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Balancing Identity and Harmony: Communication Strategies among Bisexual Men in Mixed-Orientation Marriages in Malaysia

ABSTRACT

Mixed-orientation marriages (MOMs), where one spouse identifies as a sexual minority, pose unique challenges, particularly in conservative societies like Malaysia. Bisexual men in these marriages navigate identity concealment, societal stigma, and marital expectations, shaping their communication strategies. This study explores how bisexual men in MOMs manage identity through strategic communication within Malaysia's socio-religious framework. Using a qualitative approach, in-depth interviews were conducted with 15 bisexual men, analyzed through Goffman's dramaturgical theory. Findings reveal five primary strategies: i) emphasizing concealment, ii) non-verbal communication, iii) conflict avoidance, iv) selective disclosure and v) digital communication. These strategies highlight the intersection of heteronormativity, identity management, and relational maintenance, demonstrating how bisexual men balance authenticity with marital harmony. The study contributes to identity management and communication scholarship, particularly in non-Western LGBTQ+ contexts. It underscores the need for culturally sensitive counseling, digital support networks, and inclusive discourse to support sexual minorities navigating restrictive social landscapes. Future research should explore long-term psychological impacts of concealment and comparative cross-cultural analyses to deepen the understanding of MOMs.

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

INTRODUCTION

Mixed-orientation marriages (MOMs) involve a partnership where one spouse identifies as part of a sexual minority such as gay, bisexual, or lesbian and the other as heterosexual (Hopwood et al., 2019; Buxton, 2011). These marriages are more common than often recognized, with global estimates suggesting that over 2 million individuals are in MOMs (Buxton, 2011). However, specific statistics on bisexual individuals within these relationships remain elusive, reflecting broader issues of bisexual invisibility. Emerging research indicates that bisexual individuals, defined by their romantic or sexual attraction to more than one gender (American Psychological Association, n.d), make up a significant portion of sexual minorities in MOMs.

Their experiences are often shaped by the dual pressures of navigating multifaceted sexual identities while adhering to societal, cultural, and marital expectations. For bisexual individuals, these challenges include identity erasure, societal misconceptions about bisexuality, particularly in communication and identity management (Buxton, 2011; Mereish et al., 2016; Hopwood et al., 2019).

The success of mixed-orientation marriages (MOMs) in Western contexts is largely attributed to effective communication, identity management, and mutual adaptation between partners. Past studies consistently highlight that open and empathetic communication, selective disclosure, and mutual support are key factors in sustaining these relationships (Buxton, 2004; Yarhouse & Kay, 2010; Mohr & Daly, 2008). While existing literature on MOMs primarily focuses on gay men, bisexual men in MOMs remain underexplored, particularly within non-Western, culturally conservative contexts such as Malaysia (Dalin et al., 2023; Tan et al., 2021).

In Malaysia, the socio-cultural and religious framework imposes significant challenges for LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly bisexual men in mixed-orientation marriages (MOMs). Deeply rooted cultural norms, reinforced by Syariah law, stigmatize non-heteronormative identities and criminalize same-sex behavior (Dalin et al., 2023). These societal structures such as a law, religious, culture and family create a restrictive environment where discussions about sexuality are taboo, forcing many individuals to prioritize maintaining a facade of heteronormativity over personal authenticity (Dalin et al. 2024; Tan et al. 2021; Tuah & Mazlan 2020). In reality, bisexual men often enter heterosexual marriages without disclosing their sexual orientation, driven by societal expectations, familial obligations, or fear of rejection and legal repercussions (Dalin et al., 2023).

