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Communication Strategies of Bisexual Men in Mixed-Orientation Marriages in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Mixed-orientation marriages (MOMs), where one partner identifies as a sexual minority, present complex relational and psychological challenges particularly within conservative, religiously governed societies such as Malaysia. Bisexual men in these marriages must negotiate their sexual identities while conforming to heteronormative expectations, religious norms, and cultural silence surrounding non-heterosexual orientations. This study investigates the communication strategies employed by bisexual men to manage their identities and sustain their marital relationships within such constraints. Using a qualitative research design, in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 self-identified bisexual men in heterosexual marriages across multiple regions in Malaysia. Thematic analysis was guided by Goffman's dramaturgical theory, which conceptualizes social life as a series of performances structured through frontstage and backstage dynamics. The findings reveal five key communication strategies: (i) concealment, (ii) non-verbal communication, (iii) conflict avoidance, (iv) selective disclosure, and (v) digital communication. These strategies serve as identity management tools through which informants balance personal authenticity with marital harmony in a high-stigma environment. This study contributes to scholarship on identity negotiation, communication, and LGBTQ+ experiences in non-Western contexts, while also extending Goffman's dramaturgical theory into the domain of sexual identity concealment within traditional marital institutions. The findings underscore the emotional significance of digital platforms, the need for stigma-sensitive mental health services, and the importance of culturally responsive support for bisexual men navigating marriage under moral and legal scrutiny. Future research should include longitudinal inquiry and explore the perspectives of heterosexual spouses to provide a more holistic understanding of mixed-orientation marriages in Malaysia.

Keywords: *Communication strategies, mixed-orientation marriages, identity management, bisexual men, Malaysia.*

INTRODUCTION

Mixed-orientation marriages (MOMs) refer to marital unions in which one partner identifies as part of a sexual minority such as gay, lesbian or bisexual while the other identifies as heterosexual (Din et al., 2018; Yarhouse & Kays, 2010). Although often underrepresented in public discourse, global estimates suggest that over two million individuals are currently in MOMs (Buxton, 2011). Despite this, specific data on bisexual individuals within such unions remain limited, reflecting the broader issue of bisexual erasure in academic research and public health narratives (Bostwick & Dodge, 2019; McLean, 2018). According to the American Psychological Association (2021),

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bisexuality is defined as the capacity to experience attraction to more than one gender. It represents a significant component of the sexual minority population, yet remains one of the most misunderstood and marginalised identities within that group.

Bisexual men in MOMs face layered challenges at the intersection of masculinity, secrecy, fidelity and identity management (Dalin et al., 2024; Adler & Ben-Ari, 2017; Matthews et al., 2024). Internalised stigma and the pressure to conform to heteronormative marital scripts have been shown to affect their emotional and relational well-being. These men frequently experience marginalisation in both heterosexual and LGBTQ+ communities, resulting in social invisibility and a lack of targeted support (Rodríguez-Roldán, 2020; Shaikh et al., 2024; Lin & Hwahng, 2024).

While research from Western contexts suggests that open communication, negotiated boundaries and selective disclosure can support MOM stability (Riggle et al., 2016) such communicative dynamics remain significantly underexplored in non-Western societies. In Malaysia, bisexual men navigate their identities under stringent socio-religious constraints that criminalise same-sex conduct under both Section 377A of the Penal Code and Syariah law (Dalin et al., 2024; Chua, 2021). Legal risks, familial expectations and religious obligations often compel these individuals into heterosexual marriages to preserve social legitimacy (Dalin et al., 2024). The broader Southeast Asian media environment further exacerbates stigma against sexual minorities by aligning reporting with dominant ideological positions. For instance, Indonesian media outlets such as *Republika.co.id* frame LGBT identities as deviant and threatening to national-religious values, in contrast to *Tempo.co*, which adopts a more human rights-based framing (Syam et al., 2021). These divergent media narratives demonstrate how ideology informs public discourse, shaping the conditions under which bisexual men experience and negotiate their identities.

However, these unions frequently result in psychological distress, emotional suppression and identity concealment due to the persistent stigmatisation of bisexuality (Dalin et al., 2024; Izutsu & Tsutsumi, 2024). Although some Malaysian studies have explored the experiences of gay or homosexual married men (Subhi et al., 2014), very few have centred bisexual identity as a distinct analytical category. This has resulted in limited understanding of the unique challenges faced by bisexual men, particularly in terms of how they communicate and negotiate their identities within the structure of heterosexual marriage. The specific strategies these individuals use to manage dual roles under socio-religious pressure remain critically underexamined.

