

## **Parental Rejection After Coming Out: Detachment, Shame, and the Reparative Power of Romantic Love**

HYE MIN KIM<sup>1</sup>

University of Southern California, USA

DAVID C. JEONG

Santa Clara University, USA

PAUL R. APPLEBY

University of Southern California, USA

JOHN L. CHRISTENSEN

University of Connecticut, USA

LYNN CAROL MILLER

University of Southern California, USA

Identity development is a fragile process for any youth, but this fragility may be entangled with greater complexity for young men who have sex with men (YMSM), particularly if confronted by rejection from those “closest to home”: their parents. While parental rejection to coming out may contribute to a range of maladaptive effects, the present work aims to distill the underlying mechanisms of such effects, specifically by exploring the intersection of self-disclosure and emotional intimacy. Drawing from a sample of YMSM age 18 to 24 ( $N = 364$ ), we found that the link between YMSM’s emotional detachment from their fathers in response to their coming out and the experience of shame surrounding their sexuality was indirectly and serially mediated by YMSM’s positive associations with emotional bonding needs and intimacy with their romantic partner. Findings provide initial support for the reparative potential of romantic bonding and

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Hye Min Kim: [hyemink@usc.edu](mailto:hyemink@usc.edu)

David C. Jeong: [dcjeong@scu.edu](mailto:dcjeong@scu.edu)

Paul R. Appleby: [drpaulrobertappleby@gmail.com](mailto:drpaulrobertappleby@gmail.com)

John L. Christensen: [john.christensen@uconn.edu](mailto:john.christensen@uconn.edu)

Lynn Carol Miller: [lmiller@usc.edu](mailto:lmiller@usc.edu)

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intimacy to heal identity-based shame from parental rejection and detachment, which would otherwise be a source of self-devaluation of YMSM's identity.

*Keywords: self-disclosure, sexual-minority youth, coming out, romantic relationship, shame*

At the core of youth development is the development of self-identity: "Who am I, and how do I communicate this with my family, and my friends?" Closely tied to such identity development is the role of love. That is, "Am I loved by my parents?" and "Can I share love with a partner?" While most adolescents experience challenges in identity development, sexual minority youth often face more complex psychological difficulties prompted by various factors, including a lack of willingness to disclose their gender identity, and/or others' rejection of their sexual orientation or gender identity (The Trevor Project, 2019). In particular, young men who have sex with men (YMSM) have been found to experience serious problems, including the risk of mental health conditions and suicide (Kann et al., 2016) driven by societal rejection of their sexual desires or behaviors (Rosario, Hunter, Maguen, Gwadz, & Smith, 2001). Indeed, they are arguably one of the most at-risk groups for mental health conditions in the United States (Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, 2016) with higher risk of suicidal thoughts and attempts (Haas et al., 2010) and depression (Storholm, Satre, Kapadia, & Halkitis, 2016).

YMSM who perceive societal rejection and marginalization due to their sexual identity are likely to experience sexual shame,<sup>2</sup> which produces an intense sense of worthlessness (Chen, Hewitt, & Flett, 2015). This self-conscious emotion of shame emerges through a socialization process of learning others' evaluations and is triggered by perceptions of the failure to meet others' expectations (i.e., doing what one should not or not doing what one should do). Shame's presence (triggered by sexual identity issues) is linked to sexual risk-taking that can increase exposure to STI/STDs or HIV (Hatzenbuehler, 2009; Park et al., 2014), adding risks to physical health onto existing vulnerabilities in mental health and identity for YMSM. Accordingly, an increasing number of communication interventions have focused on reducing their shame that comes from a conflict between apparent sexual desire for a man and a belief that that desire is bad (e.g., Christensen et al., 2013; Smith et al., 2018).

As it does for all children, early socialization and attachment to parents play a fundamental role in YMSM's life and sense of self (Baiocco et al., 2016). One of the most crucial events that YMSM face, typically in adolescence, is parents' reactions to their child's coming out (Baiocco et al., 2016; Mustanski, Garofalo, & Emerson, 2010). It is especially an important transition for YMSM's identity development because revealing one's sexual orientation represents self-acceptance, which may ultimately promote self-integration and personal empowerment (Chow & Cheng, 2010). According to identity development theory (Cass, 1979), parents' reactions to YMSM's sexual orientation disclosure and their internalization of the reactions are essential components of YMSM's identity formation. Indeed, parental support was a significant factor in the overall health of sexual minority youth (Katz-Wise, Rosario, & Tsappis, 2016; Pistella, Caricato, & Baiocco, 2020).

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<sup>2</sup> This term is often used interchangeably with the term *internalized homophobia* (Brown & Trevelyan, 2010).

