Article

Bisexual Identity Concealment for Marital Harmony: Cultural and Religious Pressures in Malaysia

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Abstract: This study investigates the concealment of bisexual identity among married men in Malaysia, a country where homosexuality is both stigmatized and criminalized under Syariah law. The problem lies in the immense cultural, religious, and legal pressures that compel these men to hide their sexual orientation, leading to significant emotional and psychological challenges. The primary objective of this research is to explore how these men manage their bisexual identities while maintaining marital harmony within a conservative, heteronormative society. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 self-identified bisexual men married to heterosexual women. The data were analyzed through thematic analysis. The findings reveal that societal expectations, fear of divorce, and family reputation are key factors influencing their decision to hide their sexual orientation. Participants reported high levels of anxiety, guilt, and isolation due to the dual pressure of performing heteronormativity in public while concealing their true selves in private. This study contributes to understanding the challenges faced by bisexual men in mixed-orientation marriages in Malaysia, particularly the psychological toll of maintaining secrecy. The implications underscore the need for culturally sensitive mental health services and policy reforms to provide adequate support for bisexual individuals. Such interventions are critical to reducing stigma and promoting emotional well-being in conservative societies.

Keywords: Bisexual identity; mixed-orientation marriage: cultural: religious; Malaysia

Introduction

In conservative societies like Malaysia, where Syariah law and cultural norms firmly uphold heteronormativity, bisexual men in mixed-orientation marriages face the challenges in navigating their sexual identities. The legal and social consequences of disclosing a bisexual identity can be severe, including divorce, social ostracism, and potential legal repercussions under Islamic law. These pressures compel bisexual men to conceal their sexual orientation, often resulting in profound emotional distress, anxiety, and isolation.

The stigma associated with bisexuality is particularly pronounced in conservative environments. Research indicates that bisexual men often experience heightened levels of internalized stigma and depression, especially when they are not in relationships with men, which can lead to more excellent concealment of their sexual orientation (Feinstein et al., 2023; Schrimshaw et al., 2016). The act of non-disclosure is frequently a strategy for managing stigma, as bisexual men may fear negative repercussions from both their spouses and the broader

community (Schrimshaw et al., 2016; Schrimshaw et al., 2013). This concealment can exacerbate feelings of isolation and distress, as the constant vigilance required to hide one's identity serves as a significant stressor (Schrimshaw et al., 2013).

Moreover, the emotional distress of living in a heteronormative society can manifest in various mental health issues. Studies have shown that bisexual men report higher rates of anxiety and depression compared to their gay and heterosexual spouses, mainly due to the stigma they face (Bostwick et al., 2010). The intersection of cultural norms and legal frameworks in Malaysia intensifies these challenges, as the fear of legal repercussions under Syariah law can further discourage bisexual men from being open about their identities (Maatouk & Jaspal, 2020; Bostwick et al., 2010). This fear can lead to a cycle of concealment and emotional distress, as the need to hide one's sexual orientation can prevent individuals from seeking support or engaging in healthy relationships.

The implications of these challenges are profound. Bisexual men in mixed-orientation marriages may find themselves in a precarious position, balancing the expectations of their spouses and families with their own sexual identities. The lack of supportive resources tailored to the needs of bisexual individuals exacerbates their struggles, as many mental health interventions do not specifically address the challenging experiences of bisexual men (Feinstein et al., 2023; Bostwick et al., 2010). Consequently, the emotional distress stemming from this dual pressure can lead to significant mental health disparities, highlighting the urgent need for culturally sensitive support systems that acknowledge and address the complexities of bisexual identities in conservative societies.

Much of the existing research on LGBTQ+, Issues have concentrated on Western contexts, where legislative protections and social attitudes towards sexual minorities are more supportive. In contrast, little is known about how bisexual men in Muslim-majority societies, particularly those in mixed-orientation marriages, manage the tensions between personal identity and societal expectations. This gap in the literature highlights the need to explore the lived experiences of bisexual married men in Malaysia, where cultural and religious pressures intersect with legal constraints.

Literature Review

1. LGBTQ+ Chronology in Malaysia Post-Merdeka
Since Malaysia's independence in 1957, cultural, religious, and legal dynamics have shaped its stance on LGBTQ+ issues. Early post-independence years (1960s–1970s) saw little public discussion on LGBTQ+ topics, as nation-building efforts emphasized integration over diversity. Cultural and religious norms discouraged open acknowledgment of non-heteronormative identities, leaving LGBTQ+ individuals largely hidden from public discourse (Ahmad, 2020). The 1980s introduced heightened religious conservatism and Islamization policies, reinforcing a restrictive moral framework that criminalized same-sex relations under Syariah law, which reflected Malaysia's religious and cultural conservatism (Tan, 2021).