This study addresses this gap by exploring how bisexual men in Malaysia navigate communication in MOMs, a crucial but overlooked dimension of identity and relationship maintenance in high-stigma settings. Anchored in Goffman's dramaturgical theory, the study investigates verbal, non-verbal and digital communication strategies as identity management tools in high-stigma environments. The following literature review outlines existing work on communication strategies related to concealment, ambiguity and relational negotiation in both offline and online contexts, framing the basis for this inquiry.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research shows that communicative concealment is a dominant strategy among bisexual men in mixed-orientation marriages, particularly in settings where homosexuality is stigmatized and moralized (Dalin et al., 2024). Concealment extends beyond verbal silence; it encompasses non-

verbal suppression, controlled expressions and the strategic performance of heteronormative roles to regulate how identity is perceived. Yet, complete concealment is often unsustainable. Some individuals engage in selective communication, such as disclosing their identity in controlled or anonymous contexts, thereby managing visibility while maintaining psychological safety. This nuanced approach enables men to balance self-preservation with the need for emotional expression and support.

Notably, identity disclosure through communication does not always destabilize marriages. Some research suggests that in specific relational contexts, bisexual men disclose their identity to their spouses without triggering marital breakdown. These disclosures can lead to negotiated communication and revised relationship boundaries, including tacit acceptance or non-monogamous understandings (Jordal, 2011). However, such communicative outcomes are deeply shaped by cultural and gendered expectations. Although open communication is often associated with stronger marital resilience, it remains constrained by societal norms, shame, and fear of ostracization. In response, bisexual men often turn to indirect communication strategies such as topic avoidance, ambiguity, and humour to maintain relational stability while deflecting identity-related scrutiny (Adler & Ben-Ari, 2017; Buxton, 2004).

The concept of marital commitment itself becomes a site of communication negotiation in these unions. While some bisexual men adhere to monogamous arrangements, others manage discreet same-sex relationships outside the marriage, often justified as compartmentalized expressions of identity. Jordal (2011) highlights how communication is central to navigating these boundaries, especially in contexts where religious and cultural norms strictly define acceptable relational conduct. In Malaysia, where such norms promote rigid gender roles and moral conformity, bisexual men must deploy complex communication strategies to maintain their marital roles while managing the internal and external pressures of identity concealment (Wolkomir, 2009; Dalin et al., 2024).

Support systems both formal and informal are critical for sustaining the psychological well-being of these men. However, there is a lack of communication-based support structures tailored specifically for bisexual individuals in mixed-orientation marriages. This gap contributes to feelings of marginalization and bi-negativity and perpetuates the erasure of bisexual-specific realities in mainstream discourse. As Buxton (2006) and Charley et al. (2023) emphasize, creating inclusive and affirming communication environments is essential for reducing stigma and fostering resilience among bisexual men in high-stigma societies.

In this regard, digital identity management has emerged as a crucial survival strategy. Digital spaces offer opportunities for identity expression, emotional support, and community-building especially for those who face legal and social restrictions offline. Research shows that queer individuals in Southeast Asia increasingly turn to pseudonymous social media accounts, encrypted messaging apps, and online forums to engage in identity-affirming communication that is inaccessible in public or family spaces (Tuah & Mazlan, 2020; Wong et al., 2023). These platforms serve as curated, emotionally secure arenas where users can safely share experiences, seek advice, and construct authentic identities.

However, digital visibility also brings challenges. In Southeast Asia, queer digital expression is shaped by broader legal, religious and cultural conditions that affect safety, access, and representation (Maity, 2023). Civil society groups continue to advocate for LGBTQ+ rights,

but online engagement requires digital literacy and strategic navigation of censorship and surveillance (Hanckel, 2023). In Malaysia, these concerns are particularly heightened due to restrictive laws and widespread moral policing, making digital communication not just a tool but a necessary act of identity preservation and resistance (Kasmani et al., 2022; Sperfeldt, 2023). These online practices reinforce the central role of digital communication in maintaining private identity spaces for bisexual men, especially those in mixed-orientation marriages.

Despite the growing body of literature on LGBTQ+ identity and marital dynamics, bisexual men in mixed-orientation marriages remain critically underexamined, especially in Southeast Asian contexts. Much of the existing literature subsumes bisexual men under the broader MSM category or centres on gay male experiences, thereby overlooking the distinctive communication challenges bisexual men face in negotiating relational roles within heterosexual marital frameworks. Furthermore, the scholarship on mixed-orientation marriages tends to emerge from Western liberal contexts, limiting its applicability to religiously governed societies such as Malaysia. The unique communication strategies bisexual men employ from verbal ambiguity to digital segmentation have yet to be fully explored in relation to Malaysia's socio-legal and cultural landscape. This study fills these gaps by exploring the lived experiences and communication strategies of bisexual men in MOMs in Malaysia, with specific focus on identity negotiation, relational tension and socio-religious pressures.

THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

This study employs Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory, widely recognized in the fields of communication and sociology, to examine how bisexual men in mixed-orientation marriages perform and manage their identities in high-stigma environments. Dramaturgical theory conceptualizes everyday interactions as theatrical performances, where individuals present curated "frontstage" behaviours that align with social expectations and reserve their authentic selves for the "backstage." In communication studies, this metaphor has been fruitfully applied to explore how marginalized individuals manage impressions, regulate disclosures, and adapt performances across diverse social settings.

In the context of bisexual men in MOMs, dramaturgical theory allows for a nuanced exploration of how identity is communicated, concealed, and performed. On the frontstage, these men may adopt verbal and non-verbal strategies such as silence, ambiguity, humour and performative intimacy to conform to dominant heteronormative marital roles. These performances are often shaped by familial, religious, and legal pressures that demand the presentation of a heterosexual identity.

Backstage, which increasingly includes digital spaces, allows for greater authenticity. Hogan's (2010) extension of Goffman's theory to digital environments frames social media as curated exhibition spaces where individuals manage visibility and vulnerability. Platforms like anonymous chat groups or pseudonymous Twitter accounts become critical arenas for emotional release, identity affirmation, and community connection (Trepte & Reinecke, 2013; Wong et al., 2023).

Central to this theoretical framework are the concepts of impression management and audience segregation. Impression management involves the deliberate control of self-presentation to align with expected norms and avoid stigma (Goffman, 1959; Herek, 2009), while

audience segregation enables individuals to present different identities to different audiences such as acting as a heterosexual husband in one context and expressing bisexual identity in another (Schmitz et al., 2019).

In high-stigma societies like Malaysia, where Syariah law and dominant religious discourses suppress non-heteronormative identities, dramaturgical theory is particularly well-suited to unpack how bisexual men navigate dual roles. It provides a robust lens for analysing how communication with verbal, non-verbal and digital is strategically used to maintain psychological coherence and relational harmony. As such, this framework not only supports the study's analytic goals but also contributes to expanding dramaturgical theory within contemporary communication research.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design, utilising in-depth, semi-structured interviews to explore the lived experiences of bisexual men in heterosexual marriages in Malaysia. Qualitative methodology is especially suited for examining sensitive, complex phenomena such as sexual identity, communication strategies and stigma within conservative socio-religious environments. Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasise the value of such methods for eliciting rich, contextualised narratives, while Ross et al. (2018) and Frederick et al. (2022) assert that qualitative approaches are particularly useful in capturing the experiences of LGBTQ+ populations often marginalised in quantitative research.

Sampling and Recruitment

Snowball sampling, a non-probability sampling technique was employed to recruit 15 self-identified bisexual men who were legally married to heterosexual women and expressed an intention to preserve their marital relationships. As mentioned by Fredriksen-Goldsen et al. (2023), this method is especially effective for accessing hidden and marginalised populations, such as bisexual men in mixed-orientation marriages, who often remain obscured due to prevailing social stigma and cultural constraints. Initial informants were identified through key informants within LGBTQ+ community groups and online platforms, after which subsequent informants were recruited through referrals within trusted networks. This approach enabled the researcher to access a socially sensitive population in a culturally conservative setting.

The decision to recruit 15 informants was guided by the principle of data saturation, whereby data collection continued until no new themes or insights emerged, thereby ensuring analytical depth and thematic completeness (Colpitts & Gahagan, 2016). Based on Table 1, 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 had been married for five to eight years, and during this period, they had continued to hide their sexual identity (their bisexuality) 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.

Table 1: Informant profile

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

Data Collection

Data collection was conducted in two phases, beginning in September and concluding in November 2021, following the lifting of Malaysia's Enhanced Movement Control Order (PKPD). A subsequent phase of interviews took place from September to November 2021. Interviews were conducted either in person or via secure online video platforms, depending on informants' preferences and comfort levels. The use of online interviews was particularly necessary to accommodate concerns related to privacy, geographical dispersion and ongoing COVID-19 health considerations. This flexible approach also respected the socio-cultural sensitivities of informants. Each interview lasted between 60 to 90 minutes and was conducted in Bahasa Malaysia to ensure clarity, cultural relevance and linguistic comfort. Each informant was interviewed once, with follow-up only for clarification if needed.