In addition to the emotional support from their parents, YMSM's attachment relationship and affectional bonding with their romantic partners plays an integral role in their identity formation and well-being (Mohr & Fassinger, 2003). Notably, however, YMSM report greater fear and less agency in dating romantic partners relative to heteronormative youth (Diamond & Lucas, 2004). What is not clear is how YMSM attachment relationship with their parents in response to their coming out (and its potential rupture) is related to their bonding and intimacy in romantic relationships with same-sex partners, and their level of shame about sexual identity. In the current work, we examine this intersection of YMSM's relational identity development from parent-child relationship and romantic relationship. By applying the developmental framework of identity (i.e., communication theory of identity; Hecht, 1993) on which we incorporate attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982; Ingoglia, Lo Coco, Liga, & Cricchio, 2011), our goal is to elucidate the relationship of parental reactions to YMSM's self-disclosure of sexual identity in the extended context of romantic relationships, and its link to mitigation of sexual shame.

### **YMSM's Sexual Shame and Parental Reactions to Their Coming Out**

To most YMSM, "coming out" is a wildly paradoxical event. On the one hand, self-disclosure about one's sexual orientation (i.e., coming out) signals self-acceptance, which may ultimately empower the disclosing individual (Chow & Cheng, 2010): This time of courage is a defining moment in their identity development. On the other hand, "coming out" represents a great deal of emotional labor, particularly with the risk of social rejection from parents and peers (Carnelley, Hepper, Hicks, & Turner, 2011). It is particularly salient vis à vis their interactions with their parents. The extent to which YMSM disclose to their fathers versus their mothers does not present a consistent picture. For example, gay men (63%) revealed their sexual orientation more frequently to their father than did lesbian women (50%; Pistella et al., 2020); more than half of YMSM disclosed their use of PrEP for HIV prevention to their mother (54.0%) while much less than half told father (35.6%; Phillips, Raman, Felt, Han, & Mustanski, 2019). However, YMSM consistently fear coming out (Potoczniak, Crosbie-Burnett, & Saltzburg, 2009; Willoughby, Malik, & Lindahl, 2006) and that with "coming out" will come a rejection of their identity (Ryan, Huebner, Diaz, & Sanchez, 2009). Indeed, these fears are often warranted given that one third of LGBTQ+ youth experience parental rejection of their sexual identity (Katz-Wise et al., 2016).

Such challenges in parent-child relationships among YMSM represent a more complex issue of identity development, which is a critical development process for all adolescents as they learn to individuate from parents or family (Kohler, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2002). Certainly, parental rejection of a child's "coming out" disclosure would be harmful to the child's identity development. One's self-concept is contingently shaped by how others view the individual via self-disclosure (Hecht, 1993; Jung & Hecht, 2004). However, many YMSM report rejection of their identity following self-disclosure (Rosario et al., 2001), which may activate the self-conscious emotion of shame. In other words, if developing adolescents self-disclose about an already challenging aspect of their identity (e.g., sexual orientation or gender identity) to their parents, and experience rejection, this is thought to be formative to that individual's relational identity, prompting shame. Moreover, following the combination of internalization of that rejection, especially that from one's family (Baiocco et al., 2016), and a resultant negative sense of self (Chen et al., 2015; Willoughby et al., 2006), sexual shame would be expected to be a major source of self-devaluation (Chow & Cheng, 2010).

The process of identity development as well as the process of coming out both represent communication phenomena. YMSM identity development is informed by the communication theory of identity (Hecht, 1993; Jung & Hecht, 2004), which posits that there are multiple layers of identities (i.e., personal, relational, enacted, and communal identity) that interdependently create a holistic sense of self. Among others, relational identity refers to an individual's self-concept shaped and developed by internalizing how others view oneself and by identifying oneself through one's relationships with others. Critically, relational identity plays a role in the experience of shame, which stems from self-devaluating thoughts relative to the evaluations and expectations of others, which in turn may lead to a range of adverse mental and physical health outcomes (Chen et al., 2015; Storholm et al., 2016). According to identity development theory, parents' reactions to YMSM's sexual orientation disclosure and their internalization of the reactions are essential components of YMSM's identity formation (Cass, 1979). Parental support has been observed to be a significant factor in the overall health of YMSM (Legate, Weinstein, Ryan, DeHaan, & Ryan, 2019; Puckett, Woodward, Mereish, & Pantalone, 2015). In light of the importance of parental acceptance for sexual minority youth, considerable prior work has used attachment-based family therapy (ABFT) as a treatment for suicidal adolescents and their parents (see Diamond, Russon, & Levy, 2016 for a review), leveraging adolescent parenting research that encourages secure attachment during adolescence (Steinberg, 2001). Indeed, the absence of a responsive caretaker (e.g., indicated by existing insecure attachment or family rejection) has been associated with suicidality and depression among minority youth (Ryan et al., 2009).

### **YMSM's Attachment Relationship With Parents**

Attachment theory (Bowlby, 1982) suggests that an early relationship with one or more caregivers that makes a child feel safe, secure, and protected has a powerful impact on enduring emotions in later life. Attachment relationships take on hierarchical characteristics in development such that specific competencies acquired early in development influence more global behaviors later in development (Overall, Fletcher, & Friesen, 2003). Therefore, parental love and acceptance may be one of the most critical underpinnings for competencies learned in childhood development, defining the boundaries of secure and accepting love later in life.