A turning point emerged in the late 1990s with the trial of Anwar Ibrahim, a political figure charged with sodomy in 1998. This case sparked public awareness of LGBTQ+ issues, though it often reinforced negative perceptions and reinforced the criminalization of LGBTQ+ identities (Weiss, 2007). The early 2000s saw a rise in advocacy through organizations like PT Foundation and Seksualiti Merdeka, which sought to support LGBTQ+ rights but faced significant opposition from the government and religious groups (Yee, 2012). Despite these challenges, these organizations raised awareness, even as social acceptance remained minimal.

In the 2010s, globalization amplified LGBTQ+ advocacy within Malaysia, but the government maintained stringent laws, such as the caning of two women in 2019 for same-sex relations—a move underscoring the influence of conservative norms (Goh, 2020; Amir, 2021). Social media has since become a discreet outlet for LGBTQ+ expression, offering spaces for community support even as public advocacy remains heavily restricted. While the socio-political landscape remains challenging, there is a slow-growing, quiet movement for LGBTQ+ inclusivity and recognition (Kassim et al., 2023).

2. Related Studies

Research consistently reveals that bisexual men face unique challenges when disclosing their sexual orientation, particularly in conservative societies where heteronormative norms are prevalent. Compared to gay men, bisexual men are often more hesitant to disclose due to anticipated stigma, social rejection, and potential family conflict, which can lead to anxiety, depression, and internalized homophobia (Durso & Meyer, 2012; Bostwick et al., 2010; Dyar & London, 2018). The stigma attached to bisexuality is distinct from that directed toward gay and lesbian individuals, complicating the mental health landscape for bisexual men (Feinstein & Dyar, 2017).

In conservative societies, where legal and social frameworks discourage open sexual orientation disclosure, bisexual men encounter heightened anticipated stigma and internalized homophobia, often resulting in mental health disparities compared to gay and heterosexual peers (Feinstein et al., 2023; Scandurra et al., 2020). Such environments create a cycle of concealment, as fear of social ostracism and familial rejection intensifies feelings of isolation and distress (Eady et al., 2010). This issue is particularly pronounced in non-Western contexts, where LGBTQ+ legal protections are minimal and societal attitudes remain restrictive, as seen in Malaysia's Syariah law, which criminalizes homosexuality and contributes to a culture of concealment (Peletz, 2013; Adil et al., 2023).

In Malaysia, cultural norms rooted in traditional Islamic values prioritize family honor and adherence to religious principles, which marginalizes non-heteronormative identities and promotes concealment among bisexual men in mixed-orientation marriages (Adil et al., 2023; Dyar et al., 2015). Bisexual individuals often experience dual stigma from both heterosexual and homosexual communities, leading to invisibility and a lack of supportive systems to ease the stress of disclosure (Dyar et al., 2015; Scherrer et al., 2015). However, research on bisexual men's experiences in mixed-orientation marriages remains limited, with most studies focused on gay men, leaving a gap in understanding bisexual men's unique challenges in conservative societies (Tan et al., 2021).

3. Theoretical Framework

Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory is a sociological perspective that examines human behavior as a performance. According to Goffman, individuals behave as actors on a stage, managing how they present themselves in different social settings. The front stage represents public life, where individuals perform roles that society expects, while the backstage is where individuals can retreat and express their true selves away from public scrutiny.

In conservative societies like Malaysia, where heterosexuality is strictly enforced as the norm, married bisexual men are compelled to perform their expected roles as heterosexual husbands and fathers on the front stage, adhering to societal, religious, and familial expectations (Goffman, 1959). This performance is critical to maintaining social harmony and avoiding negative consequences such as stigma, social ostracism, or legal penalties. The backstage, in contrast, allows these men to express their true bisexual identity through secretive MSM activities, which are kept hidden from family and society. The constant shift between these two stages: public conformity and private secrecy, creates significant emotional and psychological tension. Prior studies have applied Goffman's dramaturgical theory to understand how individuals in conservative contexts manage conflicting identities, particularly when facing legal and social repression for non-heteronormative behaviors (Boellstorff, 2015; Baral et al., 2011).

