

Exploring Bisexuals' Experiences of Bi Erasure, Stigma & Discrimination: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract: Bisexual individuals are often marginalized, disregarded, excluded, or seen as sexual deviants. The focus of the study is to understand the lived experiences of people who identify themselves as bisexual. The study included a sample of 12 bisexuals (3 males and 9 females) aged between 21-32 years. Data was collected through short, semi-structured interviews with the help of open-ended questions. The study aimed to analyze bisexual participants' experiences of prejudice, rejection, and invalidation in India. Ten global themes emerged while analyzing the data using thematic analysis which included Identity Denial and experiences of Binegativity; Guarding the traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity; Fetishization and negative stereotypes; Stigma and negative expectations interrupting with the need for social belonging; Cognising bisexuality as hypersexuality and openness to threesomes; Concealing the sexual stigma in a heterosexist society; Dilution of Bisexuality; Chances of being discriminated against; Unconstructive gatekeeping within the community; Significance of supportive community spaces. Even though bisexuals are included in the LGBT community, there are still issues (such as rejection) within the group that limit a bisexual's access to the community. The study has implications for bisexuals' significant experiences with discrimination and sexual objectification.

Keywords: Bisexuality, Bi Erasure, Stigma, Binegativity, LGBTQ

Introduction

The psychological and social requirements of bisexuals are increasingly being studied, although they are still a relatively unstudied group, with little emphasis on their unique experiences and resources (Loi et al., 2017). Bisexuals are subject to double discrimination due to their 'straight passing privilege'. The lack of proper awareness is another factor that can add to the double marginalization of bisexuals. Awareness about bisexuality can be a great deal for bisexual individuals, from when they first start to figure out who they are, to when they come out, and even into old age and old relationships. There is a lack of clarity in the concept of bisexuality, which contributes to this lack of awareness. This seemingly ambiguous view on bisexuality affects bisexuals as well. As a result of a lack of awareness or understanding of one's sexuality, persons with non-heterosexual as well as heterosexual orientations frequently find themselves in a web of uncertainty and identity crisis.

Bisexuality, according to Kinsey et al. (1948), occurs on a seven-point continuum ranging from entirely heterosexual to exclusively homosexual. Much of today's research on this subject is still based on the notion of bisexuality as a complicated orientation that spans a wide range of non-monosexual manifestations, which makes it important to expand the focus of bisexual studies to their lived experiences. Bisexuality may be described as "the capacity to be attracted romantically and/or sexually to individuals of more than one sex and/or gender, not always in the same manner or to the same degree" (Eisner, 2013).

Sex has always been a problematic topic to be discussed in Indian society. Sex education, for example, is essentially non-existent in the school curriculum. At the same time, neither in academia nor in popular culture, sexuality is regarded as an issue that should be discussed openly. Popular culture has likewise adopted a heteronormative stance and avoided addressing sexuality and orientation. Films exploring issues like homosexuality and bisexuality have mostly failed in Bollywood or they lack authentic LGBTQ representation (Bhugra et al., 2015). Refraining from talking about the concept of sex, in general also explains the societal denial towards the issue of diverse sexualities. Sex is taboo, not getting enough attention leads to experiences of invalidation among bisexuals. Cultural perceptions about bisexuality have been shown to impact the formation and expression of identity (Chun & Singh, 2010). Many individuals think about bisexuality as a strange phenomenon or an anomaly. Lack of understanding might contribute to the perpetuation of negative stereotypes and biases about bisexuality. An ethnographic study with a bisexual woman was conducted in Kerala to throw light on the lived experiences of an openly bisexual woman (Chithrangathan, 2018). This study further tried to understand the participant's experiences of struggle, confusion related to her sexual experiences within the social and cultural context of society. Most of the literature on bisexual research in India has focused on the health disparities and perceptions towards bisexuals. Much work is required to map the lived experiences of discrimination, bi-invisibility, and stigma among bisexuals in India. The present study tries to expand the focus to understand their experiences within the cultural context. Living in a disapproving society, where the concept of bisexuality is rarely

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acknowledged, it is natural for certain bisexual individuals to have absorbed the Bi-negative belief that bisexuality is a transitory phenomenon. This lack of discussion around myths and facts related to bisexuality may lead to the experiences of bi-erasure or bi invisibility. Sometimes they feel marginalized within sexual minority groups because they are perceived to be someone who would adjust to both and has all the options. The current research attempts to capture their concerns about being bisexuals and how it interferes with their everyday lives to understand them.

