

Factors influencing bisexual men to marry heterosexual women: A case study of Malaysia



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ABSTRACT

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In Malaysia, bisexuality is considered taboo because it is against the values and norms of society. Bisexual men may attempt to integrate by entering the institution of marriage with their partners. This study aims to discuss the factors that encourage bisexual men to choose to marry heterosexual women. A total of 15 informants consisting of bisexual men who had been married to women for more than five years were interviewed in depth. The results of the study are divided into two main themes: internal and external factors. The internal factors include (i) love for their partner; (ii) the desire to have children; (iii) wanting to eradicate the "homosexuality" inside themselves; and (iv) religious motivation. Meanwhile, the external factors include (i) family pressure; and (ii) the spouse's insistence. Overall, this study is highly relevant to the field because it provides significant input to enhance the understanding of the phenomenon of bisexual men who marry heterosexual women, especially in Malaysia, to avoid threats and discrimination against them. In addition, the results could be used by certain parties—such as individuals, social support centers, and the government—when addressing issues related to this phenomenon in the future.

Contribution/ Originality: This study is a new empirical study conducted in Malaysia about bisexual men who are married to heterosexual women. Collectively, the results of the study provide an overview of the "mixed-orientation marriage" phenomenon that occurs in Malaysia.

1. INTRODUCTION

A marriage involving people of diverse sexual orientations is known as a mixed-orientation marriage. The most typical example of a mixed-orientation marriage is one in which one partner is either non-heterosexual—such as homosexual (gay or lesbian)—or bisexual, while the other is a straight person (Hanis, Rohani, Fieza, Mohd, & Annalisa, 2018). Due to the existence of mixed-orientation marriages since the 1900s, countries in the West like the United States and the United Kingdom have a high level of knowledge about this kind of marriage. Almost two million couples in US, including homosexual, bisexual, and lesbian couples, are thought to be non-heterosexual, according to Buxton (2000).

The phrase "mixed-orientation marriage" is unfamiliar and rarely discussed in Asian nations. This is because gays and bisexuals are not accepted in the majority of Asian nations and because Asians are more traditional than

Westerners. The same holds for Malaysia. Since the topics of homosexuality and bisexuality are taboo in Malaysian culture, people seldom discuss or hear about mixed-orientation marriages. As a result, this study is one of the few to have examined this phenomenon in Malaysia or even in Asia. Because the majority of Malaysians, regardless of race or religion, detest the phrases "homosexuality" and "bisexuality" and consider them to be taboo, they tend to disregard any matters regarding those sexual orientations. As a result, Malaysians are unfamiliar with the term "mixed-orientation marriage." Marriage must be between a man and a woman for Malaysian society to celebrate and enjoy it, according to [Hanis et al. \(2018\)](#).

However, mixed-orientation marriage is now commonly accepted in China, where people have begun to give this kind of marriage more consideration. The term "tongqi" refers to marriages between heterosexual women and gay or bisexual men in China, whereby "tong" stands for homosexual and "qi" for wife ([Bram, 2016](#)). Although homosexuality was legalized in China in 1997, it was still regarded as a mental illness until 2001. Only 21% of Chinese people in China, according to Pew research from 2013, approved of homosexuality, making it difficult for gay men and lesbians to come out as having a particular sexual orientation. Research in 2015 by Yale anthropologist Tiantian Zhang (in [Hanis et al. \(2018\)](#)) found that at least 19 million straight or heterosexual women had wed gay males. Tongqi's Family is a WeChat account and a QQ group created by the programmer Liu Tengyang, a student at Qingdao Agricultural University in China, in response to the growing number of the tongqi. The group chat feature of the Chinese social media site QQ is administrator-controlled the family of Tongqi ([Hanis et al., 2018](#)).

The majority of mixed-orientation marriage cases in Malaysia are only made public when divorce claims are made in court. This demonstrates that Malaysian society rejects and is unwilling to accept those who conduct themselves in a way that is antithetical to social norms, even if they have a family and children from a legally registered marriage. Contrarily, mixed-orientation marriages frequently succeed in sustaining their union despite difficulties, particularly when non-heterosexual spouses are open and sincere with one another about their true sexual orientation. This is particularly true in Western countries like the United States, which are more liberal in this regard.