Unlike some Western contexts, where open communication about sexual identity is more feasible, the dominant socio-cultural and religious framework in Malaysia leaves limited room for such transparency. This reality compels bisexual men in mixed-orientation marriages (MOMs) to adopt strategic communication approaches, including identity concealment, selective disclosure, and non-verbal methods, to navigate the complexities of their dual identities. These strategies are often employed to maintain marital harmony while aligning with societal and familial expectations that prioritize heteronormative ideals. As a result, these marriages frequently rely on unspoken truths, underscoring the intricate balance between personal authenticity and societal conformity. Understanding how bisexual men negotiate their identities and sexuality within the restrictive socio-cultural and legal framework of Malaysia is crucial for addressing the communication dynamics and challenges that shape these relationships.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Communication Strategies for Successful Mixed-Orientation Marriages

The study of communication in mixed-orientation marriages (MOMs) has highlighted various strategies couples employ to navigate the intricate interplay of identity, sexuality, and relational dynamics. Early research, such as Rhoden (2003), underscored the importance of adaptable and compassionate communication in overcoming identity-related and traditional barriers, enabling couples to maintain marital cohesion. Similarly, Mohr and Daly (2008) identified conflict avoidance and identity suppression as common strategies to mitigate the pressures of heteronormativity and sustain emotional stability in MOMs.

As research evolved, the centrality of stigma and open communication in shaping relational outcomes became evident. Yarhouse et al. (2009) demonstrated that open dialogues and empathetic communication were pivotal in addressing complex issues related to sexual identity and marital roles, reinforcing relational bonds. Ben-Ari and Adler (2010) extended this by highlighting how effective communication enabled heterosexual spouses to understand the identity challenges faced by their gay partners, fostering a balance between personal authenticity and relational harmony.

Cultural and religious contexts further complicate communication dynamics in MOMs. Kissil and Itzhaky (2014) explored the experiences of Orthodox Jewish homosexual men in MOMs, revealing that cultural stigma often suppressed open communication, increasing emotional distress and marital discord. Similarly, Hopwood et al. (2019) illuminated how stigma, anxiety, and depression inhibited authentic communication, though couples who

overcame these barriers through open strategies demonstrated stronger emotional support systems and marital resilience.

Recent studies have delved into specific cultural contexts, broadening the understanding of communication strategies in MOMs. Song et al. (2021) explored the impact of heteronormativity and patriarchy in Chinese MOMs, revealing that cultural pressures often led to indirect communication strategies, such as emotional masking, to maintain relational harmony. In Malaysia, Rahman and Che Din (2021) highlighted the use of selective disclosure and identity concealment as protective strategies, reflecting the influence of societal stigma, cultural expectations, and Syariah law on communication practices in MOMs.

Identity management plays a pivotal role in sustaining MOMs, as individuals strategically disclose or obscure aspects of their identity to reconcile personal authenticity with relational stability. Hecht et al. (2005) emphasized the importance of selective disclosure in achieving relational goals and mitigating risks. Similarly, Rispel et al. (2015) and DeMino et al. (2007) noted that selective disclosure safeguarded individuals from societal stigma while preserving their relationships. Wang et al. (2012) and Lebni et al. (2020) further highlighted conflict avoidance and impression management as deliberate communication strategies to reduce relational tensions and ensure marital harmony.

Non-verbal communication and digital spaces have also emerged as vital tools for managing identity and sexuality in MOMs. Hillen et al. (2015) and Weisbuch et al. (2010) emphasized the role of non-verbal cues, such as gestures and physical affection, in fostering relational harmony while minimizing the risks of verbal disclosure. Additionally, digital platforms, as discussed by Hogan (2010) and Zibaei (2021), provide "back-stage" spaces for marginalized individuals, including those in MOMs, to express their authentic selves and find emotional support outside the constraints of societal judgment.

While current research has explored communication techniques and identity management among marginalised populations, there is a paucity of studies specifically addressing bisexual males in mixed-orientation marriages within non-Western, traditional communities. Furthermore, little research has utilised Goffman's dramaturgical theory to examine the function of communication be it verbal, non-verbal, or digital in managing identity and relational dynamics. This study seeks to fill these gaps by examining how bisexual males in Malaysia adeptly navigate their identities using sophisticated communication strategies. This research enhances the understanding of communication processes in mixed-orientation marriages by concentrating on these persons within a culturally and socially sensitive framework.

