

Article

## **The Challenges Bisexual Husbands Face in Trying to Keep Their Marriage Together: A case Study in Malaysia**

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**Abstract:** Bisexual men who are married to heterosexual women and at the same time have alternative relationships with same-sex partners are an invisible community in society, especially in Malaysia. A marriage involving one of these non-heterosexual partner such bisexual men will only be known when a divorce or marriage annulment case is settled in court. In Malaysia, although there are statistics that showcase divorce or annulment of marriages, the reality is that there are still “mixed-orientation couples” who manage to maintain their marriages to this day. To maintain a marriage, of course, there are challenges faced by them, which are the focus of this study. A total of 15 informants who claimed to have a bisexual orientation and were legally married to a heterosexual woman were interviewed in depth. The results of the study are divided into two main themes, namely, internal challenges and external challenges. Internal challenges include unsatisfying sex life, controlling men-sex-men addiction, financial matters, and negative’s attitudes from wives, while external challenges only family in-laws involvement. Overall, the findings of this study are expected to be used by government agencies responsible for empowering families, such as the Department of Religion and the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development, will design and help married bisexual men navigate their distinct challenges, encouraging more fulfilling marital relationships. They can enhance their relationship, promote understanding, and assure the duration and happiness of their marriage by doing so.

**Keywords:** challenges; bisexual husband; mixed-orientation marriages; heterosexual wives; Malaysia

### **Introduction**

Marriage is a social institution that has been practiced across cultures and throughout history. It is a legally recognized union between two individuals, typically involving emotional, social, and economic commitments. Marriage is defined by sociologists as a socially recognized union that includes two or more individuals in what is considered a stable, durable arrangement that is often founded at least in part on some form of sexual intimacy (Crossman, 2019). Historically, marriage has been primarily associated with procreation, providing a stable environment for raising children, and ensuring the continuation of the family lineage.

In any marriage, there will definitely be challenges and conflicts happened. According to several studies, when there is disagreement in a mixed-orientation relationship, the origins of the conflict are the same as in heterosexual relationships. The most typical difficulties in husband-wife relationships are responsibilities, intimate relationships, communication, resolution of conflicts or differences of opinion, attitudes, and financial

management (Nur Faedah Musthaphar & Bahiyah Ahmad, 2022). However, certain challenges are particular to mixed-orientation marriages (Yarhouse, 2013).

In general, mixed-orientation marriages are heterosexual marriages in which one spouse experiences intense same-sex desire and the other does not. In these relationships, the heterosexual partner is most often the one who self-identifies as such, whereas the same-sex spouse may or may not self-identify as such (Buxton, 2001). Although it is impossible to determine the real lifetime prevalence rate of mixed-orientation marriage, Buxton (2001) estimated that up to 2 million lesbian, gay, and bisexual people are married today or have been married in the past among the adult population of the United States. According to Harry (1990), 42% of the study's self-identified gay and bisexual men had previously been heterosexually married.

In Malaysia, men who live traditional marriages while also engaging in intense same-sex desire are essentially invisible. A marriage involving one of these non-heterosexual couples such as homosexual or bisexual will only be known when a divorce or annulment case is settled in court. Although there are statistics that showcase divorce or annulment of marriage, the reality is they're still "mixed-orientation couples" who manage to maintain their marriages to this day (Mohd Rafizy et al., 2023). However, in Malaysia, the term is not familiar and seldom discussed because they do not accept homosexuals and bisexuals (Hanis Nabihah et al., 2018). To maintain a marriage, of course, there are challenges faced by them, especially non-heterosexual partners such as bisexual husbands, which are the focus of this study.

The task of remaining married is difficult. Having a spouse who is sexually attracted to and may have sex with another person of the same gender presents extraordinary cognitive and relational challenges, including dealing with misconceptions about sexual orientation and resolving conflicting personal, social, and religious attitudes toward homosexuality, same-sex behaviour, and the institution of marriage. To stay married, they must discover ways to meet each spouse's moral values as well as their sexual, emotional, and social demands. Aside from the tiny number of couples who remain married, the scarcity of knowledge about long-lasting marriages is explained by their obscurity. Bisexual husbands are often indistinguishable, especially if they keep hidden due to privacy concerns or a fear of being labelled and rejected, especially by their wives and family. Therefore, this study focuses on the challenges faced from the perspective of bisexual husbands to ensure that the marriage with the wife can be maintained.