A semi-structured interview guide was employed to explore key domains such as informants' communication strategies, identity concealment techniques, role negotiation within the marital context, and psychological coping mechanisms. Open-ended questions were designed to elicit rich, in-depth narratives while allowing flexibility for informants to introduce emergent themes based on their lived experiences. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent, transcribed verbatim and anonymised to ensure confidentiality and safeguard informant identities. Interviews were conducted either in private physical settings or secure online environments, depending on informant's preference, to maintain both comfort and discretion throughout the data collection process.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the transcribed data, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework and guided by Goffman's dramaturgical theory. Data were manually coded inductively to identify recurring patterns related to impression management, communication practices, and identity negotiation. Through a systematic and iterative process, themes were developed and refined to reflect the complexities of informants' lived experiences. These themes were organised around Goffman's conceptual distinctions between "frontstage"

and "backstage" behaviours, providing nuanced insight into how informants navigate the tension between public conformity and private authenticity. This analytical framework facilitated a deeper understanding of role-play, image management and identity compartmentalisation within the constraints of heteronormative marital expectations.

Reflexivity and Researcher Positionality

Researcher reflexivity was maintained throughout the study through the use of a reflective journal, which facilitated continuous self-examination of personal biases, assumptions, and emotional responses to informants' narratives. To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, bias management was further supported by methodological triangulation, incorporating peer debriefing, audit trails, and member checking. Select informants were invited to review and validate emerging themes, thereby ensuring the credibility and authenticity of the interpretations. Additionally, clear inclusion criteria and purposeful sampling strategies were employed to ensure diversity within the sample and to maintain transparency and rigour in the informant selection process.

Ethical Consideration

Given the highly sensitive nature of the research topic, rigorous ethical protocols were upheld throughout the study. Ethical clearance was formally obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia (UKM), ensuring compliance with institutional and national ethical standards. Informants were provided with a comprehensive information sheet and gave written informed consent prior to participation. They were assured of their right to withdraw at any stage without any repercussions. Anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained through the use of pseudonyms and secure data storage protocols. Consistent with the ethical guidelines outlined by Hswen et al. (2020) and Siegel et al. (2022), particular emphasis was placed on cultural sensitivity, emotional safety, and the use of non-stigmatising language throughout all stages of the research process.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Findings reveal five primary communication strategies: (i) concealment, (ii) non-verbal communication, (iii) conflict avoidance, (iv) selective disclosure and (v) digital communication. These strategies serve as identity management tools used to balance personal authenticity with marital harmony in a high-stigma environment. The analysis below elaborates on each theme and integrates relevant theoretical and empirical literature.

Communication Strategies for Concealment

Concealment emerged as a deliberate and emotionally charged communication strategy employed by bisexual men in mixed-orientation marriages to preserve marital stability and manage the threat of social, familial, and legal consequences. Guided by Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory, informants described how they actively constructed frontstage performances aligned with heteronormative marital expectations. These were not passive acts of silence, but intentional and dynamic communication practices involving impression management, expressive discipline, and audience awareness. Informants carefully regulated their verbal and

non-verbal behaviours to maintain a consistent presentation of themselves as respectable, heterosexual husbands. Informant 1 explained how verbal ambiguity was used to manage his interactions with his wife:

> When my wife discusses our future or enquires about previous relationships, I maintain ambiguity. I do not disclose any information regarding my past experiences or attractions to other males. I am aware that this would prompt her to question matters, and I wish to avoid creating any issues (Informant 1).

This excerpt illustrates how communication was strategically crafted to prevent disclosure and maintain relational stability. Such behaviour reflects audience segregation, a dramaturgical tactic where identity is managed according to the expectations of the immediate social setting. It also supports Dalin et al. (2024), who highlight how bisexual men in Malaysia often face intense normative pressure to perform the role of the ideal husband within a Syariah-influenced legal and cultural framework. Similarly, Adler and Ben-Ari (2017) argue that ambiguity in intimate relationships serves as a communication strategy that balances relational harmony with personal protection in high-stigma environments.

Beyond verbal restraint, concealment was also enacted through non-verbal regulation. Informant 8 described how he continuously monitored his behaviour during family and social interactions:

> I use caution in my behaviour with my wife. I ensure to avoid actions that could be misconstrued, such as gazing at guys in a manner that may appear overt. My body language, whether I am seated or standing, must remain neutral, particularly in the presence of others or during family events. It is an ongoing equilibrium challenge (Informant 8).

This illustrates expressive discipline, a central concept in Goffman's dramaturgy, whereby the individual must sustain control over physical presentation to uphold the integrity of the role being performed. As Goffman (1967) emphasized, the maintenance of face requires a careful calibration of behaviour to prevent breaches in social expectations, especially in relational settings governed by rigid norms.

The concealment strategies practiced by informants were marked by significant emotional labour. They were not simply hiding aspects of their identity; they were continually scripting, rehearsing, and performing within the roles expected of them as husbands and fathers. This echoes the findings of Charley et al. (2023) and Buxton (2006), who document how bisexual men in mixed-orientation marriages often experience psychological exhaustion as a result of sustained role compliance. Informants reported persistent anxiety, loneliness, and a sense of being unseen, underscoring the cost of maintaining a performance that only partially reflected their inner reality.