Method

Participants

For the study, 12 bisexuals between the ages of 21 and 32 were chosen. Three of the participants were male, and nine of the other participants were females. Their educational backgrounds varied from undergrad to postgrad, and five of them are employed. Purposive sampling was used to collect the data.

Data Collection

Data was gathered through short, semi-structured interviews with the help of 10 open-ended questions. The study's interview questions were designed to analyze bisexual participants' experiences of prejudice, rejection, and invalidation in India. A pilot interview was done to ascertain common meanings, to clarify questions' comprehension, and to identify any possible scheduling conflicts. The interview was used to get a more in-depth look at how they felt about being a minority. Accordingly, the interview schedule was designed to cover the following areas:

- Concerns related to sexual orientation and bisexuality
- Particular problems they have faced because of discrimination based on bisexuality/sexual minority
- Experience with oneself and others after coming out or transitioning
- How open are they about their bisexuality? At work? At college? At home?
- The impact of their sexual orientation on their relationship with family/friends/coworkers
- Support from family/friends/coworkers
- Perception towards Queer collectives and involvement in LGBTQ communities
- Concerns about their body image

Procedure

The interview was started with rapport building, following which the participants were briefed about the goal of the research, and informed permission was obtained. The participants were ensured that their information would be kept private. Using the framework established by Braun and Clarke (2006) as well as Attride-Stirling (2007), the present research employed thematic analysis to analyze data. This process begins with the coding of the study data. The original code was done to place the self as near to the data as possible since the study was to be entirely data-driven. After the first coding was completed, core themes were extracted from all of the codes by methodically categorizing them.

Table 1

A collection of themes relevant to bisexuals' lived experiences, culled from interviews

Verbatim	Basic Themes	Organizing Themes	Global Themes
"Something was wrong about me, especially when others are aware of my bisexuality. People stop interacting with me once they know I am a bisexual."	Stereotypical alienation from social groups	Discrimination and non-normativity	
"I am okay with my sexuality but people make me feel bad about my bisexuality."	Induced Binegativity	Internalized binegativity	Identity Denial & experiences of Binegativity
"I am from Haryana, I struggle to fight for my make-up, education and career. My parents don't take me seriously. They think I'll be straight in some time."	Daily struggles Dismissal of sexuality Second-guessing Parental Denial	Explicit Refusal	