In Malaysia, frank and scholarly discussion of this kind of topic remains uncommon as does talking about intermarriage concerns with a bisexual man. Although this problem may seem unusual, it needs to be taken seriously to prevent this group from viewing marriage as a struggle and tainting the ideal of the purity of institutional marriage. As a result, the current researcher intended to further explore the subject of marriage among local bisexual males and whether it was motivated by societal pressure factors or otherwise, considering that Malaysia is a country where the majority of society disapproves of this form of marriage.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

For a variety of reasons, non-heterosexuals frequently date heterosexuals. Perhaps encouragingly, the most common justification for marriage is love. Some have reported marrying because they believed that doing so would lessen or eliminate their same-sex attractions ([Ross, 1971; Ross, 1990](#)). According to [Higgins \(2002\)](#), many of these marriages had taken place when the non-heterosexual partners were still young adults who had not yet fully embraced their sexual orientation. Similarly, according to [Lee \(2002\)](#), many non-heterosexual couples reported that their partners' sexual orientation had not been disclosed before marriage, as many heterosexual couples had also reported. Meanwhile, some couples asserted that they had become aware of their partner's orientation before getting married ([Matteson, 1985; Yarhouse, Pawlowski, & Tan, 2003](#)). Some couples confessed that they had got married due to social or familial pressures, a desire to have children, or both ([Brownfain, 1985; Kort, 2005; Lee, 2002](#)). In a sample of devoutly religious people, reasons for getting married included seeking a partner, thinking marriage was the right thing to do, loving their partner, and wanting children and a family life ([Yarhouse et al., 2003](#)). While this just does not appear in more recent polls, it is crucial to remember that some earlier research

listed marriage as a way to avoid homosexuality. Ross (1971) discovered that some of his respondents thought their attraction to people of the same sex resulted from a lack of sexual experience and that the interest would go away after marriage. Priests, chaplains, or doctors would frequently suggest marriage as a treatment for the gay tendencies of the study respondents.

Studies on long-married couples and research by Yarhouse on a group of deeply religious couples, which included several non-heterosexual partners who stated they thought the same-sex attraction would disappear through marriage, stand out as studies that largely ignore this justification for union, as in Kort (2005) analysis (Yarhouse, Gow, & Davis, 2009; Yarhouse et al., 2003; Yarhouse & Seymore, 2006).

Edser and Shea (2002) stated that numerous bisexual men admitted that they had not become aware of their sexual identity until after marriage. Some people had known they were homosexual before getting married, but they had been afraid to tell their partner for fear of rejection. It is uncommon for bisexual men to marry heterosexual partners to start a family and have kids. In studies by Buxton (2000) and Matteson (1985), the internal conviction that entering a heterosexual marriage may alter, diminish, or eradicate feelings of same-sex attraction in themselves was another frequently cited factor. In Malaysia, there have been few studies of non-heterosexuals marrying heterosexual individuals. Nasrudin, Mohd, Halim, and Zaakria (2014) investigated the level of homophobia experienced by gay men in Malaysia and its influence in determining why gay men chose to marry or not to marry women. The findings indicated that 72.7% of gay males in this group had internalized homophobia, which is a significant proportion. A desire to have children (51.72%), awareness of changing sexual identity (31.03%), family pressure (24.14%), and a desire for a woman's love were the leading motivations for homosexual men to marry.

However, the article by Hanis et al. (2018) focuses not on empirical difficulties but on legal concerns regarding the rights of women married to gay or bisexual spouses. Five reasons were listed in the article why gay or bisexual men had married heterosexual spouses. They include religion, morals, discrimination, wanting children, families, and social issues. The mainstream public in Malaysia still has difficulty in publicly recognizing homosexual and bisexual issues because they go against the local community's culture and religious customs. Islam, the country's official religion, forbids homosexual lifestyles and activities.