## Literature Review

Overall, there is little research on heterosexual spouses and mixed-orientation married couples, particularly actual evidence on heterosexual husbands and bisexual-heterosexual couples. There is researchers such as Ross (1971), Latham and White (1978), Coleman (1985), Matteson (1985), Wolf (1985), Malcolm (2000), Buxton (2001, 2004), Lee (2002), Higgins (2002, 2004), Yarhouse (2003; 2006; 2009), Kort (2005), Pearcey (2005), Hernandez and Wilson (2007), Confer and Cloud (2010), Alessi (2008), Ben-Ari & Adler (2021), De Melo (2022).

According to Alessi (2008), Lee (2002), and Coleman (1985), sexual activity and sexual satisfaction in certain mixed-orientation couples diminish after disclosure for both partners. Men who were sexually active with men previous to marriage had more stable marriages, whereas husbands who are new to homosexual sex withdraw sexually and emotionally from their spouses (Bozett, 1982; Matteson, 1985). According to Corley and Kort (2006), Kort (2005), and Higgins (2002), some non-heterosexual partners have sexual encounters outside of the relationship and in secret. In a very religious sample, the majority of non-heterosexual couples acknowledged secret extramarital sex (Yarhouse et al., 2009). Notwithstanding the religious sample's assumed commitment to monogamy in principle, according to Ross (1990). When heterosexual women learn that their partner has had sex outside of the relationship, they frequently experience loss, social isolation, betrayal, and fear of stigma (Hays & Samuels, 1989). Some heterosexual women report feeling sexually undesired (Yarhouse, Gow, & Davis, 2009).

Coming out is one of the most difficult situations that MOCs go through. The disclosure period can be challenging for the pair, especially for the heterosexual partner, who typically does not have the same amount of time to adjust as the non-heterosexual partner (De Melo, 2022). Many straight spouses go through various stages, according to Kort (2015) and Buxton (2014), including bewilderment, disbelief, fresh optimism, and resolution.

After disclosure, the heterosexual spouse may experience the same stages highlighted by Hernandez and Wilson (2007), such as confusion, preoccupation, feeling responsible, and disorientation.

In a study by Boss (1999), the straight female spouse experiences ambiguous loss, which is the feeling that their husbands are physically there but psychologically absent. Women are more forgiving than men of male partners who have sex with other women (Confer & Cloud, 2010), and wives report feeling humiliated over marrying a non-heterosexual (Kort, 2005), as well as shock, anger, disbelief, rage, and resentment before moving toward acceptance (Brownfain, 1985). In contrast, Yarhouse and Seymone (2006) found that understanding and acceptance were the most common partner reactions reported by a highly religious sample with intact marriages, even though this same sample also discusses repentance, overcoming same-sex attraction, and reparative therapy, which could be interpreted as a lack of understanding and acceptance.

The famous researcher like Buxton (2001 & 2004), reported several external factors can jeopardize mixed-orientation partnerships. Couples have reported negative interactions with members of their extended families and peers. Others who sought professional assistance said that their therapist did not comprehend the complexities of their problems (Alessi, 2008; Peterson, 2001). According to Alessi and Buxton (2001), limiting religious and moral attitudes about marriage endangers the viability of mixed-orientation relationships. Internalized and societal homophobia, represented as guilt, shame, denial, or self-hatred, has been proven to exacerbate the health of mixed-orientation relationships (Alessi, 2008; Ben-Ari & Adler, 2010; Coleman, 1989; Higgins, 2002, 2004; Lee, 2002; Malcolm, 2000; Pearcey, 2005; Ross, 1990). Some heterosexually married gay men can integrate their homosexuality with their married life, whereas others feel compelled to live a sort of double life, dividing their emotional, cognitive, and behavioral selves between family life and homosexual activity (Ben-Ari & Adler; Brownfain). Finally, some couples have expressed dissatisfaction with the LGBT community. According to Buxton (2001), several bisexual husbands reported opposition to staying married by gay men, while one woman was encouraged to divorce her bisexual husband by a lesbian therapist/minister.