Verbatim	Basic Themes	Organizing Themes	Global Themes
“I’ve faced sexual harassment in school because of my feminine looks. Besides, I had a relationship with a guy who cheated on me because I don’t have a vagina.”	Harassment for feminine looks cheating betrayed for being lesser than a heterosexual	The pressure to conform to the norms	Guarding the traditional ideas of masculinity and femininity
“I receive criticism based on my sexuality on a daily basis, be it my choice of clothes, soft-hearted nature...I am having anxiety issues now.”	Daily dose of criticism the choice of clothes, soft nature (unusual for a man) nontypical way of living		
“I’ve faced judgments, scrutiny, and isolation because of my sexuality.”	portrayal as unstable and untrustworthy	degree of exclusion perceived untrustworthiness	
“Biphobic comments, bi-erasure,& fetishizing bisexuality have become a part of my daily routine.”	Usual biphobic comments, bi-erasure remarks	Fetishization of Bisexuals Experiences of living	Fetishization and negative stereotypes
“I am worried about others becoming aware of my bisexuality because People are invasive and won’t mind their own business.” in a Biphobic society.	People being invasive fear of judgment Protecting oneself	Invasive culture as a threat to be out	
“Despite being confident in myself, I still hesitate coming out to some people as they might fetishize or invalidate me.”	Self-preservation unsure about coming out second thoughts	safeguarding against normative forces	Stigma and Negative expectations interrupting the need for social belonging.
“You can’t just come out to anyone as their negative reaction can become a setback in your life if you’re already going through a rough patch”.	Anticipating getting hurt protection from future discrimination		
“My friends need proofs for my bisexuality in terms of my sexual encounters with male and female partners.”	Identity erasure unstable identities sexual objectification myths of bisexuality	The quest to prove bisexuality lack of knowledge related to bisexuality	
“In India bisexuality equals to threesomes.”	hypersexuality threesome as a defining feature of bisexuality	Sexual objectification	Cognising bisexuality as hypersexuality and openness to three somes.
“I hide my bisexuality from my male friends in case they might get curious, you know.”	fear of objectification mistrust concealing bisexuality	Concealing a stigmatized identity	
“I’m voluntarily closeted. I only hint at it. Some friends know.”	selective disclosure	being selective about who you open up to	

Verbatim	Basic Themes	Organizing Themes	Global Themes
"I prefer not to be out at work. Work politics are enough, I don't need more problems."	Negative expectations protecting oneself from unpleasant and negative experiences	coping mechanism tackling by hiding	Concealing the sexual stigma in a heterosexist society
"People don't get the concept of LGBTQ, B in LGBTQ is there for a reason."	lack of inclusion	minorities within minorities	
"I know I liked both girls and boys ever since I was a school going girl, but I didn't think much of it, I was open to the idea of exploring but that was brought to a halt when a classmate called me 'bi' out of the blue."	becoming aware of one's sexual orientation being called out being selective in picking up fights for oneself	Experiences of identifying as a bisexual	Dilution of Bisexuality
"Coming out caused the occasional shouting match at home. Coming out may change your relationship or interactions with others."	issues after coming out household disputes post revelation	implications of stigma in coming out	
"I guess, I knew pretty early that I was bisexual. But it was the 90s-00s, & the only options were 'gay' & 'lesbian', So I was late to the party, I guess."			
"Some LGBTQ networks expect you to look non-binary & this can be damaging."	the compulsion to adhere to the LGBTQ norms in terms of looks and behaviours.	Gatekeeping	
"The communities are toxic with abusers & enablers. Always sweeping their abusive history under their wokeness."	Toxic LGBTQ community culture wokeness	Woke LGBTQ activism Abuse and toxicity	Unconstructive gatekeeping within the society
"I prefer not to be associated with them unless a situation calls for it."	Avoiding LGBTQ communities	Isolation from LGBTQ organizations	
"All my friends are from the Community".	finding support in the community	Community connectedness	
"I was in confusion related to my identity but some people from community helped me out."			
"Talking to community helped me become more comfortable with my sexuality."	crucial support during identity formation		