3. MATERIALS AND METHODS

In this study, a qualitative research design was applied to obtain data and information from bisexual men married to heterosexual women. Since this study explores a sensitive issue, the qualitative method was seen as a more practical approach, since the researcher would have the flexibility to interview the informants. All 15 informants were selected using the snowball sampling method. The characteristics required of the informants in this study were i) bisexual men who had been legally married to heterosexual women; ii) were still active in homosexual activities; iii) had been married for five years and above; iv) were still hiding a homosexual identity; v) had children; and vi) still intended to maintain a marriage with a heterosexual woman. All these informants were introduced through key informants.

They were interviewed semi-formally, and the researcher ensured that the questions and answers were open-ended. In terms of research ethics, after successfully finding informants, the researcher sent information to them, which included consent documents. The participation of the study informants was voluntary. Informed consent was obtained before they became involved in the study. At the same time, the confidentiality of the information and the identity of each informant were also safeguarded and classified as confidential. The results were analyzed using the thematic method, whereby the researcher organized the interview session results into several themes that had been established.

All the themes were explicitly designed to avoid misinterpretation. All the data are presented both descriptively and narratively.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

There are valid reasons for bisexual men to marry heterosexual women. In this section, the researcher examines the reasons why bisexual males marry heterosexual women. Two major themes—internal factors and external factors—are separated in the examination of the research findings. In general, the informants provided more than one response to each question posed to them.

4.1. Profile of Bisexual Men

A total of 15 informants were interviewed, and their information can be seen in Table 1.

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

4.2. Internal Factors

The desires, values, beliefs, or self-conceptualization of this sexual minority in relation to getting married were examples of internal causes. Four major subthemes of this issue were developed as a result of the in-depth interviews: (i) love for their partner; (ii) desire to have children; (iii) wanting to eradicate the "homosexuality" inside themselves; and (iv) religious motivation.

4.2.1. Love for their Partner

The majority of the informants (10) stated that the reason for getting married had been falling in love with their respective partners. Based on the in-depth interviews, three main factors were stated. One was the attraction factor of the partner's personality. In this study, the informants characterized their partners' personalities based on the latter's characteristics, such as being loving, caring, kind, gentle, funny, and other attributes, which had successfully attracted the attention and interest of the informant to live with their partner. The following excerpts come from a joint interview with four informants:

"I fell in love with her personality. She is smart, gentle, and cares a lot about me." "As long as I'm in love, I see wife material in him, and that's why I want to get married and make him my life partner until any time."

(Informant 1)

"I'm interested in mature women. So my wife has that personality. [She is] mature, firm, and a person who stands firm. But in that strictness, she can be funny too, which made me serious about marrying her."

(Informant 3)

"There are many things I like about my wife, especially her personality. She is a good person, hardworking, and cares about the people around her."

(Informant 5)

"She is a gentle and friendly person. Most importantly, she is respectful and good at getting along with the elderly. I'm happy when mom and dad like his personality. It's easy to say that he fits well with my family. My parents and siblings all agree she is the woman I want to marry."

(Informant 8)

The second attraction factor was that both partners had similar interests. This response pattern was expressed by informants 10 and 11. Throughout the interviews, "common interests" refers to similar activities or hobbies shared by both couples, such as traveling, dancing, sports, doing extreme activities, and climbing hills. Statements from informants 10 and 11 are shown in the interview excerpts below:

"When we first met, I didn't think my wife had the same hobby as me, which is traveling. When studying first, especially during holidays, we always [went] traveling together. It's nice to know when there is a partner who likes us."

(Informant 10)

"It's not easy to find a life partner who has chemistry with us." "When I first met my first wife, I immediately fell in love with her. When we first entered dance class, we always shared and helped teach each other." "The chemistry we have makes my love for him strong, and most importantly, he is not judgmental about my interests and career."