Importantly, these communication strategies were not rooted in internalized shame. Rather, they represented relational responsibility, a conscious effort to protect the emotional security of spouses and preserve family cohesion. According to Dalin et al. (2024), such

concealment operates as a form of situational agency, enabling individuals to fulfil expected roles while mitigating the risks of social exposure and legal sanction. Silence and performance, in this context, become survival-oriented communication tools that allow men to navigate complex relational landscapes without losing connection or legitimacy.

These findings also reinforce the ongoing invisibility of bisexual men, both within dominant heterosexual frameworks and within LGBTQ+ spaces where bisexuality is frequently misunderstood or erased. As noted by Adler and Ben-Ari (2017) and Charley et al. (2023), bisexual individuals often face a unique form of double marginalization, being socially overlooked in one community and politically peripheral in another. The use of concealment as a communication strategy reflects an attempt to manage this tension while preserving essential personal and relational ties.

From a dramaturgical perspective, concealment is not the absence of communication, but a contextually intelligent communicative act. It is deeply embedded in the performance of relational respectability and crafted to satisfy cultural scripts without exposing stigmatized truths. The men in this study were not deceiving their partners for selfish gain; rather, they were balancing self-protection and social obligation within a system that offers them little room for open negotiation. Their ability to sustain these roles, often without external support, reflects the resilience, complexity, and vulnerability of bisexual identity management in Malaysia's culturally and legally constrained marital environment.

Non-Verbal Communication as a Strategy for Upholding Marital Stability

In the absence of verbal disclosure about their bisexual identity, informants in this study relied extensively on non-verbal communication to affirm emotional closeness, demonstrate marital loyalty, and uphold the heteronormative appearance of relational stability. Framed through Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory, these non-verbal behaviours are best interpreted as deliberate frontstage performances, carefully crafted not only for spouses but also for extended family, children, and the wider community. Through choreographed gestures, facial expressions, bodily demeanour, and visible participation in domestic responsibilities, bisexual men sought to meet the cultural expectations of patriarchal masculinity while discreetly concealing conflicting aspects of their sexual identity. Informant 7 described how physical affection served as an intentional act of emotional communication:

> Occasionally, simply grasping her hand or embracing her after a taxing day holds significant value. This demonstrates my support for her and the strength of our relationship, without the necessity of verbal affirmation. Such actions convey more significance than mere words (Informant 7).

This response reflects expressive control, a central concept in dramaturgical theory, in which actors regulate their bodily communication to project sincerity and emotional engagement. In this context, non-verbal communication operates both as a symbol of relational commitment and as a subtle mechanism of concealment, enabling men to reinforce their marital role while shielding their bisexual identity. As Adler and Ben-Ari (2017) suggest, ambiguity

through behaviour can act as a protective relational tool, helping individuals preserve intimacy in high-stigma relationships without the risks associated with direct disclosure.

Beyond expressions of affection, non-verbal communication also encompassed visible engagement in household and caregiving duties. Informant 9 highlighted how his proactive involvement in family routines served as a communicative performance of marital responsibility:

> I prioritize assisting with the children's homework, preparing dinner collaboratively, and attending family gatherings. Demonstrating presence and engagement in our familial interactions conveys my commitment to this marriage. It provides her with reassurance and maintains a sense of normalcy (Informant 9).

This aligns with Buxton's (2006) observations that bisexual men in mixed-orientation marriages often overperform normative spousal behaviours in order to minimize suspicion and reaffirm heteronormative alignment. In Goffmanian terms, these actions are not neutral routines but scripted performances, enacted to reinforce the illusion of marital cohesion and to regulate identity presentation through behavioural consistency.

Several informants also described micro-level monitoring of posture, gaze, and facial expression to communicate attentiveness and emotional responsiveness. Informant 10 articulated this ongoing self-surveillance:

> I consistently remain conscious of my demeanour at home. I endeavour to seem attentive, such as by nodding as she speaks or smiling during discussions. It is nuanced, yet it demonstrates my attentiveness and engagement, so mitigating unwarranted doubts or enquiries (Informant 10).

This form of sustained non-verbal communication illustrates the emotional labour and hypervigilance required to maintain frontstage continuity. As noted by Charley et al. (2023), such efforts often lead to psychological fatigue, as individuals must balance authenticity with the need to avoid suspicion. These non-verbal strategies function as identity management tools, actively shielding vulnerable truths through controlled performance while reinforcing spousal trust.

Importantly, the use of non-verbal communication in this context is not secondary to speech, but a primary communicative modality. In environments where direct disclosure of bisexual identity may lead to relational rupture or moral condemnation, non-verbal communication becomes a vital resource for expressing connection and fulfilling marital expectations. As Dalin et al. (2024) emphasize, bisexual men in conservative societies often rely on behavioural conformity and impression management to maintain emotional bonds and social legitimacy.