Primary caregivers play a key role in the formation of affectional bonds involving secure attachment, by being sensitively attuned and reliably responsive to the needs of their child (Murray Parkes, Stevenson-Hinde, & Marris, 1991). Such relationships and interactions are internalized in the form of working models of self and others, where holding positive views of both self (i.e., believing self as worthy of love and trust) and others (i.e., believing others as worthy of love and trust) afford a secure attachment (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991; Pietromonaco & Barrett, 2000). On the other hand, other combinations of views of self and other (i.e., having negative views of self and/or other) undergird insecure attachment (Bartholomew & Horowitz, 1991) that involves detachment or the breaking of emotional attachment and trust (Ingoglia et al., 2011). In particular with YMSM, parental reactions to their child's coming out is especially an important transition for their emotional attachment as well as identity development (Baiocco et al., 2016; Mustanski et al., 2010). Specifically, when they experience emotional distance from their parents due to rejection, insufficient support, mistrust, or alienation in response to their sexual orientation disclosure, it may make it especially difficult for YMSM to believe themselves to be worthy of love and value (see Allan & Westhaver, 2018, for a review of attachment in gay male relationships).

Young children are equipped with mechanisms to attempt to address/repair the interactions with their primary caregivers. These include "protest" (e.g., at separation or insufficient proximity) to attempt to reinstate proximity. If they are unable to do so they may become quiet with sadness and despair, and eventually they may experience detachment, or the breaking of the emotional attachment with (and trust of) a caregiver (Mikulincer, Shaver, & Pereg, 2003). Importantly, such detachment, or insecure attachment, from one's early life has been found to have negative impacts on one's identity development (Willoughby et al., 2006) as well as close relationships throughout life (e.g., difficulties in emotional closeness and connectedness with others; Ingoglia et al., 2011; risky sexual behaviors; Kim & Miller, 2020). With the rupture of attachment and potential loss of a secure base following their coming out, therefore, YMSM may begin to develop a negative sense of self in the form of shame about one's identity (Willoughby et al., 2006) where the self is perceived as flawed, worthless, or unlovable by a loved one (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005, 2007). Therefore, such parental rejection may painfully exacerbate shame among YMSM, which is likely to enhance emotional and behavioral challenges such as depression, isolation, and suicidal ideation (Baiocco et al., 2016; Legate, Ryan, & Weinstein, 2012; Rothman, Sullivan, Keyes, & Boehmer, 2012; Vaughan & Waehler, 2010).

### **YMSM's Attachment Relationship With Romantic Partners**

In addition to playing a fundamental role in child development, the strength and nature of parent-child relationship may also be critically diagnostic of the child's future patterns of adult romantic bonding (Hazan & Diamond, 2000). Building on the earlier theoretical work on attachment, studies have delineated how early attachment with parents is associated with pair-bonding relationships as an adult (e.g., Miller, Christensen, Pedersen, Putcha-Bhagavatula, & Appleby, 2013). In particular, Zeifman and Hazan (2008) suggested that the emotional bonds formed early in life are transferred from parents to peers, constituting an integral precedent to pair bonding in romantic relationships and their later work was supportive of the development of similar attachment dynamics with peers and romantic pair bonding (Hazan & Diamond, 2000). Therefore, adolescent youth begin to develop attachment bonds with peers and/or romantic partners who offer a more age-appropriate secure base for bonding than that provided by their parents.

Earlier attachment theory suggests that less close and emotionally bonded relationships with parents, especially when young, predict less bonded romantic relationships subsequently (e.g., Bowlby, 1982; Hazan & Diamond, 2000; Zeifman & Hazan, 2008). Less clear, however, is what happens when one's early attachments to parent(s), once providing a close and secure base, are fundamentally ruptured later in young adulthood: This can be the situation for many YMSM, who after coming out to parents—perhaps for the first time—experience strong rejection, denial, and disapproval of their emerging sexual identity. It is also possible that such rupture of attachment with parents in response to YMSM's coming out may especially motivate YMSM to fill in that gap with partners by forging romantic pair bonds and seeking emotional intimacy in romantic relationships. That is, greater parent detachment (i.e., greater negative change in closeness/bonding from before to after coming out) may enhance emotional bonding needs in adult romantic relationships. Relatedly, relevant literature suggests that there are two defensive strategies (hyperactivating strategy vs. deactivating strategy) that people may adopt in dealing with their experienced attachment insecurity and regulating the affective distress from negative models of self and others (Mikulincer et al., 2003). Hyperactivating strategies involve energetic and insistent attempts to attain proximity and love from the other person. Unlike this strong and active approach orientation, deactivating strategies involve avoiding proximity and inhibition of emotional commitment to significant others.

