves as ordinary students on campus. Students usually attend classes in the afternoon and work at night, serving one to three clients at a rate of 1.5 to 5 million rupiah per night.

The phenomenon of students engaging in commercial sex work is closely related to high demand from upper-middle-class customers, such as officials, businesspeople, and professionals. They choose students because they are considered more attractive, young, educated, and provide services that are considered more satisfying. These findings are in line with research by Puspita (2022) and media reports such as *Kumparan* and *Havocscope*, which note the high turnover of the prostitution industry in Indonesia, reaching up to 24 trillion rupiah per year. The pattern of transactions carried out by students is similar to introductions in clubs, bars, and cafes, followed by financial agreements and sexual activities without long-term commitment. This practice shows how students enter the world of prostitution as an adaptive strategy to economic conditions, but often without considering the accompanying psychosocial and moral consequences (Lestari et al., 2020).

At the psychological level, students who become campus prostitutes find themselves in a dilemma between economic needs, social pressure, and the moral values they uphold (Murdianto, 2019). Many of them experience guilt, anxiety, and identity conflicts. Large incomes give them a sense of pride and independence, but there are still feelings of sin, shame,

and fear of social stigma (Susetyo, 2015). The existence of this profession not only contradicts religious and social norms, but also creates deep emotional tension. Some students even try to find peace through worship, such as prayer, which becomes a space for reflection on the guilt that continues to haunt them. This tension affects their self-concept, where students try to negotiate their identity as students with their hidden identity as sex workers.

In addition to economic factors, peer pressure, family conflicts (broken homes), hedonistic lifestyles, and pressure to conform to social standards also trigger student involvement in prostitution. Information about the world of prostitution is often obtained through social networks that offer comfort, acceptance, and financial opportunities. Family conflicts, lack of affection, and minimal emotional attention weaken students' self-control, causing them to seek outlets outside the home. Modernization and a consumptive lifestyle exacerbate the situation; many students try to keep up with standards of luxury goods, fashion, and socialite lifestyles that are not in line with their economic capabilities. The urge to earn money quickly causes some students to resort to various means, even if they violate the law and social norms. Economic factors are one of the main determinants that drive student involvement in prostitution (Suryani & Yoserizal, 2016). From the perspective of need theory, economic pressures related to meeting basic needs such as living expenses, education, and family responsibilities can drive individuals to become campus prostitutes even though it is contrary to social and moral norms. According to Grasella et al., (2023), limited economic conditions often narrow students' employment options, so informal jobs with high incomes and flexible hours are seen as a quick solution for survival.

Students involved often try to conceal their identities, juggling dual roles as students during the day and sex workers at night, while grappling with an ever-changing sense of self due to environmental pressures and life experiences. This situation shows that this research is important to study because the phenomenon of students working informally at night, especially those involved in covert prostitution, is still rarely discussed scientifically, even though its prevalence is quite significant and concerns their mental health, self-identity, and educational future. This research is also important because of the imbalance between economic demands and moral values, which creates internal conflicts among students that affect the development of their self-concept. The novelty of this research lies in its focus on examining the self-concept of students who work informally at night in depth through a phenomenological approach, not only looking at the phenomenon of prostitution from the perspective of criminality or morality, but also how students perceive themselves, build their identity, and struggle to balance their academic roles and night work. The purpose of this research is to reveal how students form and assess their self-concept while working informal night jobs, as well as the social, economic, family, and psychological factors that influence the formation of that self-concept. Thus, this research contributes theoretically to enriching the literature on self-concept, identity, lifestyle, and deviant behavior among students, and provides practical benefits for counselors, educational institutions, and students themselves in understanding the psychological dynamics of marginalized groups that are often invisible but real in today's campus life.

Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method to gain an in-depth understanding of the meaning of the life experiences of participants involved in a particular phenomenon. IPA was chosen because it focuses on interpreting subjective experiences, where researchers try to reveal how participants interpret their experiences through a double hermeneutic process, namely participants interpreting their experiences, and researchers interpreting those interpretations (Kahija, 2017). This study emphasizes understanding meaning based on the participants' perspectives, with the researcher as the main instrument.

Participants

The participants in this study were three women aged 22–25 years, all of whom were active students and had experience working as “campus girls.” Participants were selected based on the relevance of their experiences to the focus of the study, namely the self-concept of students involved in such work. All participants agreed to participate in in-depth interviews and gave their consent to the data recording process.