Ultimately, these non-verbal practices enabled informants to communicate care, presence, and relational commitment while navigating the unspoken boundaries of concealment. From a dramaturgical perspective, they exemplify how identity regulation is performed through both verbal and embodied acts, calibrated to uphold the frontstage narrative of marital normalcy. In high-stigma environments like Malaysia, non-verbal communication becomes not only a tool

of emotional expression but also a strategic practice of concealment, conformity, and relational care affirming one's role while protecting one's truth.

Conflict Avoidance as a Proactive Communication Strategy

Conflict avoidance emerged as a deliberate and adaptive communication strategy employed by bisexual men in mixed-orientation marriages to preserve marital harmony and avoid triggering suspicion about their sexual identity. In marital contexts where open discussions of sexuality could lead to discomfort, confrontation, or even dissolution, informants reported using tactical communication to steer interactions away from potentially revealing topics. These avoidance strategies were not indicative of emotional detachment but rather formed part of the informants' ongoing relational labour, efforts to sustain psychological safety and protect intimate relationships from disruption. Framed through Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical lens, conflict avoidance can be understood as a tool for script maintenance, whereby the role of the "respectable husband" is performed consistently in front of key audiences.

One widely employed technique was the use of humour as a communicative deflection. Informant 3 explained how light-hearted jokes were used to steer conversations away from uncomfortable subjects:

> When discussions arise regarding LGBTQ+ rights or sexuality, I typically make a joke to alleviate the atmosphere. It is simpler to elicit laughter and proceed than to risk articulating a statement that may provoke enquiries (Informant 3).

This illustrates Goffman's notion of facework, where individuals manage impressions and preserve interactional smoothness in the face of identity tension. In this context, humour becomes a subtle communication strategy that protects relational equilibrium by preventing topics that could jeopardize the marital script from being discussed openly.

Another common communication strategy was ambiguity, where informants employed vague responses to deflect or delay deeper inquiries. Informant 5 described this intentional use of general language:

> If my wife enquires about my perspectives on sexuality, I provide ambiguous responses, such as, 'individuals should live their lives as they choose'. It serves as a means to circumvent an in-depth exploration of the subject and maintain harmony (Informant 5).

Such strategic ambiguity, as discussed by Adler and Ben-Ari (2017), serves to balance authenticity and protection in high-stigma relationships. It allows individuals to remain present and responsive within conversations without exposing themselves to emotional or relational risk. In the context of this study, ambiguity operated as a carefully crafted communication technique that allowed bisexual men to preserve intimacy while safeguarding personal identity boundaries. Redirection of conversation was another key tactic. Informant 6 shared how he actively steered dialogue away from sensitive subjects:

> As discussions begin to veer towards sensitive subjects such as LGBTQ+ matters, I promptly redirect the conversation to alternative topics such as work or dinner plans. It assists in diverting matters from potential sources of conflict (Informant 6).

Through Goffman's dramaturgical lens, this can be seen as audience management, where communication is strategically navigated to uphold the frontstage performance of marital normalcy. Rather than risking relational rupture or identity exposure, informants engaged in a choreographed pattern of conversational control—signalling presence and participation while avoiding confrontation.

Importantly, these strategies did not reflect avoidance in the conventional sense but constituted intentional communicative acts deeply embedded in the responsibilities of partnership. As Dalin et al. (2024) emphasize, bisexual men in conservative marital settings often bear the burden of reconciling personal authenticity with external conformity. In this regard, avoidance becomes a protective communication strategy, used not only for individual preservation but also to uphold emotional security within the marriage.

Similarly, Buxton (2004) highlights how bisexual men in MOMs use indirect communication approaches—such as humour and redirection—as a way to maintain relational connection without risking emotional safety or marital stability. These strategies were not passive silences but active decisions to modulate the flow of communication in order to retain marital cohesion.

Overall, the use of humour, ambiguity, and redirection illustrates the agency and strategic communication employed by bisexual men in navigating their dual roles. Within the framework of Goffman's dramaturgy, these practices constitute performance-based identity management, where frontstage interactions are tightly managed to preserve the heteronormative image of the committed husband while shielding backstage truths that remain unspoken. These strategies demonstrate how, in restrictive cultural contexts like Malaysia, silence and subtlety become crucial tools for managing visibility, safeguarding relationships, and maintaining a sense of self within the limits of heteronormative expectations.