In Malaysia, the present study is still not carried out because it is still considered taboo in the community. Furthermore, due to societal norms and cultural expectations where non-heterosexual couples disclose their true sexual orientation to their partners, is difficult to do. Therefore, this study only involves the perspective of bisexual husbands regarding the challenges they face in trying to maintain their respective marriages.

## **Methodology**

### **1. Research Design**

This study as a whole applied a qualitative research design to obtain data and information from bisexual men married to heterosexual women. Since this study is on a sensitive issue, the qualitative method is seen as one of the more practical approaches, since the researcher has the flexibility to interview the informants.

### **2. Sample**

All 15 informants were selected using the snowball sampling method. Among the characteristics of informants required in this study are i) bisexual men who have been legally married to heterosexual women; ii) still active in homosexual activities; iii) married for five years and above; iv) still hiding a homosexual identity; v) having children; and iv) still intending to maintain a marriage with a heterosexual woman. All these informants have been introduced through key informants.

### **3. Data Collection**

To gather data and important information for this study, in-depth interview techniques used. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were conducted to gain a thorough understanding of the challenges faced by bisexual husbands in terms of maintaining their marriage. In essence, the semi-structured interview technique combines the open or unstructured interview's flexibility with the structured interview's uniformity and direction. In this style of

interview, the questions the study informant will be asked must be predetermined by the researcher; nevertheless, the study informant and the researcher are free to come up with their replies to the open-ended questions.

#### 4. Data Analysis

The results of this study are analysed using the thematic method, where the researcher organizes the results of the interview session around several themes that have been established. All themes are explicitly designed to avoid issues. All data is presented both descriptively and narratively.

#### 5. Ethical Consideration

In terms of research ethics, after successfully finding informants, the researcher has sent information that includes consent documents to them. The participation of the study informants is voluntary. Informed consent was obtained before they were involved in this study. At the same time, the issue of the confidentiality of the information and the identity of the informant is also guarded and classified as confidential.

### Findings

#### 1. Informants Profile

This study involves 15 informants overall. The majority of the informants, 12 people, were between 30 and 35 years old, while three were between 27 and 29 years old. In this study, the informants have been married for five to eight years, and during this period, they continued to hide their sexual orientation (as bisexual) from their respective wives. In terms of the number of children, the average number of children was in the range of one to three throughout the marriage period. All data can be shown in table 1 below.

Table 1. Informants profil

Informant	Age (Year)	Duration of marriage (Year)	Number of Children
1	35	7	3
2	32	6	2
3	29	5	2
4	29	6	1
5	30	6	3
6	33	8	3
7	34	7	3
8	31	5	2
9	32	5	2
10	32	6	2
11	32	5	2
12	28	6	1
13	30	5	1
14	31	5	2
15	32	6	1

Source: Field of Study (2021)

#### 2. Challenges Faced by Married Bisexual Men

The results of semi-structured interviews about the challenges bisexual husbands face in keeping their marriages can be divided into two subthemes: (i) internal challenges and (ii) external challenges. Internal challenges are those that arise within the person or their partner, whilst external challenges are those that originate outside of their relationship.

## Internal Challenges

### a. Unsatisfying sex life with a partner

Sex is one of the factors that affect happiness and satisfaction in a marriage. According to Sukamto (2017), the sex factor has a great impact on the harmony of the husband-wife relationship. In addition to contentment and enjoyment, good sex will also increase the sense of mutual belonging and love between couples. However, if not fulfilled, sex can have certain negative effects. Among them are the occurrences of divorce, infidelity, and domestic violence as a result of the lack of a sex role in a household. Sex-related issues are among the leading causes of divorce, according to Persatuan Peguam Syarie Malaysia (PGSM). Sexual dissatisfaction and a lack of desire for sex on the part of either the husband or wife generate a crisis, which leads to the marriage's demise.