The dramaturgical theory provides a lens to explore how married bisexual men in Malaysia navigate their dual identities, balancing the expectations of family, religion, and society while maintaining secrecy around their sexual behaviors. This study uses dramaturgical theory to examine these men's roles in their public and private lives and the emotional distress of managing these performances.

Methodology

1. Research Design
This study adopts a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of bisexual, married men in Malaysia who conceal their sexual orientation. Phenomenology is particularly suited for this study as it allows for an in-depth exploration of how individuals experience, interpret, and make sense of their identities about societal pressures (Merriam, 2002). By focusing on the subjective experiences of the participants, this study seeks to uncover the complexities of bisexual identity management in a conservative Muslim-majority society.

2. Participants
15 self-identified bisexual men meeting the following inclusion criteria were recruited for this study:
  i.   Legally married to heterosexual women for at least three years.
  ii.   They have not disclosed their bisexual orientation to their wives.
  iii. Have children and intend to maintain a long-term marital relationship.
      The participants were selected to ensure that they had substantial experience in concealing their bisexual identities within the context of marriage and family life in Malaysia. Their reflections on this concealment's emotional and psychological impacts provide valuable insights into their pressures.

3. Sampling Method
Given the sensitive nature of the topic and the difficulty in accessing closeted bisexual men, a snowball sampling method was employed. This approach, where initial participants refer others from their social networks, is particularly effective in reaching hidden populations (Polit-O'Hara & Beck, 2006). While snowball sampling has limitations, such as the potential for sampling bias, it was deemed appropriate for this study due to the legal and cultural risks associated with bisexuality in Malaysia.
      Participants were recruited from various socioeconomic backgrounds to mitigate the risks of bias and ensure diverse representation. This approach helped ensure that the findings reflect the experiences of bisexual men across different segments of Malaysian society rather than being limited to a particular demographic group.

4. Data Collection
Data were collected through semi-structured interviews via Zoom or telephone to ensure participant anonymity and comfort. Each interview lasted between 40 minutes and 1.5 hours, allowing participants to share their experiences in detail. The semi-structured format provided flexibility, enabling participants to focus on the aspects of their lives that were most relevant to them while also allowing the interviewer to explore key themes as they arose. The interview questions covered a range of topics, including:
  i.   Personal experiences of being bisexual and married.
  ii.   Reasons for non-disclosure of sexual orientation.
  iii. Perceptions of cultural, societal, and religious norms.
  iv.   Concerns about potential reactions from spouses and family.
  v.   Coping mechanisms and support systems.
      All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' informed consent, and the recordings were transcribed verbatim. Personal identifiers such as names, locations, and workplaces were removed from the transcripts to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the participants.

5. Data Analysis
The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a qualitative approach that allows researchers to identify and interpret patterns and themes within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The study followed several vital steps:
  i.   Familiarization: The researcher read and re-read the interview transcripts to comprehensively understand the data.

ii.   Coding: A line-by-line coding process was used to identify significant statements and concepts within the transcripts. Codes were initially generated based on recurring themes such as "fear of divorce," "religious pressures," and "family reputation."

iii.   Developing Themes: The codes were grouped into broader categories, and key themes emerged through iterative analysis. These themes captured the emotional and psychological experiences of the participants, particularly about the concealment of their bisexual identities.

iv.   Member Checking: To enhance the credibility of the findings, summaries of the analysis were shared with participants to ensure that the themes accurately reflected their experiences.

6. Ethical Consideration

Throughout the study, rigor and ethical standards were thus adhered to. Anonymous personal identifiers were used to protect confidentiality, and all participants provided informed consent. The study recognizes the potential limitations of utilizing snowball sampling, such as the chance of sampling bias. Still, it suggests this was imperative due to the legal and cultural restrictions on LGBTQ+ concerns in Malaysia. These limitations provide some critical context for the results of this study. The complete nature of the obtained data contributes to the rigor and validity that could have been challenging to get.

Findings

The findings revealed several key themes that illustrate the challenges faced by bisexual, married men in Malaysia as they conceal their sexual orientation. These themes highlight the complex interplay between personal identity, societal expectations, and cultural norms, emphasizing non-disclosure's emotional and psychological distress.

1. Fear of Divorce and Social Stigma

One of the dominant concerns expressed by participants was the fear of divorce. Many participants felt that disclosing their bisexuality would lead to marital breakdown, with potential legal and social ramifications. Divorce in Malaysia is not considered a private matter; it often involves the extended family and broader community, making disclosure a threat not only to their marriage but to their reputation and social standing.