Selective Disclosure as an Adaptive Communication Strategy

Selective disclosure emerged as a nuanced and context-sensitive communication strategy employed by bisexual men in mixed-orientation marriages to balance emotional expression with relational preservation. Unlike total concealment, which demands full suppression of one's identity, selective disclosure provided a more flexible mechanism through which individuals could regulate their visibility, deciding carefully what to share, with whom, when and under what circumstances. This practice created a communicative middle ground, allowing for authenticity without destabilizing their marital roles. Framed through Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory, selective disclosure can be interpreted as a strategy of audience segregation, wherein distinct social groups such as spouses, friends and online communities, receive tailored identity performances that align with the actor's strategic objectives.

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Most informants engaged in disclosure only within emotionally secure environments, particularly through anonymous online platforms or among highly trusted confidants. These backstage spaces offered psychological relief from the performance pressures of frontstage marital life, enabling moments of authenticity. Informant 11 shared how digital anonymity enabled open expression:

> There exists a web-based community where individuals similar to me exchange their narratives. This is the one place where I can candidly express my bisexuality. I employ anonymity and avoid disclosing any identifying information to prevent any impact on my marriage. In that environment, I can articulate what I cannot convey elsewhere (Informant 11).

This account aligns with Goffman's concept of the backstage, where individuals are freed from frontstage expectations and allowed to express suppressed aspects of the self. In Malaysia, where same-sex attraction is stigmatized and criminalized under both Syariah and civil law, such digital spaces become vital communicative lifelines. Studies by Tuah and Mazlan (2020), Wong et al. (2023), and Kasmani et al. (2022) have similarly shown how Malaysian queer individuals rely on pseudonymous online platforms for emotional support, spiritual reflection, and the formation of digitally mediated identities that remain hidden in physical spaces.

Selective disclosure also occurred offline, typically within small circles of close friends. Informant 15 described how disclosure to a trusted confidant allowed for expression without jeopardizing marital stability:

> I have chosen not to disclose this to my wife, as it would engender superfluous complications. I exercise caution in my management strategy. When I feel compelled to discuss it, I confide in a trusted buddy. I do not explicitly lie, but I maintain ambiguity in my marriage to evade suspicion. It concerns reconciling my authenticity with preserving the integrity of our relationship (Informant 15).

These accounts reflect a calculated and relationally sensitive use of communication that prioritizes both emotional safety and respect for existing relational structures. In this regard, selective disclosure becomes an act of discursive agency, whereby bisexual men manage identity-related risks while still pursuing connection and self-expression. As observed by Buxton (2006) and Charley et al. (2023), such communication is critical for bisexual men who often face erasure not only within heterosexual institutions but also within LGBTQ+ spaces that overlook bisexual-specific experiences.

Digital platforms, in particular, played a transformative role. Informants reported using encrypted chats, pseudonymous Twitter accounts, and private online forums to express themselves more freely. These platforms functioned as virtual backstage arenas, supporting asynchronous communication and audience control. For bisexual men in mixed-orientation marriages, this allowed the segmentation of their identity performances: one version for their wives and children, another for digital spaces, and yet another for close friends. As Goffman's

dramaturgy suggests, such audience segregation helps preserve psychological coherence and social legitimacy by preventing conflicting scripts from colliding.

Importantly, selective disclosure should not be interpreted as a form of deception. Rather, it is an adaptive communication strategy shaped by legal risk, cultural expectations, and emotional needs. Instead of equating silence with shame, this practice represents a sophisticated negotiation of selfhood within a restrictive environment. As noted in the works of Kasmani et al. (2022) and Charley et al. (2023), these forms of carefully controlled communication provide critical emotional safety for bisexual individuals whose full selves cannot be safely disclosed in all contexts.

Ultimately, the findings reveal that selective disclosure allows bisexual men to maintain relational commitments while protecting their sense of self. From a dramaturgical perspective, it is a communication strategy that manages multiple audiences, upholds the frontstage performance of heteronormativity, and creates emotionally safe backstage spaces for authenticity. In a Malaysian context characterized by high stigma and legal constraints, such strategies are not merely acts of concealment but essential tools of resilience, regulation, and relational care.

Digital Communication as a Key Strategy for Identity Expression

While selective disclosure often includes digital forms of expression, this section focuses specifically on how online platforms serve as distinct, emotionally sustaining spaces that facilitate identity coherence beyond interpersonal interactions. In settings where in-person disclosure could provoke moral judgment, social alienation, or legal repercussions, the online realm became a crucial backstage communication space, as conceptualized by Goffman (1959). Within these digital environments, informants were able to momentarily step away from their performed roles as heterosexual husbands and engage in expressions of self that would otherwise be suppressed in their frontstage lives. Informant 12 shared his reliance on private LGBTQ+ networks to process his feelings:

> I became a member of a private LGBTQ+ community on social media where participants utilize pseudonyms. It is an environment in which I candidly express my emotions and experiences without the concern of my identity being disclosed. I can finally express my true self, albeit only in the internet realm (Informant 12).