Theoretical Framework

Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory offers significant insights into how individuals manage their social identities in complex and frequently contradictory contexts. The theory, grounded in the symbolic meaning of a theatrical activity, suggests that social life includes encounters in which individuals assume roles based on their audience and context. The "front stage" implies public environments where individuals adhere to established standards and expectations, frequently emphasizing social harmony and acceptance. Conversely, the "back stage" implies secluded areas where individuals can relinquish their public identities and reveal their true selves, unconstrained by societal judgement.

This theory offers an extensive framework for understanding how bisexual men in mixed-orientation marriages manage their identities via communication tactics. Goffman conceptualizes social interactions as performances, wherein individuals alter their

presentations according to the context: the front stage (public sphere) and the back stage (private places). On the front stage, individuals perform roles that conform to cultural norms and expectations, while backstage, they can reveal their true identities without public observation.

This study employs Goffman's theory to explore participants' strategic utilization of verbal, non-verbal, and digital communication in managing identity conflicts. Selective disclosure and conflict avoidance exemplify front-stage performances in which participants prioritize relational peace over personal authenticity. In contrast, digital surroundings and reliable interactions serve as backstage settings, offering individuals avenues for emotional release and self-expression. This study applies dramaturgical theory to explain the interaction between social expectations, relational dynamics, and communication tactics utilized by bisexual men in culturally sensitive environments.

METHODOLOGY

3 *Research Design*

This study adopts a qualitative research design, using in-depth interviews to explore the lived experiences of bisexual men in heterosexual marriages in Malaysia. Qualitative methods are particularly suited for investigating complex and sensitive topics, such as identity, communication strategies, and sexuality, within culturally conservative environments. Creswell and Poth (2018) emphasize the value of semi-structured interviews in collecting rich, detailed narratives that capture individuals' nuanced experiences.

Ross et al. (2018) further argue that qualitative approaches offer deeper insights into the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals, especially when addressing topics that quantitative methods may fail to adequately capture. Similarly, Frederick et al. (2022) highlight the significance of qualitative methods in uncovering unique barriers and perspectives faced by LGBTQ+ populations, demonstrating the necessity of this approach for exploring identity and communication in mixed-orientation marriages.

Sampling and Recruitment

This study employed snowball sampling, a non-probability sampling technique, to recruit 15 bisexual men who were married to heterosexual women and demonstrated a commitment to maintaining their marital relationships. Snowball sampling is particularly effective in reaching marginalized and hard-to-access populations, such as bisexual men in mixed-orientation marriages, where traditional recruitment methods may fall short (Goldsen et al., 2023). The recruitment process began with an initial group of eligible participants and expanded through their personal networks, allowing for a broader reach within this population. Community organizations and support networks that assist individuals with identity and relational challenges played a pivotal role in facilitating access to the target demographic, further strengthening the recruitment process.

The sample size was guided by the principle of data saturation, ensuring that no new themes emerged during analysis and thereby enhancing the robustness of the findings (Colpitts & Gahagan, 2016). Participants were thoroughly informed about the study's objectives, ethical considerations, and the voluntary nature of their participation. Emphasis was placed on confidentiality and anonymity to foster a supportive and secure environment for open and honest discussions about their identities, communication strategies, and marital experiences. This approach ensured the collection of rich, detailed narratives essential for

¹ understanding the unique challenges faced by bisexual men in mixed-orientation marriages within Malaysia's socio-cultural and religious context.

² *Data Collection*

Data were collected through semi-structured, in-depth interviews, conducted either in person or via online platforms, depending on the informants' preferences and availability. This interview method was chosen for its flexibility in exploring complex topics and its ability to capture the informants' lived experiences in their own words. Open-ended questions were employed to investigate informants' communication strategies within their marriages, their use of impression management and role-play, and the challenges they faced in conforming to societal norms. Each interview was conducted with informed consent and transcribed verbatim to ensure the authenticity and integrity of the informants' narratives.

