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Fighting bisexual erasure with a double-edged sword: Experiences of successful and unsuccessful bisexual visibilities

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Abstract

Bisexual erasure results from the oppressive belief that sexuality is binary, rendering bisexuality culturally unintelligible and unimaginable. Researchers and activists call for increased bisexual visibility; however the concept remains largely critically unassessed. While visibility can challenge erasure it also comes with risks, as heightened exposure often reproduces practices of domination, marginalization, and surveillance. These risks are especially pertinent when considering bisexual visibility through an intersectional lens where the most marginalized are rendered most vulnerable. Building on research on bisexual visibility strategies, this article challenges a binary framing of visibility as inherently positive and invisibility as inherently negative, where intersectional subjectivities are often ignored. This article draws from qualitative interviews with 35 bisexual people in the UK, and I find that while many participants desired increased visibility, they also sought invisibility in certain contexts. Participants described utilizing verbal and visual visibility strategies to varying effects, as well as intentionally passing to maintain invisibility when desired. While passing has primarily been discussed in relation to harm reduction, it can also be understood as an agential resistance strategy in the face of hegemonic identity politics. I propose the concept of (un)successful visibility to better capture the nuance of bisexual visibility across diverse subjectivities and argue that successful bisexual visibility should be understood as the ability to be seen (or not seen) in the desired way. Successful visibility may include both visibility and invisibility when desired, and unsuccessful visibility describes erasure, misrecognition, and unwanted exposure.

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Introduction

The concept of bisexual visibility has gained prominence in activism and scholarship and is understood as central in challenging the marginalization of bisexuality that renders it culturally unintelligible, reinforcing the fictive reality that sexuality is binary (Hayfield, 2021; Nelson, 2023; Stewart, 2021; Yoshino, 2000). Despite the challenges to being visibly bisexual, research indicates that bisexual people actively seek visibility through various strategies, including visual cues and verbal communication (Davila et al., 2019; Hartman, 2013; Korinth et al., 2024; Miller, 2006; Nelson, 2020). Visibility scholars argue that recognition is crucial for marginalized groups, as invisibility results in exclusion and symbolic annihilation (Brighenti, 2007; Gross, 1991; Thompson, 2005). As a result, advocates promote greater bisexual visibility at the individual level, emphasizing "coming out" as a politically valuable milestone (Klein et al., 2015; McLean, 2007). Individual and wider cultural visibility is encouraged on social media platforms through the use of hashtags such as "#StillBisexual" and "#BisexualMenExist" on Instagram (Gonzalez et al., 2017; Rogers, 2020), and participation in TikTok trends such as "ayo, bisexual check" (Knopp-Schwyn and Fracentese, 2023). In the mass media sphere, GLAAD's (2024: 46) most recent "Where We Are in TV" report encourages an increase in bisexual representations, stating that "as executives plan for future year's slates of programming and strategies to reach new subscribers, they would be smart to consider the interests and potential of this sizable audience who are being left out of the story currently." However, I argue that uncritical calls for visibility do not necessarily combat bisexual erasure, and can reproduce exclusions and relations of domination through commodification and unwanted exposure. Benjamin (2019: 119) acknowledges that visibility is a worthy goal in the abstract, but asks: "what does it mean to be included, and hence more accurately identifiable, in an unjust set of social relations?" When the heightened visibility of subordinated groups is used to perpetuate violent practices, increased visibility comes with risks, and those most marginalized are rendered most vulnerable (Benjamin, 2019). Building on research on bisexual visibility strategies, this article challenges a binary framing of visibility as inherently positive and invisibility as inherently negative, where intersectional subjectivities are often ignored (Ghabrial, 2019; Ghabrial and Ross, 2018). Drawing from qualitative interviews with 35 bisexual people in the UK, I find that while many participants desired increased visibility, they also sought invisibility in certain contexts. Researchers have described the "success" of a visibility attempt as the likelihood of being recognized as bisexual (Davila et al., 2021), however this framework does not account for those who pursue any level of invisibility. I argue that success should be considered from the perspective of the individual making the visibility attempt, where successful visibility describes the ability to be seen in the desired way, which may include both visibility and invisibility when desired. For one participant, this meant being recognized as bisexual upon coming out, while for another it meant passing

as heterosexual to avoid discrimination. Alternatively, unsuccessful visibility describes experiences of erasure, misrecognition, and unwanted exposure. Bisexual visibility thus functions as a double-edged sword, where the risks of erasure are simultaneously mitigated and reproduced. Utilizing this framework, the unique desires and intersectional subjectivities of bisexual individuals are central, and uncritical calls for visibility that reinforce hegemonic identity politics and moralize one version of visibility over others can be decentered in the fight against erasure.