(Informant 11)

The third attraction factor was an attraction to physical characteristics. This response pattern was expressed only by informant 12. He admitted that he was interested in beautiful, white-skinned, narrow-eyed, thin, black, and thick-haired women, like his wife. The interview excerpt below shows his statement on this:

"When I first met her [my wife], I thought she was the most stunning woman I had ever seen." "She had all the features I wanted: white skin, narrow eyes, a thin body, and black and thick hair."

4.2.2. Desire to have Children

In addition to the factor of falling in love, the majority of the informants, as many as 10 people, had chosen to marry a heterosexual woman to have offspring. All the informants stated that before getting married, they had already been planning to have children with their respective partners after marriage. As stated by informant 1, planning to have children early was discussed with and agreed upon by his partner. Furthermore, as an only child, he felt that the dream of having children after marriage needed the consent of both parents, even though at that time he was 24 years old and had just obtained a job. He stated:

"I can't wait to start my own family, have kids, and have a fulfilling life."

Informant 5 responded by saying he was looking forward to being a parent. The following statement is informant 5's justification:

"I like kids. Those who can't wait to have a family should always take good care of their kids. I'm eager to become a father."

Informant 10 said,

"I can't wait for my children to call me father; my guys always call me uncle."

Generally, the informants acknowledged that only heterosexual women can become pregnant. Despite modern technology and options like adoption, they understand that males cannot perform these tasks. The interview clip below shows the informant's response to this subject:

"I understand and cannot deny that males are unable to conceive and give birth to my children. Even if I have a homosexual side, I am nonetheless conscious of the fact that only women can conceive and bear me children. That's also one of the main reasons I want to marry, have kids, and raise them together with my wife."

(Informant 8)

"Even if Malaysia legalizes same-sex unions, I still think that only women, not men, are capable of bearing me children. To ensure the continuation of my generation and my family, I want to have children."

(Informant 11)

4.2.3. Wanting to Eradicate the "Homosexuality" Inside Themselves

Nine informants hoped that marriage with a heterosexual woman would eliminate the homosexual side in them. It was found that the informants experienced high levels of internal homophobia and were aware of wanting to change their sexual orientation from a man attracted to both sexes to a fully heterosexual man. Based on societal norms in Malaysia, the "normal way of life" stated by the informants refers to the heterosexual way of life. For example, informant 10 stated:

"I want to be like other normal men."

Meanwhile, informant 9 stated,

"There may be an awareness to change into a normal man."

In the interviews with these informants, they admitted that changing into a normal man was not easy, especially since the majority of them had fallen into the homosexual world when they were still in their teens. Socialization for a long time as a homosexual man must have presented the individuals with difficulties, especially if they had already experienced the coming-out process. The joint interviews with informants 2, 4, and 6, each of whom admitted to having been a gay man before changing to bisexuality, revealed that they had tried various ways to get rid of the homosexual side in them but these had been ineffective. All of them admitted to experiencing sexual addiction to same-sex partners. This analysis can be demonstrated through the interview excerpts below:

"I used to be a gay boy before I became bi." "It was obvious that I turned into an active gay boy, starting in third grade. It turns into an addiction when it becomes a habit. I've tried a lot of different things to get rid of that item, but it's not simple. I still recall that, even though I was seeing someone at the time. So in the hope that my wife could assist me in leaving the gay lifestyle, I decided to be married..."

(Informant 2)

"To be quite honest, I also [wanted] to be married in the hope of returning to normalcy." "Yes, I was a straight guy at first. I admit that I was frightened and even felt bad inside when I began to have the innate need to like guys. So to rid myself of my gay nature, I decided to be married..."

(Informant 4)

The bisexual men in this study also wanted to change since they found it uninteresting to make love with a same-sex partner. Most homosexual couples who begin a romantic relationship, according to Mohd-Nazri (2004) are primarily focused on sexual fulfillment alone, so the sensation of falling in love with a same-sex partner generally would not last very long. Finally, some relationships that had developed simply broke down due to a lack of commitment, and some homosexual couples deceived one another by dating other guys. Informants 5 and 7 both acknowledged that they were aware of such scenarios, which contributed to their internal homophobia and caused them to marry heterosexual women. Here are their justifications:

"I'm sick of being in a relationship with a man. Never serious. Being deceived frequently is when I keep getting attacked like that, and I eventually [gave] up." "I married a lady in the hope that I might move on from that experience..."