Cultural sensitivity and respect were integral to the data collection process, with language tailored to create a comfortable and empathetic environment for informants to share their experiences openly. Data collection continued iteratively until data saturation was reached, characterized by the absence of new themes or insights emerging from the interviews (Colpitts & Gahagan, 2016). Throughout the process, the researcher engaged in ongoing analysis, refining the interviews to explore emerging themes comprehensively. The decision to conclude data collection was guided by the consistent recurrence of principal themes related to identity management, communication strategies, and sexuality in mixed-orientation marriages. This iterative approach ensured that the findings were deeply rooted in diverse and richly detailed experiences, providing the depth and breadth required for robust qualitative analysis.

Data Analysis

⁵ Thematic analysis was employed to interpret the interview transcripts, facilitating the identification of recurring patterns and themes related to communication strategies, identity management, and social role negotiation. Following Yoon et al. (2023), thematic analysis provided a structured framework for uncovering nuanced experiences within the data, particularly the intersection of sexuality and societal expectations.

Utilizing Goffman's dramaturgical theory, the analysis categorized participants' narratives into themes such as "role-playing," "image management," and "identity compartmentalization." This theoretical lens, which conceptualizes social interactions as performances on "front" and "back" stages, offered a comprehensive perspective for understanding how informants negotiated heteronormative norms while striving to maintain their personal identity. Schmitz et al. (2019) further illustrate how thematic analysis effectively captures the intersectional challenges faced by marginalized groups, highlighting its appropriateness for this study.

Reflexivity and Bias Management

Reflexivity was integral to the research process, as the researcher continually examined their own potential biases, perspectives, and influences on data collection and interpretation. This practice ensured that participants' narratives were authentically represented, untainted by the researcher's preconceptions. Explicit criteria for participant selection were established to ensure a diverse sample reflective of the bisexual male demographic in mixed-orientation marriages. Bias management was further supported by triangulation, which utilized multiple data sources and maintained a transparent audit trail to strengthen the credibility of the

findings (Colpitts & Gahagan, 2016). Member checking was conducted, allowing select participants to review and confirm the accuracy of the identified themes and interpretations, ensuring that the analysis faithfully represented their lived experiences.

Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitive nature of the subject, rigorous ethical protocols were adhered to throughout the study. Participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, scope, and confidentiality measures, in line with the recommendations of Siegel et al. (2022). Participation was voluntary, with individuals retaining the right to withdraw at any stage without repercussion. Hswen et al. (2020) highlight the importance of prioritizing participants' emotional safety when discussing sensitive topics like identity and sexuality; this study adopted culturally sensitive and inclusive language to ensure a respectful and non-stigmatizing environment. Identifiable information was anonymized, and all findings were reported in ways that preserved participant privacy. Additionally, ethical approval was secured from the appropriate institutional review board, ensuring adherence to established research standards.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study reveal that communication strategies are central to how bisexual men in mixed-orientation marriages (MOMs) manage their identities and relationships in the Malaysian context. In a society where non-heteronormative sexualities face significant stigma due to cultural and religious pressures, communication plays a pivotal role in maintaining marital harmony and conforming to societal expectations. This section explores the various communication strategies employed by bisexual men: i) emphasizing concealment, ii) non-verbal communication, iii) conflict avoidance, iv) selective disclosure and v) digital communication.