This reflection embodies Goffman's notion of the backstage, where the self is temporarily relieved from social surveillance and performative expectations. For many of the men in this study, digital communication allowed them to experience moments of emotional authenticity and social affirmation, particularly in the absence of such recognition in their physical environments. These findings echo those of Tuah and Mazlan (2020) and Kasmani et al. (2022), who observed that queer Malaysians rely on pseudonymous and encrypted digital platforms as safe spaces for spiritual reflection, emotional release, and identity expression.

Through the use of pseudonyms, encrypted messaging apps, and curated online communities, informants constructed parallel selves and engaged in what might be described as communication-based identity work. These spaces allowed for the regulation of emotional

vulnerability, as individuals calibrated their visibility according to perceived audience safety. While rooted in dramaturgical theory, this strategy also aligns with what Charley et al. (2023) and Buxton (2006) describe as critical tools of psychosocial survival among bisexual men, who often lack access to affirming support networks in both heterosexual and LGBTQ+ spaces.

Digital communication also enabled a form of audience segregation, another key concept within Goffman's theoretical framework. Informants reported crafting distinct communication scripts for different social settings. The frontstage comprising the marital home, family gatherings, and public life, demanded performances of heteronormativity and emotional neutrality. The backstage, represented by digital platforms, allowed informants to articulate their bisexual identity, receive support, and engage with others navigating similar relational complexities.

Informants also described how these digital environments became essential avenues for emotional resilience. Being able to communicate with others who "understood their world" gave them not only psychological relief but a sense of identity validation. These interactions although virtual, offered a depth of emotional connection often absent in their marital or familial lives. Some reported feeling "seen" or "understood" for the first time, even if only in a mediated, pseudonymous space.

Ultimately, digital communication functioned not merely as a medium but as a lifeline. It provided bisexual men in mixed-orientation marriages with the communicative freedom to express themselves while safeguarding their relational roles. Through segmentation, anonymity, and curated self-presentation, Informants sustained a form of identity coherence across conflicting social domains. In a context such as Malaysia, defined by religious conservatism, legal prohibitions, and cultural stigma, these digital strategies represent not only practical adaptations but emotionally intelligent and survival-driven communication practices.

CONCLUSION

This study provides critical insight into the communication strategies employed by bisexual men in mixed-orientation marriages in Malaysia, illustrating how these individuals navigate sexual identity management within a socio-religious context that criminalizes and stigmatizes non-heteronormative expressions. The findings identify five primary forms of communication: concealment, non-verbal communication, conflict avoidance, selective disclosure, and digital communication. Collectively, these strategies reflect a dynamic and adaptive repertoire through which bisexual men maintain marital harmony while managing internal identity tensions.

Anchored in Goffman's dramaturgical theory, the analysis demonstrates how informants construct and sustain frontstage performances characterized by verbal ambiguity, emotional restraint, and normative behaviour in order to fulfil expected marital roles. Simultaneously, backstage spaces, particularly digital platforms, serve as vital channels for authentic expression, emotional relief, and identity reflection. These findings affirm the enduring relevance of dramaturgical theory in explaining how sexual identity is communicatively performed, concealed, and segmented across both interpersonal and digital settings in culturally restrictive societies.

Theoretically, this study extends dramaturgical concepts such as impression management and audience segregation into the underexplored realm of bisexual identity negotiation within legally and morally regulated heterosexual marital institutions. It contributes to the broader literature

on identity and communication by highlighting how bisexual men adapt their communicative practices to navigate layered socio-cultural, religious, and relational constraints.

Practically, the findings underscore the need for culturally responsive communication-based counselling services, inclusive mental health frameworks, and support networks that address the unique communicative realities of bisexual men in mixed-orientation marriages. Bisexuality should be recognized as distinct from generalized LGBTQ+ or MSM categories in the development of legal, medical, and social interventions. Moreover, the emotional and relational importance of digital platforms highlights the need to safeguard safe online communication spaces for LGBTQ+ communities in Malaysia.

Future research should explore the long-term psychological and relational effects of communication-based identity concealment, including its impact on mental health, spousal relationships, and parenting roles. Comparative studies across ethnic and religious subgroups in Malaysia and Southeast Asia would further illuminate the intersectional dimensions of identity regulation. Longitudinal research is especially warranted to examine how communication strategies evolve over time and influence marital satisfaction, personal well-being, and family dynamics.

In conclusion, this study affirms that bisexual men in mixed-orientation marriages are not passive or deceptive, but rather resilient communicators who engage in complex, context-sensitive identity performances. Their lived experiences reveal the power of communication not only as a tool of adaptation but also as a quiet form of resistance. By centring these voices, the study contributes to a more inclusive and grounded understanding of communication, identity, and family within contemporary Malaysian society.

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