In mixed-orientation marriage, sexual activity and sexual satisfaction decline for both partners after disclosure (Alessi, 2008; Lee, 2002; Coleman, 1985). Once a spouse finds out that a husband or wife is bisexual, gay, or lesbian, sexual adequacy becomes an issue. Many feel rejected sexually and may wonder if they were not enough of a woman or a man to maintain their partner's sexual attraction to them. In this study, sexual dissatisfaction reported by bisexual husbands is caused by refusal from each partner. One of the main causes of this problem is the wife's refusal to have an intimate relationship. The factors of the wife working, maintaining the physical body, lack of sexual knowledge, and health issues are among the causes that cause the informants involved do not receive the treatment that a husband expected from his wife. Their responses have been included in the transcripts and excerpts below:

*"In the early days of marriage, my wife didn't work, when I was told to always serve, there was no problem. But when he started to get a job, he was less helpful. If you ask, there's a reason, just be tired, don't worry. Sometimes I feel neglected" (Informant 5)*

*"My wife is very concerned about her looks, especially her body shape, as she sells beauty products. He also insists on dieting and taking supplements to lose weight. I feel happy with my partner, but it's not a perfect situation because rarely wants to have physical relations with me. She once stated that he no longer wishes to have children." (Informant 4)*

*"Of course, I have high expectations when it comes to sex. Yes, everyone has this passion. Maybe because of previous experience, therefore I'm hoping for the kind of fulfilment expected while we're together. But when my wife refuses to share in the way that I wish for, I am also disappointed." (Informant 9)*

*"I didn't even force my wife to treat me after finding she had a chronic illness. Yes, she is sick, and I understand. I don't want to risk my health or make things tough for her in the future. "I don't want to have to endure, even if I sometimes feel lonely." (Informant 5)*

### b. Controlling men-sex-men addiction

Sexual orientation is a fundamental aspect of a person's identity and is not something that can be changed or controlled. Bisexual individuals are attracted to both men and women, and this attraction is a natural part of who they are. For married bisexual men, their sexual orientation does not change simply because they are in a committed relationship with their wives. Past experiences, particularly as a bisexual or homosexual before marriage, make it difficult for them to control MSM addiction even after being married for several years. The persistent dread of being discovered by their spouse or suffering societal judgment in Malaysia can amplify these unpleasant emotions, producing a cycle of addiction and distress.

According to Smith (2018), these internal conflicts can drive individuals to seek validation and acceptance through engaging in same-sex encounters. Additionally, societal stigma and discrimination against bisexuality can further exacerbate these struggles (Jones, 2016). Several informants in this study reported to continuing engage in MSM for sexual fulfilment. Same-sex experiences may give married bisexual men with emotional

fulfilment and a sense of connection that they may lack in their marriage due to issues such as unsatisfying sex life, negative wife behaviour, and so on. Furthermore, numerous informants claimed that controlling MSM addiction is challenging due to the influence of close friends, as well as accessibility and availability.

*"I've tried to change many times, but it's not easy. Add to that the fact that I can never obtain what I want when I'm with my wife. I will feel more grateful and content when I am in a relationship with a man than when I am with my wife." (Informant 3)*

*"I have no control over it." I used to want to change at the start of my marriage, but I couldn't. There is a sense of shame in myself, but I can't stop it, especially since I'm not satisfied with my connection with my wife." (Informant 12)*

*"At the start of my marriage, I stopped. Remember to turn away, but after a few years, I can't keep my sexual desires in control. I open Tindr apps when I'm away from home just to get that satisfaction. I'm not sure, I'm trying to stop, it's just that the need to play occasionally comes unexpectedly" (Informant 14)*

### c. Poor financial management

Financial matters are frequently a source of stress and tension in relationships around the world, and married bisexual men are no different. According to Mariam Abd Majid et al. (2018), money concerns are the most significant contributors to marital strife. Finance is one of the most significant necessities that must be met, particularly by the head of the household or the spouse. One major issue is the rising expense of living. Couples are finding it increasingly difficult to manage their finances properly as the cost of housing, education, healthcare, and daily necessities continues to rise (Hafiz, 2021). This situation often leads to financial disagreements, stress, and even marital conflicts. Another issue is the lack of financial literacy. Many individuals enter into marriages without a solid understanding of personal finance management, budgeting, and investment strategies (Fadilah, 2016). This lack of knowledge can result in poor decision-making, leading to financial instability and can threaten the marriage relationship.