> *" Talking about my bisexuality is made so much more complicated because I know it would ruin my marriage. In Malaysia, divorce is not a private affair; it would be a national scandal"* (Participant 2)

> *"If my wife knew about my bisexuality, it is never just the two of us here (in Malaysia). It includes my family, your community, and the law"* (Participant 4)

Based on the informant's statement, the fear was closely linked to concerns about social stigma. Participants worried that coming out as bisexual would lead to public judgment, ostracism, and a tarnished family reputation. The fear of being labeled immoral or deviant further reinforced their decision to remain silent.

2. Religious and Cultural Pressures

Religious and cultural expectations also played a significant role in the participants' decisions to disclose their bisexuality. In Malaysia, Islamic teachings strongly oppose homosexuality, and participants were keenly aware of the religious consequences of revealing their orientation. Many participants internalized these spiritual values, creating a deep sense of guilt and conflict between their faith and their sexuality.

> *"Being open about my sexuality is not an option in Malaysia. The religious and cultural framework is clear: homosexuality and bisexuality are unacceptable."* (Participant 3)

> *"There is a constant internal battle between being true to myself and being a good Muslim, husband, and father. Society expects me to conform, and I do not want to disappoint my family or my religion." (Participant 7)*

Cultural norms surrounding family honor also reinforced the pressure to conform. Participants expressed concerns about the shame that would be brought upon their families if their bisexuality were revealed, further complicating their internal struggles.

3. Inner Conflict and Emotional Distress

The emotional distress of concealing bisexuality was a recurring theme. Participants frequently described feelings of isolation, guilt, and depression. Many felt that they were living separate lives, public and private and that maintaining this facade was emotionally exhausting. The constant need to manage their identities contributed to significant mental health challenges, including anxiety and depression.

> *"I feel like I am living two lives, one that my family sees and another that's hidden away. It is exhausting, and sometimes I do not even know who I am anymore."* (Participant 9)

> *"The stress of hiding my true self has affected my mental health. I struggle with depression, but I cannot talk to anyone about it because they would not understand."* (Participant 12)

4. Family Reputation and Honor

In Malaysia, family reputation plays a central role in shaping social expectations. Participants were particularly concerned about how their bisexuality would affect their families' standing in the community. They expressed fear that coming out would not only tarnish their reputation but also bring shame to their parents, children, and extended family members.

> *"In Malaysian culture, family comes first. If I came out, it would not just affect me—it would tarnish my family's name, and that is something I cannot allow."* (Participant 11)

> *"There is so much at stake—my parents' reputation, my children's future. Coming out just is not an option."* (Participant 15)

5. Limited Support and Visibility of LGBTQ+ Issues

Participants highlighted the lack of support available for bisexual men in Malaysia. Many felt there were no safe spaces to discuss their struggles or seek help. The invisibility of LGBTQ+ issues in Malaysian society compounded their feelings of isolation, as there were few resources or support systems to help them navigate their dual identities.

> *"There is nowhere to turn. The LGBTQ+ community is invisible here, and even if I wanted to seek help, it feels like there is no one to talk to"* (Participant 5)

> *"There are no support groups that understand what I am going through as a married bisexual man. The isolation is unbearable"* (Participant 13)

Discussion

This study discusses the hidden difficulties these men have when concealing their sexual orientation to maintain marital stability. The in-depth interviews revealed several critical themes, including fear of divorce and legal consequences, societal and religious pressures, concern for familial reputation, and a lack of support for the LGBTQ+ community.'

Participants consistently performed heteronormative roles in public (front stage) to conform to societal expectations, while privately (backstage), they concealed their bisexual identities. This dual performance, a core element of Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory, caused significant emotional distress. The constant tension between their public and private selves led to exhaustion, guilt, and anxiety.

Secrecy emerged as a key identity management strategy, driven by the fear of social stigma, family dishonor, and legal repercussions. Participants avoided accessing healthcare services out of fear of being outed, which mirrors findings from previous research (Schrimshaw et al., 2016; Ribeiro-Gonçalves, 2023). The broader implications of this secrecy are evident in the psychological toll, as these men experience heightened isolation, depression, and anxiety, exacerbated by the lack of supportive environments in Malaysia.