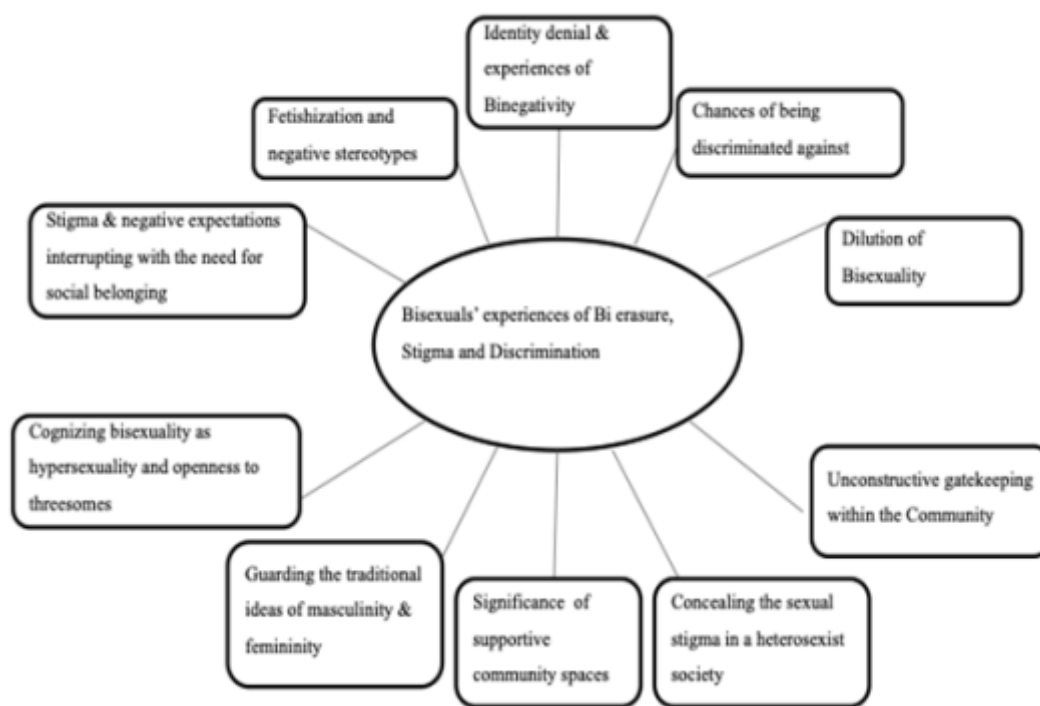


Figure 1: Global Themes of Bisexuals' experiences of Bi erasure, Stigma & Discrimination

Discussion

The goal of the study was to investigate bisexuals' lived experiences of discrimination, invalidation, and negative stereotypes in India. Because this study is qualitative, it acknowledges both the researcher's and participants' subjectivities. Qualitative research was employed to use interviews to stay as close as possible to the detailed description of their lives as bisexuals. The themes that emerged from the participants' experiences of persistent sexual orientation neglect, social marginalization, and finding strength in bisexual identification were explored. The theoretical framework of social power and sexual objectification (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997) may be traced back to explore participants' experiences of sexual objectification. So, social power, for example, promotes the objectification process. Social power, which may be described as an individual's ability to manage resources and influence others, including the ability to apply rewards and punishments, is a regular occurrence in everyday social life. In this case, heterosexuals, as the dominant group, may see bisexuals as social targets or vulnerable groups. Social power encourages people to process social objectives as tools rather than as persons with personalities. This can explain the dismissive attitude of the majority towards bisexuals in society. In addition, the prejudice against bisexuals by heterosexual and LGBTQ groups may be explained using Social Identity Theory (Hodson & Earle, 2020). Individuals establish social identities, i.e. understanding that they belong to specific groups of people or categories, which form part of their self-concept. People cease acting like individuals and start acting like members of a group when social identity is activated. When social identities are highlighted, one's self-perception and group behaviour

become normative and stereotyped as each member seeks to represent specific group features (Flanders, 2016). The stigma associated with bisexuality in heteronormative society and LGBTQ groups rendered the participants unable to identify with any one social group.

Identity Denial & experiences of Binegativity

Since bisexuality challenges the central notion of heterosexism, the fact that a person is bisexual can lead to strong reactions from society, such as a constant lack of attention and hostility. Identity denial may be a type of unsupportive response that can make people think bad things about them. One of the participants mentioned being fine with his sexual orientation; it's the others around him who make him feel bad about his bisexuality. Identity denial is described as the scenario in which a person is not acknowledged as a member of an important in-group (Cheryan & Monin, 2005). As a result of the denial of one's existence, bisexuals get their feelings of acceptance impacted. Since heterosexist culture doesn't acknowledge a bisexual person as its member can lead to social exclusion, alienation, and neglect. As mentioned by a participant, "People stop interacting with me once know I am a bisexual". The societal way of chucking away may make them feel bad about their sexuality, which explains the experiences of internalized biphobia. Binegativity which can be described as the widespread preconceptions, stigmas, and unfavourable attitudes that bisexual men and women suffer as a result of their sexual orientation can be found rooted in the ideas held by the majority of society that bisexuality is not a valid identity (Barker et al., 2012).