Unequal experiences of bisexual erasure and visibility

Bisexual people face unique barriers to recognition due to the binary framework of sexual knowledge and the inability to communicate bisexual identity through behaviors or relationships (Angelides, 2001; Hartman, 2013; Hayfield, 2020; Madison, 2017a; Monaco, 2021; Nelson, 2020, 2024). Bisexual visibility is further complicated by intersecting identities, necessitating an intersectional approach to visibility research (Ghabrial, 2019). Bisexual non-binary individuals face compounded invisibility in relation to both gender and sexuality (Feinstein et al., 2020; Hayfield, 2021), while bisexual people of color experience additional barriers due the way race is read on the body (Das Nair and Thomas, 2012). In a qualitative study conducted with bisexual women and gender diverse people of color, Ghabrial (2019) found that biracial and white passing bisexual people encounter misrecognition and erasure in relation to both their racial and sexual identities. Both racial and class diversity are often ignored in queer and bisexual research and community spaces, reinforcing the marginalization and erasure of bisexual people of color and working-class bisexual people (Alimahomed, 2010; Das Nair and Thomas, 2012; Ghabrial, 2019; Ghabrial and Ross, 2018; Hayfield, 2021; Lim and Hewitt, 2018). Addressing bisexual erasure requires an intersectional perspective that acknowledges the diversity of bisexual subjectivities to prevent the reinforcement of existing exclusions. While bisexual visibility combats erasure, supports political advocacy, and fosters identity and community, it does not come without risks (Davila et al., 2021; Hayfield, 2021; Korinth et al., 2024). Hayfield (2021: 74) argues that when heterosexual people "get the message" about queer identities based on appearance norms, "visibility can become vulnerability." The risks of unwanted exposure are especially pertinent when considering bisexual visibility through an intersectional lens. Bisexual women are frequently caught in a double bind between erasure and hypervisibility (Rodríguez, 2016), while racialized sexualization often leads bisexual women of color to conceal their identities (Ghabrial, 2019). Biphobia is reinforced when bisexual stereotypes intersect with those of other marginalized groups, such as the conflation of bisexual, working-class, and racialized promiscuity (Barker and Iantaffi, 2019; Klesse, 2011). Due to the diversity of bisexual subjectivities, visibility is not experienced equally (Ghabrial, 2019; Hayfield, 2021; Korinth et al., 2024; Nelson 2023).

Bisexual erasure extends beyond individual experiences to mainstream media and broader cultural representation (Barker and Iantaffi, 2019; De Barros, 2020; GLAAD, 2024; Hayfield, 2021; Nelson, 2023). The widespread use of social media further complicates the relationship between visibility and power as new technological

affordances allow individuals to be visible in ways previously impossible (Thompson, 2020). While social media provides bisexual individuals with opportunities for self-representation, challenging both cultural and individual erasure (Gonzalez et al., 2017; Hayfield, 2021; Knopp-Schwyn and Fracentese, 2023), scholars emphasize that increased visibility does not necessarily translate to greater acceptance (Johnson, 2016; Wood, 2022). In a study on the experiences of queer people who use social media, young bisexual people were found to experience the highest rates of sexuality-based discrimination and exclusion online (Nelson et al., 2023). This attack on and suppression of bisexuality online can be described by what McPherson (2024) terms a visibility backlash, where increased visibility for a marginalized group is met with attempts to discredit and invisibilize them. Although increased media visibility can help challenge erasure, researchers argue that visibility possibilities are still shaped and constrained by the political economy of social media platforms and the wider media industry (Duguay, 2016, 2023; Gamson, 1998; Jones, 2023; Thompson, 2020). While GLAAD's (2024) report advocates for increased bisexual representations by appealing to the profit-oriented logic of media executives, Gamson (1998: 12) warns that "cultural visibility, especially when it is taking place through commerce, is not a direct route to liberation; in fact, it can easily lead elsewhere." Today's media landscape has evolved since Gamson's (1998) study of queer identities and talk shows, but his insights on the mediated commodification of queer identities and the exclusions it perpetuates remain pertinent. Simpson and Semaan (2020: 24) describe how "algorithms construct and reconstruct exclusionary structures," a process they term "algorithmic exclusion." Through algorithmic exclusions, social media platforms like TikTok privilege and reproduce "a specific racially, temporally, and culturally positioned" image of bisexuality (Knopp-Schwyn and Fracentese, 2023). The commodification of identities under data capitalism reinforces exclusions, where the intersections, contradictions, and fluidity subjectivities are often lost (Jones, 2023). While the queer participants in Simpson and Semaan's (2020: 19) study described feeling "seen" by the TikTok algorithm as a positive experience, they expressed some discomfort with being categorized. For genderqueer individuals and people of color, being "seen" by algorithms often exacerbates violent surveillance practices (Andersen, 2025; Benjamin, 2019). The risks and advantages of heightened visibility and erasure are intensified in the current media landscape, where users may be afforded more control through their ability to represent themselves, while also being constrained, suppressed, and exposed by profit-oriented platform logics.