Sampling Procedures

This study used purpose sampling with criterion-based sampling, which is the selection of participants based on specific criteria relevant to the phenomenon being studied. The participant criteria included: (1) active students; (2) women aged 22–25 years; (3) having experience working as a campus escort; and (4) willing to be interviewed in depth. This technique allows researchers to obtain participants who have actually experienced the phenomenon, thereby providing rich and in-depth data. The number of participants was set at three in accordance with the characteristics of qualitative research, which emphasizes data depth rather than large numbers.

Procedures

The research procedure began with the formulation of research questions, the selection of participants, and the conduct of in-depth interviews. Before the interviews were conducted, the researcher first explained the purpose of the research, the data collection procedure, and the rights and obligations of the participants, including the guarantee of confidentiality and the freedom to withdraw at any time without consequences. After receiving this explanation, the participants expressed their willingness to participate through informed consent. The researcher conducted semi-structured interviews, beginning with general questions and then moving on to exploring the participants' personal experiences. During the interviews, the researcher applied the principle of *epoche* to suspend personal prejudices and assumptions in order to understand the participants' experiences clearly. All interviews were recorded with the participants' consent and then transcribed verbatim. Documentation in the form of audio recordings and field notes was used to strengthen the credibility of the data. The data collection process was carried out in a place that was comfortable for the participants and took place in May–June 2025.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in this study was conducted using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach, which emphasizes a deep understanding of the meaning of participants' life experiences. The analysis process began with repeatedly reading the interview transcripts to internalize the experiences described by the participants, followed by making initial descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual notes as a basis for interpretation. Next, the researcher developed emergent themes as representations of the meanings contained in the participants' statements, then grouped them into broader and more comprehensive superordinate themes. After all participants were analyzed individually, the researcher identified patterns between cases to see the similarities, differences, and relationships between the themes that emerged. The final stage of analysis was carried out by systematically compiling a thematic structure and writing it in the form of an interpretive narrative supported by direct quotations (verbatim), so that the essence of the participants' experiences could be presented in a complete, in-depth, and reflective manner in accordance with IPA principles.

Results and Discussions

Table 1. Participant Data

Name	Location	Age	Gender	Semester
Participant 1	Karaoke Semarang	23 years old	Female	3
Participant 2	Karaoke Semarang	25 years old	Female	2
Participant 3	Karaoke Semarang	22 years old	Female	6

Table 2. Patterns Among Participants

Participant 1	Participant2	Participant 3
1. Working at night	1. Broken home	1. Long working hours
2. Risks of working at night	2. Disappointment with father	2. Risks of working at night
3. Customer base	3. Started as an LC	3. Arrogant customers
4. LC fee	4. Interested in becoming an LC	4. Job postings on social media
5. Harmonious with coworkers	5. Started as a sex worker	5. The beginning of working as a karaoke hostess
6. Work facilities	6. Age when becoming an LC and sex worker	6. Studying while working
7. Working since vocational school	7. Men who accept them as they are	7. The beginning of becoming a sex worker
8. Expensive education	8. No intermediaries	8. Semi-intimate transactional relationships with customers
9. College friends don't know	9. Open BO process	9. Benefits
10. Limiting interactions	10. Bargaining	10. Being controlled by older men
11. Work hours based on customers	11. Sexual agreement	11. Money as the top priority
12. Time management	12. Client appearance	12. Customer demographics
13. Rates	13. Rates	13. Open BO requirements
14. Young age	14. Advantages of student sex workers	14. Contraceptive methods
15. Open BO	15. Young age	15. Health checks
16. Appearance	16. Maintaining identity from family	16. Maintaining anonymity from family
17. Bargaining	17. Limiting interaction	17. Defense through education
18. Appearance	18. Appearance	18. Broken home
19. Smoking on campus	19. Coming to terms with a double life	19. Financial needs
20. Family reactions	20. Life changes	20. Sexual relations
21. Intelligence	21. Character changes	21. Becoming a sex worker
22. Perception of religion	22. Drinking	22. Financial needs
23. Worship	23. Financial needs	23. Economic changes
24. Ways to relieve stress	24. HIV	24. Saving money
25. Becoming a sex worker	25. Fear of not being able to get pregnant	25. Limiting interactions
26. Determination to study	26. Economic changes	26. Appearance
27. Invitation from friends	27. Men who accept things as they are	27. Time management
28. Becoming a sex worker	28. Contraceptives	28. Confidants
29. Disagreement with parents	29. Time management	29. Immaturity
30. Life choices	30. Confidants	30. Dilemma between actions and feelings
31. Sufficient finances	31. Confiding in God	31. Dilemma with his legal wife
32. Comfortable with the job	32. Worship	32. Religious practices
33. Easy to earn money	33. Accepting one's past	33. Accepting his job
34. Maintaining family identity	34. Positive changes	34. Perception of his religion
35. Drinking		
36. HIV		
37. Contraceptives		
38. Awareness of sexual agreements		