The findings of this study align with several previous works that highlight the profound psychological impact of hiding bisexuality due to societal pressures. Schrimshaw et al. (2016) emphasize the mental health challenges associated with bisexual identity concealment, particularly anxiety and depression, resulting from fear of stigma and social rejection. Similarly, Benoit and Koken (2012) discuss how bisexual men in relationships with women often engage in dual identity performance, which is emotionally exhausting. In both cases, the constant pressure to conceal one's identity leads to significant mental health concerns.

However, this study extends previous research by emphasizing the unique religious and legal constraints specific to Malaysia, which adds another layer of complexity. In Malaysia, bisexual men not only face social stigma but also contend with legal ramifications under Syariah law, which criminalizes homosexual acts. This legal threat intensifies their need for secrecy, as even healthcare interactions could expose them to potential prosecution. This is distinct from Western contexts, where bisexual men may face social stigma but are less likely to encounter legal persecution (Benoit & Koken, 2012; Schrimshaw et al., 2016). The intersection of cultural norms, religious obligations, and legal frameworks in Malaysia creates a more hostile environment for bisexual individuals, further compounding their emotional distress.

Goffman's theory of stigma (1963) provides a valuable lens through which to understand how bisexual men in Malaysia navigate these pressures. While many Western studies, such as Balsam & Mohr (2007), explore the psychological costs of "passing" as heterosexual, this study illustrates how Malaysian bisexual men must carefully perform their heteronormative roles in a context where non-conformity is not just socially punished but also legally sanctioned. The constant performance of heteronormativity places significant emotional strain on the participants, with many reporting feelings of isolation, depression, and anxiety as a result of the double life they are forced to lead.

Moreover, while studies like those by Muñoz-Laboy et al. (2014) discuss the role of secrecy in managing bisexual identity within healthcare settings, the participants in this study face additional religious constraints. The internal conflict between their sexual orientation and Islamic teachings, which strongly oppose homosexuality, contributes to heightened feelings of guilt and shame. This religious pressure is a critical aspect of the Malaysian context, setting it apart from similar studies conducted in less religiously conservative environments.

Goffman's theory of stigma (1963) provides a valuable lens through which to understand how bisexual men in Malaysia navigate these pressures. While many Western studies, such as Balsam & Mohr (2007), explore the psychological costs of "passing" as heterosexual, this study illustrates how Malaysian bisexual men must carefully perform their heteronormative roles in a context where non-conformity is not just socially punished but also legally sanctioned. The constant performance of heteronormativity places significant emotional strain on the participants, with many reporting feelings of isolation, depression, and anxiety as a result of the double life they are forced to lead.

The findings suggest that the emotional toll of performing dual identities contributes to significant mental health challenges among bisexual married men in Malaysia. Participants reported feelings of isolation, depression, and anxiety stemming from the pressure to conceal their true selves. The lack of supportive spaces for LGBTQ+ individuals in Malaysia exacerbates these struggles, leaving bisexual men without the resources needed to cope with their emotional burdens. Mental health interventions that acknowledge the complexities of identity performance are essential. Culturally sensitive counseling services that provide a safe space for bisexual men to express their true identities are urgently needed. These services must be designed to support individuals navigating the tensions between societal expectations and personal authenticity.

Conclusion
This study provides a nuanced understanding of how bisexual married men in Malaysia navigate the concealment of their sexual orientation within a conservative, Muslim-majority society. By applying Goffman's dramaturgical theory, the research sheds light on the complex dynamics of identity performance, revealing how these men balance their public and private personas to conform to societal expectations while managing the emotional toll of secrecy. The findings highlight the significant psychological burden faced by bisexual men who must conceal their identities to maintain marital harmony and family honor. The study emphasizes the need for culturally sensitive mental health services and policy reforms to address the unique challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in Malaysia. Creating safe spaces where bisexual men can seek support without fear of reprisal is critical to improving their mental health and wellbeing. By contributing to the growing body of literature on sexual identity management in conservative societies, this research underscores the urgent need for interventions that promote acceptance and reduce the stigma surrounding bisexuality. The study's implications extend to mental health professionals, policymakers, and LGBTQ+ advocates, offering critical insights for fostering a more inclusive environment for marginalized individuals in Malaysia.

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this study. All opinions and interpretations presented are solely those of the authors and have not been influenced by any external funding or affiliations.

Informed Consent: Informed consent was obtained from all participants before their inclusion in the study. Participants were provided with complete details about the purpose of the research, their role in the study, and their right to withdraw at any time. All efforts were made to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the participants throughout the research process.

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