In building and maintaining their pair-bonds, YMSM are apt to seek emotional intimacy. Intimacy within a romantic relationship refers to an emotional depth and mutual love between oneself and one's partner, involving relationship satisfaction, trust, and attachment (Theodore, Durán, Antoni, & Fernandez, 2004). Thus, when YMSM's bonding needs are fulfilled by a great emotional intimacy that they feel in their romantic relationship, it may produce positive emotional effects—for instance, reducing sexual shame. If that is the case, such a potentially reparative process may contribute to YMSM's psychological and emotional well-being. Taken together, this study first tests whether the detachment from the parent (change in emotional distance from "before coming out" to "after coming out") is associated with YMSM's sexual shame, and whether such detachment–shame link is mediated by emotional bonds and intimacy that YMSM have with their romantic partner. Ironically, YMSM's elevated need to bond and emotional intimacy with romantic partners—the very object of parental rejection—may afford the reparative power to restore YMSM's sense of self-worth and lovability and reduce their sexual shame. Therefore, we propose the following hypotheses and a research question:

*H1: The greater the detachment experienced in YMSM's child–parent relationship during their coming out to parents, the greater their sexual shame.*

*RQ1: How is the detachment experienced in YMSM's child–parent relationship during their coming out to parents associated with their emotional bonding needs in a romantic relationship?*

*H2: The relationship between detachment experienced in YMSM's child–parent relationship during their coming out and their sexual shame will be mediated by the (a) emotional bonding they seek and (b) emotional intimacy they have in their romantic relationship.*

### **Method**

This study used a baseline cross-sectional survey data of a larger project that was developed to reduce sexual risk taking of YMSM (for additional details, see Read et al., 2006). A nationwide sample of YMSM living in the United States was recruited via online banner ads on several websites and online publications, including Craigslist and Tumblr blogs,<sup>3</sup> as well as via paper flyers at gay communities, such as LGBTQ+ centers, bars, and bookstores,<sup>4</sup> from February 12 to October 28, 2012 (Appleby et al., 2013). Eligible participants were those who (a) gender identify as men, (b) are within the ages of 18 to 24, and (c) engage in sexual relationships with men. Of a total of 935 YMSM, we included those in a romantic relationship with a male primary partner (defined as

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<sup>3</sup> To advertise the study, Tumblr page was created with content ranging from fashion, entertainment, and music to other fun "eye candy" for men who have sex with men with pictures of attractive men and stories about celebrities (content was updated by the project specialist and research assistants who were gay men). Other links included news about gay events and issues. The idea was to create a fun environment that would appeal to YMSM on its own merits while also offering a place to reach potential subjects. The ad with a link to the screener was put in posts to keep it circulating through the site. If eligible, a person would be forwarded to the main study.

<sup>4</sup> These community centers were identified based on formative research on locations that were either gay inclusive or frequented by members of the gay community.

"someone you would consider to be a husband or boyfriend") at the time of study participation ( $N = 364$ ). The average age of participants was 21.80 year ( $SD = 1.64$ ). This study was reviewed and approved by the institutional review board at a major private research university, and informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study. Participation was voluntary, and they could end their participation at any point without loss of compensation to which they were otherwise entitled.

### **Measures**

#### *Shame*

Following prior study's suggestion that it is shame about sexual *desire* (i.e., unresolvable conflict between what one desires [another man] and one's belief that having sex with other men is bad), rather than past sexual *behavior*, that represents the construct of sexual shame among YMSM in predicting risky behavior (Park et al., 2014), shame was measured with two items on 7-point Likert scales (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*). These items (i.e., "When I think about my desire for other men, I feel like a bad person"; "I feel bad about my desire for other men") were adapted from a measure of PANAS-X shame, which has been extensively used (Christensen et al., 2013; Park et al., 2014). Since the internal consistency between the two items was confirmed ( $r = .83, p < .001$ ), the scores were averaged to be used as a shame variable (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .89; M = 4.27, SD = 1.39$ ).

#### *Bonding Need*

Participants' emotional bonding need was measured by asking them how much they agree with the four items ("You want to be as physically close to your partner as much as possible"; "You experience an increase in anxiety when you are separated or kept apart from your partner"; "Your partner is a source of comfort and security. In his presence you feel less anxiety"; "Your partner is your 'rock' or 'secure base'; As long as he's there, you can explore or contemplate any challenge") on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*; 7 = *strongly agree*). There was no prior self-report measure of the strength of propensities pertaining to bonding need for a particular romantic partner; thus, items were developed by the research team to capture the four characteristics indicative of the development or need for bonding in romantic relationships suggested by prior work (i.e., proximity maintenance, separation distress, safe haven, and secure base; Zeifman & Hazan, 2008). Items were examined through principal component analysis (PCA) with an oblique rotation, and as expected, only one factor was extracted, explaining the 60.7% of total variance. After confirming the internal consistency among the four items, the average score was used for a bonding needs variable (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .78, M = 4.88, SD = 1.02$ ).

#### *Emotional Intimacy With Partner*

Participants were asked, "How emotionally close are you with your male primary partner?" with responses ranging from 1 (*not close at all*) to 5 (*extremely close*). This constitutes the measure of participants' self-reported emotional closeness with their primary partner ( $M = 3.78, SD = 0.81$ ).