Bisexual visibility strategies

'Creating a bisexual display' and being out of uniform

In response to bisexual erasure and biphobia, bisexual individuals employ various visibility strategies both online and offline, including direct and indirect communication, visual cues, and community engagement (Davila et al., 2019, 2021; Feinstein et al., 2020, 2021; Hartman, 2013; Hartman-Linck, 2014; Hayfield, 2020; Hayfield et al., 2013; Korinth et al., 2024; Miller, 2006; Nelson, 2020, 2023, 2024). Recent surveys conducted by Davila et al. (2021) and Korinth et al. (2024) examine how, when, and why bisexual people attempt to make their bisexuality visible, and found that activism and pride are

primary motivations for increasing visibility. Research on bisexual appearance norms finds no clear visual standard for expressing nor recognising bisexual identity (Hartman, 2013; Hartman-Linck, 2014; Hayfield, 2020; Hayfield et al., 2013; Miller, 2006; Nelson, 2020). While previous studies focused primarily on bisexual women, recent work has included bisexual men (Rogers, 2020) and non-binary individuals (Nelson, 2020). Many bisexual people express uncertainty about how to make their identity visible and desire clearer visual codes to draw from (Knopp-Schwyn and Fracentese, 2023; Madison, 2017b; Nelson, 2020). Despite this, they attempt to signal their bisexuality through hybrid styles that blend queer and heterosexual signifiers, a concept Hartman-Linck (Hartman, 2013) termed "bisexual display" (Hayfield, 2020; Nelson, 2020). Along with mixing symbols, researchers find that bisexual people use specific "bi pride paraphernalia," such as pride flags and badges (Hartman, 2013; Hayfield, 2021; Korinth et al., 2024; Nelson, 2020). While visual cues are a commonly used strategy, their limitations have been noted. Mixing queer and heterosexual symbols often leads to misrecognition for bisexual people as they are often read as gay or lesbian (Knopp-Schwyn and Fracentese, 2023; Nelson, 2020), and recognition of bisexual pride flags and symbols remains limited even within bisexual communities (Hartman, 2013). While there is no definitive bisexual look, Knopp-Schwyn and Fracentese (2023) argue that a prototypical bisexual social uniform is being collectively developed through TikTok.

Some researchers argue that the desire for bisexual appearance norms to draw from is misguided, as appearance norms can limit fluidity and reinforce exclusions (Hayfield, 2020, 2021, Madison, 2017, 2017b). Madison (2017b) notes that while her research participants expressed a desire for visibility in terms of wearable symbols, it is often expressed in terms of commodification, which may undermine autonomy and diversity. On platforms like TikTok, algorithmic exclusions privilege wealthy, white users, reinforcing a dominant "bisexual social uniform" that erases bisexual people of color and working-class bisexuals (Knopp-Schwyn and Fracentese, 2023). Although some bisexual people seek a cohesive look, others prefer the absence of strict visual codes (Hartman, 2013; Hayfield, 2021; Miller, 2006). Hartman-Linck (Hartman, 2013: 52) describes how her participants viewed the lack of visual bisexual codes as "being out of uniform," where they were neither in the "dyke uniform" nor the "straight uniform." While the congealment of bisexual appearance norms based on sartorial style makes bisexual identity easier to perform for some, it becomes more difficult to perform for others, disadvantaging people of color and working-class people. Additionally, a recognized set of bisexual appearance norms may put bisexual people at greater risk of biphobia and discrimination, where visibility becomes vulnerability in an unjust set of social relations.