Communication Strategies for Concealment

Concealment emerged as a deliberate and indispensable communication strategy employed by the informants to sustain marital stability. Within the context of their marriages, informants expressed a profound awareness of the potential consequences of disclosing their bisexual identity. To navigate this delicate terrain, they actively suppressed both verbal and non-verbal communication that might inadvertently reveal their sexual orientation. This suppression extended beyond merely withholding information. They encompassed carefully curated interactions, meticulously chosen words and the avoidance of behaviors that could invite suspicion from their spouses or others in their social circles, like two informants said below:

"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)

For many informants, this concealment strategy was not merely a choice but a survival mechanism. They described constantly monitoring their behaviors and words, avoiding certain topics in conversations, and suppressing any outward expressions of affection toward individuals of the same sex, even in non-romantic contexts. The vigilance required to maintain this facade often came with emotional costs, as the informants internalized the pressure to

conform to a heteronormative ideal. This relentless self-regulation underscored the intersection of personal identity and societal expectations, revealing the lengths to which bisexual men in Malaysia go to navigate their marriages while managing their sexual identity.

"I use caution in my behavior 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)

These findings align with Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory, which provides a robust lens for analyzing concealment strategies through "front stage" and "backstage" performances. On the front stage, informants strategically managed their verbal and non-verbal communication to conform to societal expectations, projecting a heteronormative image to avoid suspicion or conflict. The intentional use of vague or coded language, as described by Informant 1 and the meticulous regulation of non-verbal cues, as highlighted by Informant 8, exemplify controlled self-presentation aimed at maintaining relational harmony. This aligns with Eisenberg's (1984) concept of strategic ambiguity, where individuals deliberately communicate in imprecise terms to navigate high-stakes interpersonal interactions, such as conversations with spouses or in-laws.

By avoiding explicit discussions about sexuality, informants ensured that their relational identities remained intact, mitigating potential disruptions in their marital and familial relationships. Such discursive strategies reflect broader identity management techniques observed in stigmatized populations where ambiguous messaging serves as a protective mechanism against social scrutiny (Clair et al., 2005; Orne, 2011). Additionally, informants employed stigma management techniques outlined by Goffman (1963), specifically passing—constructing a heterosexual identity through heteronormative discourse—and covering—minimizing cues that might invite scrutiny (Yoshino, 2006). These findings parallel research on LGBTQ+ individuals in mixed-orientation marriages, where self-monitoring and selective disclosure serve as key strategies for relational maintenance (Schrimshaw et al., 2013; Dyar et al., 2020).

Non-Verbal Communication as a Strategy for Upholding Marital Stability

Non-verbal communication emerged as a pivotal strategy for affirming commitment and preserving marital stability among the informants. In the absence of verbal disclosures about their inner conflicts or bisexual identity, informants relied heavily on physical gestures and non-verbal cues to demonstrate their devotion to their spouses and families. These actions served as tangible evidence of their commitment, subtly reinforcing their roles as loyal partners while simultaneously maintaining the facade of marital harmony.

One common form of non-verbal communication involved physical gestures that conveyed affection and reassurance. Informants described how small acts of intimacy, such as holding hands, giving hugs or maintaining eye contact, became deliberate expressions of dedication. These gestures were not only a means of nurturing their marital bond but also a way of making any internal struggles they faced regarding their sexual identity. Through these seemingly simple actions, informants sought to reaffirm their presence as attentive and loving spouses, ensuring their partners felt valued and secure in the relationship.

"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)

Beyond physical touch, informants emphasized their active involvement in family routines as another non-verbal strategy for affirming their commitment to their marriages. Informants emphasized their engagement in daily household responsibilities, such as preparing meals, assisting with childcare, or planning family activities. These actions symbolized their commitment to their roles within the family unit, reinforcing the perception of a stable and harmonious marriage. By immersing themselves in these routines, informants communicated their dedication without the need for explicit verbal affirmations, ensuring that their spouses felt supported and that their family life remained cohesive.

"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)

Informants also reported being highly aware of their body language to convey attentiveness and emotional engagement. They described consciously monitoring their posture, expressions, and reactions, particularly in situations that could reveal their inner conflicts or arouse suspicion. For example, they avoided appearing distracted or emotionally distant, ensuring their demeanor remained calm and composed during interactions with their spouses and extended family. Smiles, nods, and attentive listening became subtle yet powerful ways to signal their involvement and investment in the relationship.