### *Detachment From Mother*

There are two components in the measure of detachment from mother: (1) the extent to which the participants were close with their mother when they were growing up, which was before coming out to her (i.e., "When you were growing up, how close were you with your primary female caregiver?"), and (2) the extent to which they were close with their mother after coming out to her (i.e., "After you told your primary female caregiver, or after she found out that you were having sex with other men, how close were you?"). Each item was measured on a 5-point scale (1 = *not close*; 5 = *very close*). Conceptually, the detachment variable could be made by subtracting the closeness with mother *after* coming out to her from the closeness *before* coming out to her so that higher score means they had been closer with their mother before the coming-out, the bigger detachment. However, simple difference scores are typically influenced by baseline values, and thus residualized change scores were used to eliminate the dependency (Christensen et al., 2013; Cronbach & Furby, 1970). It was calculated by regressing the emotional closeness with mother *after* coming out (Y) on the baseline values of emotional closeness with mother *before* coming out (X), resulting in the estimates of predicted Y values (Y'), which are then subtracted from Y (Y - Y') and saved as residuals. To ensure intuitive interpretation, the residualized scores were multiplied by -1s so that high scores meant greater detachment from the mother ( $M = .00$ ,  $SD = 0.83$ ; Min = -2.63, Max = 2.93).

### *Detachment From Father*

Two subscales were used to make the final variable for detachment from father following the same procedure we used to develop the measure for detachment from mother. Participants were asked the extent to which they were close with their father when they were growing up before coming out to him (i.e., "When you were growing up, how close were you with your primary male caregiver?") and the extent to which they were close with their father after coming out to him (i.e., "After you told your primary male caregiver, or after he found out that you were having sex with other men, how close were you?") on 5-point scale (1 = *not close*; 5 = *very close*). Likewise, residualized difference scores were used for the variable of detachment from father, with higher scores meaning participants became more detached from their father after coming out ( $M = .00$ ,  $SD = .92$ ; Min = -1.86, Max = 3.10).

## **Results**

Missing values were examined and addressed to preserve the power of analysis following prior literature (Enders, 2001; Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013)—measures with less than 5% missing values (i.e., bonding need and shame) were imputed with mean values and the measures with more than 5% but missing completely at random indicated by the nonsignificant results of Little's MCAR test (i.e., detachment measures) were imputed using the expectation maximization algorithm. Multivariate outliers were examined by using Mahalanobis  $D^2$  (distance statistic), and there were four cases that have unusual combinations of values on variables. After excluding the four cases, 360 were left for the main analysis. Bivariate correlations among the variables are presented in Table 1.