The disclosure imperative and strategic invisibility

Due to limitations of conveying a bisexual identity through appearance, researchers argue that direct verbal communication, primarily through coming out, is essential for individual bisexual visibility (Hayfield, 2020, 2021; Nelson, 2020). While coming out is often framed as a positive experience that supports a healthy identity development (Hayfield, 2021; McLean, 2007; Nelson, 2023), bisexuality's general invisibility means coming out

is never one singular act with a permanent outcome, but an ongoing process requiring repeated disclosure (Hayfield, 2021; Nelson, 2020, 2024). Social media provides greater representational control, enabling bisexual individuals to instantly reach a broad audience while creating a lasting archive through hashtags and coming-out videos (Alexander and Losh, 2010; Gonzalez et al., 2017; Hayfield, 2021; Madison, 2017a; Nelson, 2023; Rogers, 2020). While coming out in-person or online helps enable positive identity development and challenge bisexual erasure, the increased visibility can increase vulnerability to harm (Alexander and Losh, 2010; Nelson et al., 2023). Additionally, although Davila et al. (2021) find direct verbal communication the most "successful" visibility method, it still has its limitations. Nelson's (2023) interview study highlights how bisexual identities are often forgotten or dismissed even after coming out. Ultimately, visibility is never entirely within one's control, as meaning is always negotiated between representation and audience (Hall, 1997).

Many researchers critique the framing of coming out as an essential step in queer identity development, describing it as the disclosure imperative (Klein et al., 2015; McLean, 2007; Nelson, 2024; Sander, 2022). Researchers argue that the disclosure imperative encourages others to come out despite associated risks, where coming out is positioned as "more moral, more healthy, and more politically valuable" (Klein et al., 2015: 316; McLean, 2007). This reinforces the deviant status of bisexuality, as bisexual people face unique barriers to the morally superior position of being "out" (Hayfield, 2021). While many bisexual people do desire and attempt to come out, others choose not to for safety or fear of rejection, and many engage in strategic outness where disclosure varies by context (Nelson, 2023, 2024; Sandler, 2022). An intersectional approach reveals how the disclosure imperative reproduces marginalization through the reinforcement of a singular, white-centric identity politics. While Klein et al. (2015: 320) argue that the "good, out queer" narrative marginalizes those who face additional barriers to coming out or approach it non-normatively, this can be challenged and resisted through reconceptualizing coming out (Alimahomed, 2010; Beckett, 2010; Sandler, 2022). For example, some queer Black activists have utilized online spaces and their affordances to reframe coming out as "coming in," disrupting heteronormative discourses (Beckett, 2010; Sandler, 2022). Some bisexual people strategically pass as hetero- or homosexual due to the risks associated with bisexual visibility, and literature on bisexual passing tends to focus on harm reduction (Feinstein et al., 2020; Maliepaard, 2017; Nelson, 2024). As a result of the disclosure imperative, bisexual people often feel guilt and stress surrounding passing, which researchers associate with poor mental health outcomes (Feinstein et al., 2020; Hayfield, 2021; McLean, 2007; Nelson, 2024). While bisexual people strategically pass for complex reasons (Nelson, 2024), Feinstein et al. (2020) note that attention to the motivations behind passing has been limited. Although intentional passing is often discussed in relation to safety, many of Ghabrial's (2019) participants take pleasure in the fluidity that their invisibility offers them. Eisner (2013: 118) argues that passing disrupts identity hierarchies, as those "worthy" of privilege are indistinguishable from the "unworthy," and in this way, passing can be a subversive tool. Ghabrial (2019) argues that the negative mental health effects associated with passing can be mitigated when passing is used as a tool for social justice. While researchers have found that many bisexual people

report activism as an important motivation for making their identity visible (Davila et al., 2021; Korinth et al., 2024), Ghabrial's (2019) findings highlight that it is not the only viable resistance strategy.