Based on the table above, this study involved three female participants. Participant 1 had been a campus escort since her third semester with clients at a hotel in Semarang, participant 2 had been a campus escort since her second semester with clients at a hotel in Semarang, and participant 3 had been a campus escort since her third semester with Om K at a hotel in Semarang (Table 1). After analyzing all participant data, the author then looked for patterns or relationships among the themes obtained from all participants (Table 2).

Tabel 3. Identification of Recurring Themes

No	Superordinate Theme	Participant 1	Participant 2	Participant 3	Average Response
1	Initial entry into sex work	YES	YES	YES	YES
2	Time management	NO	YES	YES	YES
3	Rates	YES	YES	NO	YES
4	Drinking	YES	YES	NO	YES
5	Financial needs	NO	YES	YES	YES
6	Economic changes	NO	YES	YES	YES
7	Risks of working at night	YES	NO	YES	YES
8	Contraceptives	YES	YES	YES	YES
9	Young age	YES	YES	NO	YES
10	Appearance	YES	YES	YES	YES
11	HIV	YES	YES	NO	YES
12	Religious practices	YES	YES	YES	YES
13	Perceptions of religion	YES	NO	YES	YES
14	Broken home	NO	YES	YES	YES
15	Maintaining identity from family	YES	YES	YES	YES
16	Clientele	YES	NO	YES	YES
17	Confidants	NO	YES	YES	YES
18	Bargaining	YES	YES	NO	YES
19	Sexual agreements	YES	YES	NO	YES
20	Limiting interactions	YES	YES	YES	YES

Based on the table above, recurring themes can be seen among respondents in the superordinate theme related to student sex workers, namely “starting as a sex worker,” “contraceptives,” “appearance,” “worship,” “maintaining identity from family,” and “limiting interaction.” According to (Kahija, 2017), the table identifying recurring themes provides an overview of the distribution among all respondents, indicating whether more than half of the participants share a particular theme or not.

The phenomenon of students working in the informal sector is both interesting and complex in campus life. Jobs in this sector are generally part-time and highly flexible, allowing students to balance their academic activities and economic needs. However, for students who work informally at night, various challenges arise, such as drowsiness, reduced rest time, and certain risks depending on the type of work they do. Among the various forms of informal work, there is a group of students who work in the nightlife industry, including those known as *ayam kampus*, a euphemism for students who sell their bodies. Their decision to enter prostitution is usually motivated by various reasons, such as peer pressure, economic demands, or the desire to maintain a certain lifestyle. To balance work and college, some choose to take employee classes that have more flexible schedules. In carrying out their profession, they have certain rates, ranging from Rp800,000 to Rp2,500,000 for short time, and Rp3,500,000 to Rp5,000,000 or more for long time. Through this work, they can meet their financial needs and even improve their personal economic conditions. However, behind this, they often face psychological pressure and inner conflict between feelings of guilt and efforts to accept their life choices. To maintain their image and identity, college girls usually appear like ordinary students, dressed neatly, politely, and orderly. Their relatively young age is often an attraction for customers, who generally come from the middle to upper classes. However, the transaction process often

involves bargaining and sexual agreements. This job also carries health risks, especially HIV/AIDS transmission. Some try to protect themselves by using contraception. Despite living in a world that is considered deviant, many of them continue to worship and try to maintain spiritual relationships, although some feel that they have become too involved in this work.

Family factors, such as broken homes, are often the main reason for students' involvement in this work. They generally hide their work identity from their families for fear of disappointing or hurting their parents. In their social lives, they also tend to limit their interactions on campus and in their neighborhoods, sharing their stories only with close friends they trust. This phenomenon highlights the moral, social, and psychological dilemmas faced by students who work at night. On the one hand, they are struggling to survive and be independent, but on the other hand, they must bear a heavy emotional burden and social stigma (Mahfujah et al., 2023).