"I consistently remain conscious of my demeanor at home. I endeavor 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)

These findings align with Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory, which frames non-verbal communication as a vital element of "front stage" performances. The deliberate use of gestures, physical affection, and body language by the informants illustrates their efforts to maintain their public roles as "committed husband" while minimizing verbal disclosures that could jeopardize their heteronormative façade. Goffman's (1959) notion of impression management is particularly relevant here, as informants consciously aligned their verbal and non-verbal cues to present a consistent and credible performance. This regulation of non-verbal communication mirrors Eisenberg's (1984) concept of strategic ambiguity, where individuals rely on implicit messaging to navigate sensitive interactions. For example, informants described how small but deliberate physical gestures such as holding hands, initiating hugs or maintaining prolonged eye contact served as communicative acts reinforcing marital cohesion while simultaneously diverting attention from any inconsistencies in their sexual identity expression.

Research by DePaulo et al. (2003) further supports this, indicating that non-verbal immediacy such as smiling, nodding, or mirroring a partner's movements enhances relational

closeness and reinforces perceived authenticity. This was evident in the accounts of informants who strategically used affectionate behaviors to sustain their marital roles. Additionally, the findings align with Herek's (2009) framework on stigma management, which highlights how sexual minorities regulate their self-presentation in heteronormative environments to avoid discrimination or relationship disruptions.

Conflict Avoidance as a Proactive Communication Strategy

To preserve marital harmony, informants deliberately employed conflict avoidance strategies, skillfully navigating conversations to steer clear of discussions about sexuality or LGBTQ+ topics. This approach functioned as both a protective mechanism and a method of sustaining relational stability by minimizing the risk of disclosure-related tension. Informants were acutely aware that open discussions about their bisexuality or LGBTQ+ issues could disrupt the fragile balance of their relationships, leading to potential conflict, misunderstanding, or even the dissolution of their marriage.

Humor emerged as a key conflict mitigation strategy, allowing informants to defuse sensitive discussions without directly engaging with the subject matter. As Informant 3 explained:

"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)

Another widely used strategy was strategic ambiguity, where informants provided vague or non-committal responses to prevent conversations from escalating into identity-related disclosures. As Informant 5 stated:

"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)

Additionally, informants employed conversational redirection, a strategy commonly observed in identity management and topic avoidance research (Roloff & Ifert, 1998). As Informant 6 explained:

"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)

Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory offers a valuable lens for interpreting conflict avoidance as a deliberate front-stage communication strategy aimed at preserving relational harmony and meeting societal expectations. Participants' intentional discursive redirection of conversations about sexuality or LGBTQ+ issues underscores their focus on maintaining a consistent heteronormative performance in both public and private spheres. This aligns with Goffman's (1959) concept of impression management, where individuals carefully regulate their verbal and non-verbal self-presentation to ensure their interactions reinforce socially acceptable identities. Through conversational framing, informants employed techniques such

as humor, strategic ambiguity, and topical shifts to navigate sensitive discussions without disrupting the relational balance. For instance, the strategic use of humor allowed informants to mitigate tension and deflect identity-related inquiries.

Similarly, Dailey and Palomares (2004) found that relational partners employ topical avoidance as a face-saving communication strategy, ensuring that sensitive discussions are managed without triggering confrontation or relational discomfort. Furthermore, these message regulation tactics align with Wang et al. (2012) findings, which identify conflict avoidance as a goal-oriented communication strategy employed in stigmatized relationships to reduce relational tensions. The use of strategic ambiguity (Eisenberg, 1984) allowed informants to provide intentionally vague responses, enabling them to circumvent explicit self-disclosure while maintaining conversational fluidity.