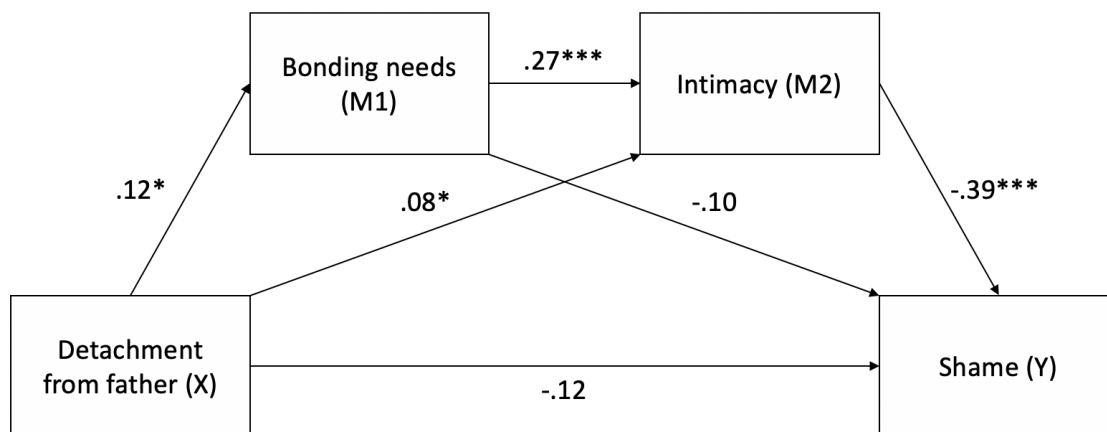


**Table 1. Bivariate Correlations Among the Measured Variables.**

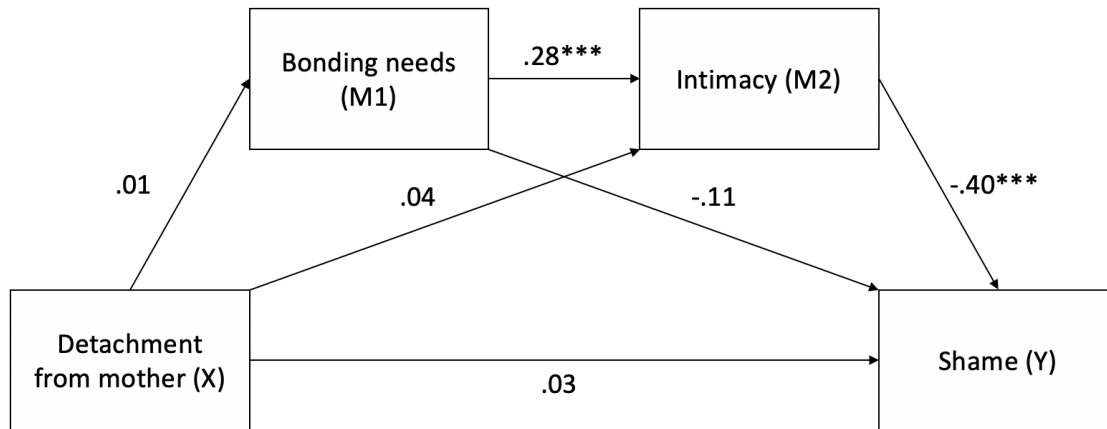
	Correlations					
	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Age	-					
2. Detachment with father	-.01	-				
3. Detachment with mother	-.11*	.24***	-			
4. Bonding needs	-.17**	.11*	.01	-		
5. Emotional intimacy	-.06	.13*	.05	.36***	-	
6. Shame	.12*	-.12*	.00	-.16**	-.26***	-

Note. Pearson correlations statistics are presented. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

For analysis, serial mediation analyses (Model 6 in PROCESS; Hayes, 2013) were performed for detachment from mother and from father, respectively. Among the variables, age was correlated with the outcome variable ( $r = .12, p = .019$ ), and thus it was entered as a control variable in testing the associations. PROCESS generated bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals for all indirect effects using 10,000 bootstrap samples. Results are illustrated in Figure 1 and Figure 2.



**Figure 1. Illustration of the serial multiple mediation model: Detachment from father as a predictor. \* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .**



**Figure 2. Illustration of the serial multiple mediation model: Detachment from mother as a predictor. \*p < .05, \*\*p < .01, \*\*\*p < .001.**

Results show that the first model with the detachment from father as predictor (Figure 1) and shame as the outcome variable through bonding needs and emotional intimacy with partner was significant, total effect:  $F(1, 358) = 4.90, p = .028, R^2 = .01, 95\% \text{ CI} [-.333, -.020]$ . Notably, the direct effect of detachment from father on shame ( $c'$  in Table 2) was not significant, which is interpreted as the estimated difference in shame (Y) between two cases that differ by one unit on detachment from father ( $X_1$ ) who are equal on the mediators ( $M_1$  and  $M_2$ ) in the model,  $b = -.12, SE = .08, 95\% \text{ CI} [-.272, .035]$ .

**Table 2. Regression Coefficients, Standard Errors, and Model Summary Information for the Serial Multiple Mediator Model: Detachment from Father as a Predictor.**

Antecedent	Consequent								
	M <sub>1</sub> (Bonding needs)			M <sub>2</sub> (Emotional intimacy)			Y (Shame)		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
$X_1$	.12	.06	.038	.08	.04	.051	-.12	.08	.130
M <sub>1</sub>	-	-	-	.27	.04	<.001	-.10	.07	.176
M <sub>2</sub>	-	-	-	-	-	-	-.39	.09	.001
Constant	4.88	.05	<.001	2.45	.20	<.001	6.23	.42	<.001
	$R^2 = .01, p = 0.038$			$R^2 = .14, p < .001$			$R^2 = .08, p < .001$		
	$F(1, 358) = 4.32$			$F(2, 357) = 27.90$			$F(3, 356) = 10.24$		

Note.  $X_1$  = detachment from father.

Therefore, there was no evidence that detachment from father is independent in its effect on shame. Because the correlation coefficient revealed a significant positive relationship between detachment from father and shame, this nonsignificant direct effect implies indirect effects in the model. Indeed, the indirect effect of detachment from father on shame through both bonding needs and emotional intimacy with a current romantic partner (detachment from father → bonding needs → emotional intimacy with current partner → shame) was

significant,  $b = -.01$ ,  $SE = .01$ , 95% CI  $[-.035, -.001]$ . This indirect effect was significant and negative because the bootstrap confidence interval was entirely below zero (and also indicated by the multiplicative of the coefficients involved, two positives, one negative). Notably, an indirect effect of detachment from father on shame through intimacy as a single mediator (detachment from father → emotional intimacy with current partner → shame) was also significant,  $b = -.033$ ,  $SE = .022$ , 95% CI  $[-.092, -.001]$ , although this was not significantly different from the sequential indirect effects model, 95% CI  $[-.015, .076]$ . The other path with bonding needs as a single mediator (detachment from father → bonding needs → shame), was not significant, 95% CI  $[-.053, .005]$ . Taken together, detachment from father is positively associated with bonding needs, which in turn is related to a greater emotional intimacy with a current romantic partner, and this greater intimacy translated into a lower level of shame.