Guarding the traditional ideas of Masculinity & Femininity

Bisexuals and other sexual minorities' non-binary identity is an affront to heterosexist society's truths and heteronormative ways of living a life. There are occasions when bisexuality is perceived as diminishing the importance of the sex binary. In this context, dismissal, disregard, denial, and rejection are the societal ways of dealing with alternative realities. Society continues to undermine that bisexuality/homosexuality is a genuine and legitimate sexual orientation. For heterosexual women and men, the core of gender stereotypes is that they follow established gender norms (Blashill&Powlishta, 2009). Not adhering to these established norms can lead to criticism, lack of inclusion, prejudice, and hostility. As mentioned by one of the participants, "I have received criticism based on my sexuality on a daily basis, be it my choice of clothes, looks or soft-hearted nature". This can further explain the negative impact of not going as per societal expectations.

The fetishization and Negative Stereotypes

Those who identify as bisexual are often subjected to negative and stereotypical representations of sexual orientation. Fetishization in this context would mean paying unreasonable attention/fixation to the fact that bisexuals can date both males and females, which explains the process of turning bisexuals into sexual objects only because of some part of their personal or social characteristics. Thus, sexual objectification is yet another way to turn a bisexual person into a thing or object that doesn't have any of the characteristics that make a person human. This may be observed in one of the participants' responses, which said, "Biphobic insults, bierasure, and fetishizing bisexuality have become a part of my everyday routine." The interviews show that bisexual people often face stigma, prejudice, and discrimination because of their sexual orientation from both heterosexual and gay/lesbian people. It is part of what causes bad stereotypes to be negative: heterosexism and homosexualism. When people see a sexual expression that is not heteronormative, like same-gender sexual expression, they get indifferent, dismissive, and judgmental as can be seen in a participant's response where he said, "I've faced judgments, scrutiny, and isolation because of my sexuality."

Stigma and Negative expectations interrupt the need for social belonging

People hide their sexuality, are afraid to reveal their identities, and participate less in society because of stigma and negative expectations (Klesse, 2011). Bisexuals as denied members of society feel insecure and restrained when it comes to socialization. Due to the stigma associated with bisexuality, they do not feel their authentic version of self or identity while interacting with others. As human beings, we do not form deep and lasting relationships with others if the contact lacks

authenticity. Hence, negative expectations and fear of rejection may affect bisexuals' need for social belonging. As reported by a participant in her verbatim, "I feel the need of being vigilant all the time, this constant vigilance and safe-guarding has affected my social life".

Cognising Bisexuality as hypersexuality and openness to threesomes

Bisexual individuals often experience objectifying experiences because of their sexuality. Lewd ideas for threesomes are especially common among bisexual women. People in our culture are not shy about asking them questions about their sexual orientation, such as whether they're open to threesomes or if they're interested in sexual activities with other genders. For example, one participant shared her experiences, "people including my close friends got so many questions regarding threesomes and my sexual encounters with different genders, In India bisexuality, equals threesomes". Bisexuality is sometimes misunderstood because of a lack of understanding, which may lead to the belief that bisexuality and hypersexuality are equivalent. Due to this fact, a bisexual individual might get even more conscious about opening up to people fearing exploitations and inaccuracies/myths after identity revelation (Serpe, 2020). As can be observed in one of the participant's experiences, "I hide my bisexuality from my male friends in case they might get curious, you know." The responses demonstrate how these encounters have the potential to destroy a friendship/relationship. It demonstrates how biphobia may cause tremendous suffering and damage relationships.