Selective Disclosure as an Adaptive Communication Strategy

The findings also revealed that selective disclosure emerged as a nuanced and adaptive communication strategy employed by bisexual men in this study to balance their dual identity management and preserve marital harmony. Unlike complete identity suppression, which required the concealment of all aspects of their bisexuality, selective disclosure allowed informants to strategically disclose certain facets of their identity within carefully chosen, low-risk environments. This approach functioned as a discursive compromise, enabling individuals to negotiate their self-presentation between the need for self-expression and the maintenance of relational stability. The intentional selection of disclosure recipients, such as trusted confidants or anonymous online communities, reflects a targeted disclosure approach (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010), where individuals weigh the potential risks and benefits before engaging in identity-related communication.

Informants consistently emphasized the importance of "safe spaces" both digital and interpersonal as vital outlets for controlled self-expression. These spaces provided opportunities for emotional validation and identity affirmation which were often absent in their everyday marital and social interactions. The digital realm, in particular, functioned as a protected environment where informants could engage in asynchronous identity negotiation without the fear of immediate social consequences. As Informant 11 noted:

"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)

Similarly, other informants underscored the role of trusted confidants in their selective disclosure strategies, revealing that they carefully manage interpersonal disclosures to maintain relational stability. As Informant 15 explained:

"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)

The findings align closely with Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory, particularly the concept of "back-stage" performance where individuals retreat from their publicly regulated identities to engage in authentic self-expression in protected environments. These back-stage spaces such as anonymous online forums and trusted interpersonal relationships, allowed informants to momentarily shed their front-stage personas and articulate their authentic identities without the constraints imposed by heteronormative expectations. This supports Herek's (2009) stigma management framework, which suggests that individuals who experience sexual identity-related stigma often rely on private, low-risk communication contexts to navigate their identity in a way that protects their psychological well-being. Additionally, the concept of "communication boundary management" (Petronio, 2002) is relevant here, as informants engaged in deliberate information regulation to balance identity affirmation with relational preservation.

The role of digital spaces in selective disclosure further resonates with Trepte and Reinecke's (2013) findings on online self-disclosure, which emphasize that digital anonymity enhances identity exploration and communicative freedom. These platforms not only allowed informants to exchange experiences with others who share similar challenges but also provided a space for asynchronous self-reflection, where they could process their identity in a controlled and supportive environment. Furthermore, research on computer-mediated communication (CMC) suggests that digital platforms facilitate deep self-disclosure due to the lack of non-verbal cues and reduced fear of judgment (Tidwell & Walther, 2002). This underscores how asynchronous communication technologies serve as vital tools for identity management and emotional expression, particularly for individuals navigating high-stakes relational concealment. Ultimately, the findings illustrate how selective disclosure functions as a strategic and adaptive communication mechanism, enabling bisexual men in MOMs to navigate their dual identities, preserve their relational stability, and engage in identity-affirming interactions within carefully curated disclosure boundaries.

Digital Communication as a Key Strategies for Identity Expression

The findings revealed that digital communication emerged as a crucial identity management strategy for bisexual men in mixed-orientation marriages (MOMs). Informants strategically engaged with digital platforms to establish private and anonymous spaces, where they could express their bisexual identities, seek affirmation, and connect with others who shared similar experiences. Unlike face-to-face interactions, where heteronormative self-presentation was required, online platforms offered a backstage environment (Goffman, 1959) where participants could negotiate their identities more authentically without the risk of exposure or conflict. The role of computer-mediated communication (CMC) in this context aligns with Walther's (1996) hyper personal communication model, which suggests that online environments afford users greater control over self-presentation, enabling them to curate their narratives and disclose selective aspects of their identities. Informants found digital spaces particularly valuable as they provided asynchronous communication, allowing them to engage in discussions at their own pace, reflect on their identity, and interact with supportive communities without immediate social repercussions.