In this study, almost every participant admitted to having financial management issues. As a husband and parents, the bisexual males in the study confessed that saving is tough because each of them has numerous obligations such as children's expenses, school, rental house, car, wifi, and others. Some informants were in terrible positions, especially when the PKP among them was laid off and had to rely on savings to survive. Some people are willing to incur debt. Some are also willing to work part-time as grab food, food panda, or shoppeefood rider to supplement their income.

*"I admit that I have no permanent savings because I have a lot of bills to pay at the end of the month. Rent, car, postpaid, and children's necessary. My wife comes to assist, but she is struggling to save." (Informant 1)*

*"Before this, I had to stop working during covid. I had to become a Food panda rider in roughly six months. Needless to say, the reserves will be depleted within that time frame. I had to borrow from my siblings up until a certain point." (Informant 5)*

*"When I started a new job, I had to take my wife out to look for a rental house because the distance from the family's house is quite long. As a result, when it is released, the monthly commitment increases. You have to work part-time whether you want to or not, and the shop food rider is the easiest. I want to say tired is tired, but I also have to be strong for my family." (Informant 7)*

*"At this point, money is the most difficult challenge. The salary is low, and you have to find a part-time job in addition to working full-time. I'm also going to bring a grab". (Informant 8)*

#### *d. Negative attitude from wives*

A negative attitude from wives can indeed present challenges to maintaining a healthy and fulfilling marriage. It's essential to recognize that negative attitudes can arise from various sources, such as stress, unresolved conflicts, communication problems, or personal issue. Some of the negative attitudes include constant criticism, nagging, lack of appreciation, emotional withdrawal, controlling behavior, passive-aggressive behavior, constant negativity, refusal to communicate, and lack of empathy. Norhanisah and Raihanah (2016) discovered that attitudes that generate marital issues are difficult to address, hot-tempered, and inflexible. However, communication problems are among the most common and are cited as one of the primary reasons for a household breakdown in both heterosexual and mixed-orientation couples.

Poor communication occurred in this study such as avoiding, blaming others, punishing others, not being a good listener to the partner, not being honest, and preferring to keep silent, among the issues faced by bisexual husbands. Lack of communication because each person spends too much time on social media and does not spend enough time with family.

*"It's hard when you have an assertive wife. I admit that I was irritated when my wife began to block all of my hobbies, like playing futsal. I prefer not to play all the time, but what irritates me happens when I have a promise with friends and my wife refuses to allow me to go out. I'm fruit" (Informant 3)*

*"She never behaved well during the early days of our marriage." She begins to obstruct everything after a long period. What irritates me the most is that he can go out with her friends when she wants, but when it's my turn, she just complains. My wife occasionally hangs out and calls me to come home early." (Informant 11)*

*"I think it's normal for women to want to show off. However, if it is excessive, it is not possible because it may jeopardize my career's reputation. I travel outstation frequently as part of my current job. Go here and there, sometimes only two days a week at home, my wife is always obviously out of place, even though I'm hunting for money." (Informant 13)*

### External Challenges

#### *a. Family in-law involvement*

Family in-law involvement can be challenging for married couples as well. They might be the cause of tensions and disagreements between husband and wife. After marriage, both partners must adapt to their in-laws' family. However, in most circumstances, this adaptation is exhausting. They find it hard to adjust, let alone embrace, new norms, values, culture, and way of life. When they live with their in-laws, the situation gets even more dire. According to Cherni (2013), some in-laws enjoy gossiping, criticizing, sneering, blaming, and discrediting their son-in-law. Some people even compare their sons-in-law. This attitude will produce friction and put a lot of pressure on the couple. Four bisexual husbands in our study are in this circumstance. Their responses are included in the interview excerpt below:

*"We can't talk even though our mother is mature; in this situation, she is sometimes more immature than me. So that's where the conflict exists. As a result, the first five years are crucial." (Informant 1)*