(Informant 5)

"I frequently switched lovers while I was homosexual. Usually, being in a relationship only lasts for a short period. Like me, the longest relationship I've ever been in ended after two months." "I grew discouraged as a result and sought to make a difference..."

(Informant 7)

4.2.4. Religious Motivation

Since mixed-sexual orientation differs from the norm for humans, who are created to be in pairs, namely men and women, the issue of homosexuality is classified as deviant in the religious world. The majority of Malaysians who are Muslim reject this type of orientation since gay actions are listed in the Al-Quran as prohibited. In addition, homosexual activity is condemned by all global faiths, including Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Confucianism. This is because homosexual behavior goes against the instincts of people, who were first created in pairs to become spouses of those of the opposite sex. In terms of the subject of bisexuality, even if a man is married to a woman, their homosexual conduct, which creates a twisted connection outside marriage from a religious perspective, is still regarded as sinful.

"Even though I am bisexual and still have feelings of attraction to males, I am conscious that I can only marry women, not men, which is why I married a girl. I think everyone is aware that in Islam itself, it is specified that men should marry women, not men."

(Informant 1)

"As a Muslim, I am aware that only males and women may be in authorized marriages. Male marriage to male is prohibited."

(Informant 3)

The next statement was given by informant 5, who claimed that while he was aware of the grave evil committed by gay offenders, he had sentiments of dread and regret. His choice to marry a straight lady had been further influenced by the regret surrounding him since he believed that only by marrying in this way would he be able to return to being a "normal" guy. Similarly, informant 11 said:

"It appears that all Muslims are aware that homosexual behavior is a grave sin and is condemned by God. I remember feeling afraid and crying as I considered what will happen to me in the future."

The second response was given by a Christian informant who considered marriage to be a vocation from God. Marriage is one of the seven marks of belief in their faith, according to informant 4. Their choice to get married was inspired by the Christian view of marriage, which accords it a high and honorable place. As stated by informant 4:

"Since I think it's a sign of a summons from God, I chose to wed a woman. I think God purposely put my wife and me together because I know that He has excellent things in store for us."

4.3. External Factors

Two major subthemes of this issue were developed as a result of the in-depth interviews: (i) family pressure; and ii) spouse's insistence.

4.3.1. Family Pressure

Whether they live in Western or Eastern nations, men who identify as bisexual or gay, or who have another sexual orientation, always struggle with familial issues. This is because many bisexual and gay people are raised in families that do not support their sexual orientation. Families who discover their sons are not straight often opt for the quick fix of forcing the sons to wed heterosexual women. The sons had to consent to marry heterosexual women to follow the family's directives, particularly those of the parents. According to the findings, only one informant mentioned that his family's rejection of his sexual orientation was the reason he married a heterosexual lady.

"Specifically when it comes to religion, my father is strict with the kids. I once had to confront my father when I played with males when they were around. He's unable to accept it. He has treated me crudely ever since then. By the time I got a job, he said he wanted to marry me early (he was 23 at the time) to the woman of his choice. I didn't want to, but I must support my father's choice."

(Informant 14)

In addition, the researcher discovered that the bisexual males in this study were motivated to get married by family pressure brought on by their parents' desire for grandchildren and the pressure of their parents' rising ages. The replies from informants 2 and 6 demonstrated this pattern of responses.

"My parents frequently inquire about my plans for marriage and when I hope to have children of my own. Yes, I am the oldest kid; the rest of my siblings are still in school. However, I would like to clarify that although I believe I married late, I am still youthful. However, I feel bad for my parents, especially my elderly father who asked if it were possible to feel like he had a grandson before he passed away. In these passages, I'm really lacking. Luckily, I was already employed at the time, but I still felt compelled to wed a stranger."