Informants consistently highlighted the role of anonymous social media platforms, private messaging applications, and online LGBTQ+ support networks in their digital communication practices. These digital venues functioned as safe spaces for identity exploration, offering opportunities to share personal experiences, seek emotional support, and cultivate meaningful connections—opportunities that were often unavailable in their

physical front-stage environments, where they were required to perform heteronormative marital roles. Informant 12 illustrated this point, stating:

"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 aligns with Hogan's (2010) digital self-presentation theory, which posits that online platforms facilitate identity curation through selective disclosure, allowing individuals to share specific elements of their identity while controlling their visibility. Additionally, the findings resonate with Trepte and Reinecke's (2013) research on online self-disclosure, which highlights that digital anonymity enhances communicative freedom, fostering deep self-expression and psychological relief among individuals managing stigmatized identities. For bisexual men in MOMs, these digital interactions were not merely social engagements but a fundamental aspect of their emotional well-being, providing them with an outlet for identity affirmation, community belonging, and personal validation elements that were often constrained within their immediate relational and societal environments.

CONCLUSION

This study provides significant insights into the intricate communication strategies employed by bisexual men in mixed-orientation marriages (MOMs) in Malaysia, highlighting the complex interplay between personal identity management, societal expectations, and marital harmony. The findings reveal that these men adopt various strategic communication techniques, including concealment, selective disclosure, conflict avoidance, and non-verbal communication, to navigate the challenges posed by heteronormative cultural and religious constraints.

Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical theory proves to be an essential framework in understanding these identity management strategies, demonstrating how bisexual men meticulously regulate their front-stage performances to maintain their heterosexual marital facades while seeking moments of authenticity in back-stage settings. The application of strategic ambiguity (Eisenberg, 1984), stigma management (Herek, 2009), and communication boundary management (Petronio, 2002) further contextualizes the nuanced ways these individuals sustain their relationships without explicit self-disclosure.

The findings indicate that concealment is not merely an individual preference but a social survival strategy that protects marital stability and mitigates the risk of familial or societal repercussions. Non-verbal communication emerged as a vital tool in affirming relational commitment, while digital communication platforms provided a crucial back-stage space for identity expression and emotional support. Additionally, conflict avoidance strategies, such as humor, topic redirection, and strategic ambiguity, illustrate the proactive measures bisexual men take to prevent tensions that could jeopardize their marriages. Selective disclosure further serves as an adaptive communication approach, allowing them to express aspects of their identities within carefully curated boundaries.

These findings have significant implications for both theoretical and practical domains. Theoretically, this study expands existing discussions on identity management by integrating multiple frameworks, including dramaturgical theory, strategic ambiguity, and digital self-presentation, to illustrate the multi-layered communication strategies of bisexual men in

MOMs. It contributes to the growing body of literature on LGBTQ+ experiences in heteronormative and religiously conservative contexts, offering an empirically grounded understanding of how bisexual identity is negotiated within the institution of marriage.

From a practical standpoint, the study underscores the necessity of culturally sensitive mental health and counseling interventions for bisexual men navigating MOMs. The emotional toll of concealment and identity suppression highlights the need for safe spaces—both offline and digital where bisexual individuals can seek support and validation. Policymakers and advocacy groups should recognize the unique struggles of this population and work toward fostering inclusive discourse on sexual identity within the framework of family and marital relationships. Furthermore, digital platforms play a crucial role in identity management, suggesting that online support networks should be strengthened to provide discreet and accessible resources for bisexual individuals facing social constraints.

While this study provides an in-depth examination of communication strategies in MOMs, future research should explore longitudinal impacts of concealment, cross-cultural comparisons, and digital communication advancements to further understand the evolving landscape of identity management in mixed-orientation relationships. In conclusion, this study highlights the resilience and adaptability of bisexual men in MOMs, showcasing the intricate ways they navigate personal identity, marital expectations, and societal norms through strategic communication. By advancing the discourse on interpersonal and digital communication in heteronormative contexts, this research paves the way for greater inclusivity, understanding, and support for bisexual individuals within traditional family structures.

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