However, the second model with the detachment from mother as a predictor (Figure 2) and shame as the outcome variable through bonding needs and emotional intimacy with partner was not significant,  $b = -.01$ ,  $SE = .09$ , 95% CI  $[-.015, .014]$ . Results show that the direct effect of detachment from mother on shame was not significant,  $b = .03$ ,  $SE = .09$ , 95% CI  $[-.116, .166]$ , although bonding needs were positively associated with participants' intimacy with a current partner,  $b = .28$ ,  $SE = .02$ , 95% CI  $[.216, .345]$ . Also, higher scores on the emotional intimacy with partner measure were associated with the lower level of shame,  $b = -.40$ ,  $SE = .09$ , 95% CI  $[-.560, -.248]$ . Further statistics in the full model are presented in Table 2 and Table 3.

**Table 3. Regression Coefficients, Standard Errors, and Model Summary Information for the Serial Multiple Mediator Model: Detachment from Mother as a Predictor.**

Antecedent	Consequent								
	M <sub>1</sub> (Bonding needs)			M <sub>2</sub> (Emotional intimacy)			Y (Shame)		
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
X <sub>1</sub>	.01	.06	.856	.04	.05	.395	.03	.09	.770
M <sub>1</sub>	–	–	–	.28	.04	<.001	–.11	.07	.147
M <sub>2</sub>	–	–	–	–	–	–	–.40	.09	<.001
Constant	4.88	.05	<.001	2.41	.20	<.001	6.33	.42	<.001
	$R^2 = .01, p = 0.856$			$R^2 = .13, p < .001$			$R^2 = .07, p < .001$		
	$F(1, 358) = 0.03$			$F(2, 357) = 26.13$			$F(3, 356) = 9.44$		

Note. X<sub>1</sub> = detachment from mother.

Therefore, results confirmed the relationship between the detachment that participants experienced during their coming out to father and their sexual shame is mediated by the emotional bonding they seek (RQ1) and emotional intimacy they have in their romantic relationship with another man (H2 supported), while rejecting H1 (direct effects). Further analysis with a separate regression model was conducted to see what explains most of the variance in the level of shame: This revealed that it was emotional intimacy with current romantic partner that best predicted the level of shame,  $b = -.39$ ,  $SE = .09$ ,  $p < .001$ .

### Discussion

The current work uniquely examined YMSM's shame about their desire for other men in relation to their relationships with two important sources of emotional bonds, those with parents and those with a romantic partner. This work is both descriptive in distilling the mechanisms of parental reactions to YMSM's coming out on their identity development, as well as prescriptive in identifying the potential for romantic love as an indirect path to mitigating the maladaptive effects of parental rejection on YMSM's shame about their sexual identity. Results revealed that for YMSM, rejection (emotional detachment) from their father in response to their coming out is indirectly associated with the level of shame through their emotional bonding and intimacy with their romantic partner. Specifically, the greater the detachment from *father* that YMSM had experienced after coming out, the greater the bonding needs they had in their romantic relationship. These romantic bonding needs, in turn, were associated with greater emotional intimacy with current same-sex romantic partner, which was then negatively associated with the level of shame surrounding their own sexual identity.

Our findings provide support for research that emphasizes the unique influence of fathers and the father-son relationship especially for YMSM in that fathers play a pivotal role in perpetuating the hegemonic masculinity norms, socially accepted sets of norms concerning masculine behavior or beliefs (Donaldson, 1993). Indeed, young gay and bisexual men were often found to expect that fathers would negatively respond to their disclosure of same-sex attraction (Jadwin-Cakmak, Pingel, Harper, & Bauermeister, 2015). Despite such negative expectations, if they were to decide to disclose to their father, it likely means that these young men made the hard choice to "bite the bullet" with significant emotional labor (with the hope of acceptance) to overcome the fear of the expected response from their father. Therefore, dashing YMSM's hopes of a positive reaction, negative or rejecting reactions from their father may have had an even more harmful impact on youths' ensuing identity (e.g., Baiocco et al., 2016). Therefore, our findings highlight the importance of parental acceptance, especially from fathers, in YMSM's well-being, both from an interpersonal (i.e., bonding in romantic relationships) and an intrapersonal (i.e., shame) perspective.

Meanwhile, it is worth noting that our results indicate that YMSM's shame is not directly associated with parental detachment alone, but can be mitigated by bonding needs in romantic relationships and emotional intimacy in that relationship. In the current work, greater emotional intimacy experienced by young men with their same-sex romantic partners mitigated the effects of their earlier experience of rejection (and detachment) after "coming out" to their father. Contrary to the classical tenets of attachment theory, that parental rejection in one's early life leads to insecure attachment relationships afterward (Bowlby, 1982), our findings suggest that the propensity of YMSM's bonding need with their same-sex romantic partner is rather motivated by the detachment experienced in their relationship with fathers. Our results reveal possible extensions and limitations in classical attachment theory in accounting for nonheteronormative identities and the common "shocks" youth experience with their parental reactions to coming out. Parental rejection does not categorically result in romantic insecurity. Rather, parental detachment may encourage sexual minority individuals to find solace and secure attachment in the embrace of their romantic partners as adults. Taken together, our findings suggest there is a greater need to support the mental and physical health of YMSM by understanding the mechanisms underpinning emotional bonding and intimacy in identity development.