Findings through Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of the experiences of three participants related to their Self-Concept as students involved in informal night work (prostitution) in the city of Semarang. This interpretation will be linked to the structure of Self-Concept, which consists of internal dimensions (Identity Self, Actor Self, Recipient/Evaluator Self) and external dimensions (Physical Self, Ethical-Moral Self, Family Self, Social Self).

From the perspective of internal self-dimensions, this includes individuals' views of their personality, abilities, and values. For participants, this dimension became the main arena for conflict and justification. From an internal perspective, participants defined themselves through their dual identities as students and sex workers. The initial involvement in this work was not singular, but triggered by various factors such as invitations from friends, previous work experience in the nightlife industry, and personal interactions with customers. These conditions show that the identity as a college girl did not entirely arise from independent choice, but was the result of a transition of roles influenced by social accessibility and financial needs. This dual identity forces participants to constantly adapt by redefining their roles, on the one hand as students who continue to strive to fulfill their academic obligations, and on the other hand as sex workers who are pragmatic about economic demands (Riana et al., 2017).

The formation of identity (Identity Self) shows that the participants' initial involvement in this work was not singular, but always involved triggering factors that created a new identity. Participant 1 was encouraged by a roommate, Participant 2 switched from LC because of a lack of work, while Participant 3 started from personal interactions with customers. This indicates that the identity of a campus prostitute is not entirely an independent choice at the outset, but rather a transition of roles driven by social accessibility (friends/work environment) and financial needs (Participants 2 and 3). This dual identity forces them to adapt by redefining their roles: on the one hand as diligent students, on the other as pragmatic sex workers (Novarizal & Soares, 2021).

In terms of identity formation, the participants' involvement did not arise suddenly or entirely as a personal choice, but was triggered by invitations from friends, previous work experience, and social relationships that opened up access to the world of prostitution. These conditions led to the formation of a dual identity as students and sex workers, which required a high level of adaptability in order to carry out both roles simultaneously without interfering with each other. In carrying out these roles, participants demonstrate adaptive behavior through flexible time management and work strategies (Kusumawati et al., 2019). Choosing employee classes and limiting work schedules are ways to maintain their academic roles. Despite being aware of the negative impacts of their work, participants tend to justify their behavior on financial grounds, making money the main motivation and basis for decision-making (Rezky, 2019).

In terms of self-acceptance and morality, participants experienced psychological dilemmas characterized by feelings of guilt, inner conflict, and inconsistent religious practices. This condition indicates an effort to separate moral roles and work roles as a mechanism to reduce psychological tension (Wallenbrock, 2015). On the other hand, there was also a pragmatic acceptance of the work being done as a form of self-adjustment to economic demands. The body

and appearance are important aspects of the external dimension of the self. Participants consciously maintain a reasonable appearance on campus to preserve their image as students, while in the night work world, age and physical condition are the main selling points. Awareness of health risks encourages the use of contraceptives as a form of risk management and self-protection (Roem, 1997).

In the family context, keeping the identity of their work a secret is the main strategy employed by participants. A dysfunctional family background strengthens the drive for financial independence, while also fostering the need to protect the family from disappointment. Efforts to hide their work from their parents reflect the conflict between family values and the reality of their lives. Socially, participants limit their interactions with their surroundings and only build relationships with certain individuals who are considered safe. This segmented relationship pattern serves as a mechanism of protection from social stigma, but also has the potential to reduce broader emotional support. Overall, this shows that the self-concept of students involved in informal night work is adaptive and segmented. Participants are able to maintain dual roles through identity separation and financial justification, as a strategy for surviving amid complex social, moral, and economic pressures.

Conclusions

The phenomenon of students working as commercial sex workers in this study shows relatively similar patterns of experience among the three participants, particularly in relation to their initial reasons for becoming CSWs, strategies for maintaining their identities, use of contraception, the role of appearance, and efforts to maintain religious practices amid their dual lives. IPA analysis shows that their involvement is motivated by a combination of economic factors, broken home conditions, emotional pressure, and peer pressure that provides access to the world of prostitution. Although this work provides significant financial benefits and improves their economic conditions, the participants face moral dilemmas, health risks, and psychological conflicts that affect their self-concept, especially in the dimensions of ethics-morals, personal identity, and social relations. All three participants tried to hide their work identity from their families and campus environment, limited their social interactions, and experienced inner struggles between their livelihood needs and their religious beliefs. Overall, the research results confirm that student involvement in prostitution is a complex survival strategy, in which economic factors and dysfunctional family relationships play a strong role, while efforts to maintain self-image and spiritual support become internal mechanisms to reduce their psychological burden.

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