(Informant 6)

"I didn't want to get married at the time, but I didn't have a significant other either. I'm truly in a pickle when my mum asks me when I want to be married. It may also be distressing at times. Mom, though, has a task; therefore I'm also looking for a son-in-law for her. Moreover, my mum is older than sixty. Even though I stated at the time that I wasn't yet ready to be married, I had to comply with her requests even if I don't want to."

(Informant 2)

Then, informant 15 acknowledged that his respect for his parents' position had played a role in his choice to wed. According to the interview with informant 15, the community in his town referred to his family as "religious people," which was linked to how respected they were. According to informant 15, his parents pushed him to get married as soon as possible to his fiancée. He acknowledged that because he hadn't yet received permanent job status, he was not prepared at the time. Eventually, however, having been persuaded repeatedly, he consented to wed.

4.3.2. Partner's Insistence

Two informants acknowledged they had got married at their partner's insistence, facts that were uncovered when the study data were further examined. According to the input of both informants, continuing to have sex with one partner had influenced their decision to wed their chosen spouse. Informant 9 acknowledged that he had frequently had sexual encounters with his companion, who was his present wife. Informant 9 acknowledged that his spouse began pressuring him to get married very quickly as their relationship entered its second year because if he had vanished and not been accountable, his partner would have been scared and concerned.

"My wife and I have experienced love in the past. Any infatuated pair will attest that it is natural. Similar to my situation, we did intend to be married, but we ended up getting married sooner than anticipated. Because it wasn't steady yet, it was also difficult at the time, but because I was concerned there would be additional issues, we just had a formal ceremony when we got married."

Informant 15 stated that he was concerned about his companion (now his wife) telling his family about the situation (the continuation of their intimate relations). He declared:

"I'm concerned and terrified that my family would find out about my dishonor. I don't want to, but I have to wed her as well."

4.4. Discussion

The overall goal of this study was to investigate the reasons why bisexual men marry heterosexual women in Malaysia. The study's findings only apply to bisexual males who had continued to keep their sexual orientation a secret from their wives.

The study's conclusions demonstrate that internal causes have a stronger influence than external variables on bisexual men's decisions to marry straight women. Many of the same reasons why heterosexual couples date—such as love and emotions of physical, social, and emotional attraction—are probably why they first started dating. The males who had repressed their homosexual tendencies for social and frequently religious reasons finally developed more fully formed gay identities, went through emotional agony, and decided to hide their true sexual orientation to avoid the rejection that would lead to divorce.

As could be predicted, one reason why bisexual males choose to marry women was found to be religious considerations. Similarly, (Hanis et al., 2018) asserted that the religious aspect was a driving force behind the decisions made by this group to get married. In Malaysia, homosexuality is a sin, and traditional religions like Islam and Christianity forbid same-sex unions. Therefore, in order to prevent sin, bisexual men choose to wed heterosexual women without considering their wives' feelings if they are aware that their husbands are homosexual (American Psychological Association, 2009). However, the informants in this study did not perceive this religious aspect as being highly important (only five people stated this).

The researcher discovered that one reason for bisexual males not experiencing societal pressure, particularly from governmental agencies, religious organizations, and the local community, is that this group is less well-known and more cautious in all its actions. In other words, such individuals put the idea of dramaturgy into practice every day. They are forced to adjust to a heterosexual environment as a result. Through observation, this can be demonstrated (behavior and way of speaking).

5. CONCLUSION

Mixed-orientation unions may be legal in other nations, but they are not accepted or prevalent in Malaysia. In fact, this study is one of the few to have examined the issue. The lack of understanding about the topic is because many secret mixed-orientation marriages take place in Malaysia without the knowledge of the straight wife. The main finding of this research was that bisexual males opt to marry heterosexual women of their own volition. They feel compelled to conceal their true sexual orientation from the community, especially their wives, as a result of the Malaysian community's rejection of this group. It is believed that this discovery would help future academics to better grasp the marital scenarios affecting bisexual men and heterosexual women. The findings of this study are anticipated to be used in non-academic settings by interested parties in the future as a guide to developing techniques to assist people in this type of marriage to resolve their issues.

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