### ***Limitations and Future Direction***

Despite the promising findings of the current work, several limitations that can be strengthened through future research should be noted. First, the findings are based on a sample of YMSM who had a primary male partner at the time of participation in this study. Due to the homogeneous nature of this sample, our findings may not be generalizable to those not in a primary relationship (e.g., in casual relationship[s], no relationship at all). Moreover, within the age range of this sample (i.e., young adults/adolescents), youth tend to have multiple (casual) partners before settling into a monogamous relationship (Miller et al., 2013). Therefore, we would welcome future work to test the generalizability of the current findings to other populations of sexual minority youth.

Second, it is worth noting the age of data used in this study. Given that the data we analyzed were collected in 2012, social norms and expectations surrounding YMSM's sexual identity disclosure and relationships may have changed in recent years, especially in light of the media landscape with the surge of social media use. For instance, recent studies suggest that social media such as Instagram, Twitter, and TikTok serve important platforms for sexual minority youth to explore their identity as well as to connect with friends and community (Hanckel, Vivienne, Byron, Robards, & Churchill, 2019; The Trevor Project, 2019) that they consider as "judgment-free zones" (Leventry, 2019, para. 5). Although Craigslist and Tumblr are still widely employed in recruiting samples of sexual minority youth (e.g., Miller-Perusse, Horvath, Chavanduka, & Stephenson, 2019), our findings observed from these sampling sources may not reflect the most up-to-date relationships. Noting the changes in media affordances for the YMSM community, future studies may expand the recruitment advertisements to more inclusive social media that provide "finding, building, and fostering support" (Hanckel et al., 2019, p. 1262) affordances for sexual minority youth.

Lastly, the current work may be limited by the measurement validity of the key concept of detachment, partially due to the retrospective nature of self-report as well as the use of secondary data analysis in developing indicators. Certainly, a study of child development would be best equipped with a longitudinal examination from childhood to adulthood. That said, it would not be feasible to recruit a sample of youth who had not yet come out and have them report on the perceived emotional intimacy with their parents before and after coming out (Carnelley et al., 2011). Further, as the current work involves a secondary data analysis, the scales for measuring emotional intimacy with parents before and after coming out may have not been ideally suited to creating detachment measures. Future work should develop items and scales with rigorously designed measurements to more precisely capture the changes in parent-child relationships before and after coming out to parents.

### ***Implications and Contributions***

Perhaps most critically, the current work provides initial support for the possibility that YMSM's close romantic pair bonding may potentially repair and mitigate the shame surrounding their sexual identity. Our findings suggest that the pair bonding in romantic relationships may not only mitigate the damaging effects of parental detachment, but also mitigate the experience of sexual shame with which YMSM or other sexual minority youths may struggle. Based on our findings, targeted interventions may focus on enhancing YMSM or other sexual minority youth's capacity for intimacy building toward emotionally close relationships

(e.g., through open communication and negotiated safety with romantic partners; Eisenberg, Bauermeister, Pingel, Johns, & Santana, 2011). Such interventions with acknowledging and incorporating the role of romantic intimacy may not only optimize YMSM's mental health (e.g., reduced shame) but also help minimize YMSM's exposure to other health risks. Therefore, a greater understanding is needed of how researchers might support the development and maintenance of YMSM intimacy and bonding in their close relationships to optimize the emotional well-being and overall health of this population.

With all that has been said about romantic partners, society, and health practitioners, we conclude with a discussion on the role of parents, who may arguably hold the most foundational key to their children's well-being—in childhood and adulthood. Parental rejection after coming out can come in many forms of reactions, ranging from being disowned to being "laughed off." Regardless of the degree of rejection, parental rejection is painful and confusing to youth navigating the process of learning about their identity. While this current work has focused on parental rejection, this work would be rendered moot with widespread parental acceptance of their child's identity disclosure. Such positive responsiveness and acceptance from parents are foundational to secure attachments, exerting pervasive lifetime effects on sexual minority youth's positive relationships and self-regulatory abilities (Mikulincer et al., 2003). While the current work contends that romantic love and intimacy may mitigate some of the maladaptive effects of parent rejection after coming out, parents of YMSM have the capacity to be a *primary source* of love, security, and acceptance for their children. YMSM's emotional security and emotional belongingness in their interpersonal relationships would represent a foundational step toward a more inclusive and healthy society. Therefore, it would logically and theoretically follow that societal inclusivity must be emphasized to promote more secure intimacy and bonding among YMSM.

Finally, we close by noting that YMSM represent many intersections of identity, such as race, class, and gender—thus, the YMSM population should not be considered a monolithically identical one (Allan & Westhaver, 2018). YMSM by definition are not technically gay, and coming out represents a critical step in the development of their self-identity. Importantly, YMSM have differing experiences with parents, such as in support or availability, that are grounded in intersections with class and race. Future work should examine the differences in parental acceptance and emotional intimacy of YMSM across class and race to explore the potential systemic inequities that may impact the love and support they receive.

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