*"The challenge is, how do we want to understand her mother, and how does her mother want to understand the two of us?" We're new, even though we've known each other for a long time, and we share a house in a certain way. In terms of eating, we are accustomed to doing so at times, but she is not. As a result, that can occasionally become a source of tension." (Informant 2)*

*"The way to mother-in-law took over direction of the home. I still felt she was good at first, but as she began intruding into our private lives, I grew uncomfortable. I tried to speak with my wife; I don't mind being reprimanded, but when everything is under control, I become angry. In her opinion, whatever I do is awful." (Informant 8)*

## Discussion

The goal of this research is to identify and investigate the difficulties that married bisexual men face in maintaining their marriage. The bisexual men in this study had been lawfully married to female partners for five years and had kept their true sexual orientation hidden. The study's findings are grouped into two major themes: internal challenges and external challenges. Internal challenges include unsatisfying sex life with partner, controlling men-sex-men addiction, poor financial management, and negative attitudes from wives. External challenge only includes family-law involvement. Overall, the majority of the findings in this study are consistent with prior studies on mixed-orientation marriage and heterosexual marriage (sexual unhappiness, poor communication, bad financial management, and hostility from family and peers) (Ross, 1971; Latham & White, 1978; Coleman, 1985; Matteson, 1985; Wolf, 1985; Malcolm, 2000; Buxton, 2001, 2004; Lee, 2002; Higgins, 2002, 2004; Yarhouse, 2003; 2006; 2009; Kort, 2005; Pearcey, 2005; Hernandez & Wilson, 2007; Confer & Cloud, 2010; Alessi, 2008; Ben-Ari & Adler, 2021; De Melo, 2022). However, certain challenges are particular to bisexual husbands in this study which is hard to control men-sex-men addiction.

Bisexuals, as is commonly known, are attracted to both the male and female sexes. In this study, all of the participants admitted to being aware of their sexual orientation as bisexual before marrying. This means they had prior relationship experience with male or female partners, including sexual relations. It is important to note, however, that sexual orientation, including bisexuality, is not inevitably associated with difficulties in managing sexual behaviours. Individual psychology, relational dynamics, personal beliefs, cultural conventions, and environmental influences are all elements to consider. This problem can be resolved in Western countries by getting expert help. A licensed therapist, counsellor, or mental health professional with experience in sexual health and behaviour can offer support, guidance, and appropriate interventions to help you deal with these issues constructively and healthily. It is critical to approach these discussions with delicacy and empathy and to avoid making assumptions about an individual's sexuality.

However, because bisexuality is less acceptable in Malaysia, they would endure stigma and discrimination and, at worst, will remain divorced. Bisexual people have no legal privileges as in Western countries. Furthermore, due to cultural and legal constraints, the support networks and resources accessible to LGBTQ+ individuals in Malaysia, especially married bisexual males, may be limited. Because of this lack of support, they may struggle to obtain expertise and tools to resolve marital concerns. Due to potential stigma and discrimination, married bisexual men in Malaysia may face difficulties in openly communicating their sexual orientation to their spouses. Fear of rejection or judgment might hinder honest discussions about their feelings and needs. Lastly, family and community pressures. In some cases, societal and familial expectations can place significant pressure on individuals to conform to traditional gender roles and expectations, potentially leading to conflicts within the marriage.

## Conclusion

Every marriage faces challenges and conflicts, whether heterosexual or mixed orientation. Due to societal guilt, emotional issues, and a lack of support, married bisexual men in Malaysia encounter various challenges in maintaining their relationships. Society must create a more welcoming and inclusive atmosphere that recognizes and respects different sexual orientations. It is hoped that government agencies responsible for empowering families, such as the Department of Religion and the Ministry of Women, Family, and Community Development, will design and help married bisexual men navigate their distinct challenges, encouraging more fulfilling marital relationships. They can enhance their relationship, promote understanding, and assure the duration and happiness of their marriage by doing so.

Thus, while some of the findings keep showing a similar pattern, this study can help to comprehend issues that are marginal in society, particularly in Malaysia. Future scholars must continue to do research on this type of issue since it can help many people, particularly in the field of social science, understand, add to current knowledge, and plan for dealing with and handling similar occurrences in the future.



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