Dilution of Bisexuality

Dilution of bisexuals occurs because bisexuals' sexuality is often denied in both the heterosexual and homosexual communities; as a result, they experience more discrimination and microaggression than their gay and lesbian peers. For instance, one of the participants mentioned, "identification with my sexuality was confusing as the only options were gay and lesbian". This response aligns with a widespread belief that one must either be straight or homosexual; there is no in-between. Furthermore, many persons in the LGBTQ community are under the assumption that bisexuals do not encounter prejudice because they may be passed off as heterosexuals. This lack of inclusion in both mainstreams can itself evoke the experiences of bisexual dilution and bi invisibility. As stated by a participant, "People don't get the concept of LGBTQ, B in LGBTQ is there for a reason." This, along with the negative stereotypes that people have about them, leads to a lot of misrepresentation in the media and a lot of sexualization of bisexual women (Yoshino, 2000).

Chances of being discriminated against

One needs to have one's own beliefs validated by others to preserve a stable sense of self and a predictable social reality, according to self-verification theory (Swann, 2012).

Restoration of a clear and positive self-concept after being stereotyped negatively requires self-verification. In the absence of adequate social support and positive self, bisexual individuals may have the chance of being discriminated against, for instance one participant talked about anticipations regarding life post coming out “Coming out may change your relationship or interactions with others.” When people reject one's sense of belonging to a group, it may impair one's sense of self-worth as well as their mental health (Leary, 2010). Experiences of invalidation and discrimination should have negative psychological effects since they undermine both one's ability to verify one's own identity and one's desire to fit in with others.

Unconstructive gate keeping within the community

Sometimes they face backlash within the LGBTQ community who are supposed to support them. Bisexuals have a lot of the same problems as gays and lesbians, but they also have to deal with “double discrimination”. They have to deal with discrimination from both heterosexuals and homosexuals. If someone is only straight or only gay, they may think that bisexual people are greedy and promiscuous, have not chosen a side, or are just going through a phase (Yoshino, 2000). Besides, some individuals are adamantly opposed to the existence of bisexuality. Participants reflected into the societal beliefs that there is no such thing as bisexuality and one is defined by their current partner's gender. Participants noted extra difficulties associated with being in a “straight appearing” (i.e., diverse pair) relationship or looking more feminine. For instance, one participant mentioned, “Some LGBTQ networks expect you to look non-binary, and this can be damaging”. Not adhering to the standards might lead to alienation from the LGBTQ community. One participant said, “The communities are toxic with abusers & enablers. Always sweeping their abusive history under the 'wokeness'”. The accounts provided by participants demonstrate the challenges that bisexual people face when confronted with prejudice from the community.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Bisexuals' lives are multifaceted and cannot be completely covered in a single qualitative research. This constraint may be solved by increasing the sample size and using mixed method designs. The participants were predominantly working, living in developed areas of the country, and speaking English, therefore cannot be generalized to other sections of the society. The present study focused on a range of experiences related to the LGBTQ community's involvement in bisexuals' lives, future studies can specifically focus on the 'community of bisexuals' as a whole, which acts as a buffer against the discriminatory gestures by the LGBTQ community. Since the focus of the present study was narrowed down to the psychosocial concerns of bisexuals' experiences, the implications were limited to psychological, cultural & social contexts. Future studies should broaden the range of issues and

ideas to capture the understanding of economical, linguistic and cultural diversity aspects.

Conclusion

The present research debunked bisexuality-related myths, prejudices, and preconceptions in India. The participants discussed how patriarchal norms govern the view of bisexuality, as well as cultural meaning systems and psychosocial dynamics that control parts of life as bisexuals, such as marginalisation, disclosure, membership in the LGBTQ community, and familial ties. They talked about being othered by LGBTQ groups due to their straight privilege. This finding is consistent with a previous study that discussed the straight privilege contributing to bisexuality's stigma in the Indian context; it explained the widespread belief that the majority of bisexuals would ultimately marry their straight spouses (Bowling et al., 2019). The importance of being closeted in the face of heteronormative influences was explored. The present study also highlighted the crucial role of the LGBTQ community on identity building and coming out.

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