Defining success: A critical framework of (un)successful bisexual visibility

Davila et al. (2019, 2021) write that their findings raise the question of whether strategies for enacting bisexual visibility are successful, which they address in their following study. Davila et al. (2021: 99) define a "successful" visibility attempt as one that "...increases the chances that people will know someone is bi." While Davila et al. (2021: 104) argue that a better understanding of "what is successful from the point of view of the perceiver" is needed, I argue that the experience and goals of the bisexual person making the visibility attempt should be central, as intersectional experiences are still erased and misunderstood within Western research (Das Nair and Thomas, 2012). Hartman-Linck (2014: 191) notes that "the ways bisexuals try to reveal themselves have been overlooked by prior research because of the fact that these strategies, overall, have not been particularly effective in being perceived by others as bisexual cues." In developing the concept of a bisexual display, Hartman-Linck (Hartman, 2013: 43) argues that it is understood through the intentions of the bisexual person themself, where "less important is how successfully their projection is perceived by an audience." Hartman-Linck (2014) argues that bisexual displays can help foster feelings of wholeness for the bisexual subject, even when these displays are not read as bisexual by viewers. Utilising an intersectional approach, this study develops recent research into bisexual visibility strategies and reframes notions of success by drawing on Hartman-Linck's (Hartman, 2013, 2014) concept of a bisexual display and critical literature on bisexual appearances, the disclosure imperative, and strategic invisibility.

Methods

The empirical data analyzed in this study was collected through semi-structured qualitative interviews with 35 bisexual people in the UK which took place between 2022 and 2023. The data analyzed is part of a wider PhD thesis on the relationship between bisexual audiences and representations of bisexuality in popular culture. All participants identify as being under the bisexual umbrella, but not all participants use the label bisexual. While most of the participants identify as bisexual, others identify as queer, pansexual, gay, use multiple labels, or prefer to use no label. Because participants all identify as being under the bisexual umbrella, the word 'bisexual' is used when referring to them as a group. However, the specific preferred identity label is used when referring to individual participants. Participants range between 20 and 45 years old. The majority of participants are white, with 10 participants being people of color. One participant identifies as Black, two participants identify as South Asian, one participant identifies as East Asian, one participant identifies as Southeast Asian, and five participants identify as biracial. 16 participants are women, 12 are men, and seven are non-binary. The majority of participants

described themselves as middle-class, with four describing themselves as upper class and five as working-class. Most participants lived in cities, while a few lived in suburban and rural areas. Participants were recruited through posters in businesses and community spaces in a city in south-east England, through posts on social media platforms, through online and offline queer and bisexual networks, and through the researcher's personal networks using a snowball sampling method. The snowball sampling method was used for its advantage in recruiting participants from marginalized communities who are sometimes difficult to reach (Liamputtong, 2011). The qualitative interview method allowed for nuance and depth in the discussion of bisexual identity and experiences of visibility, which was important to the study. The interviews were semi-structured, and followed a loose topic guide. Participants were asked questions surrounding their identity, their media practices, and their feelings and opinions regarding bisexual representation and visibility broadly. To reduce harm and treat participants with care, I closely followed the advice in "Guidelines for Researching and Writing about Bisexuality" by Barker et al. (2012). The authors urge researchers to be careful of perpetuating harm by erasing bisexuality, universalising bisexual experiences, and ignoring intersectionality (Barker et al., 2012). The interview data was coded and analyzed using thematic analysis. Because the research seeks to challenge bisexual erasure and prioritize bisexual voices, participants were given the option of having their name attached to their narratives. Participants who chose to use their name were informed of the risks related to this decision, and participants who wished to remain anonymous were given a pseudonym. This research was approved by the University of Cambridge Sociology Ethics and Risk Assessment for Research Committee in June, 2022. Through semi-structured interviews with bisexual people, this research develops our understanding of bisexual visibility and what successful visibility entails in the words of bisexual people themselves.

Successful bisexual visibility: From recognition to invisibility

"You look exactly bisexual today": Visual cues, hybridity, and being out of uniform

This study's findings indicate that bisexual people employ a variety of strategies to experience successful visibility, defined as the ability to be seen, or not seen, in the desired way. Following recent research findings, my research indicates that visual and verbal cues are primary for enacting bisexual visibility (Davila et al., 2019, 2021; Korinth et al., 2024). Participants reported attempting to enact visibility through the use of visual cues and style, including pride paraphernalia. Jason, a 45-year-old white man, said that he sometimes wears a face mask printed with a bisexual flag because he likes its subtlety. He said, "what's interesting about the bi flag is it's actually very unknown, and so in a sense…some people will know what these mean, most won't." While bisexual pride paraphernalia limits bisexual visibility due to its lack of widespread recognition, Jason found this quality desirable (Hartman, 2013). Because the bisexual pride flag is more specific and less recognized than the rainbow gay pride flag, Jason felt like he had more control over what he was visible as and who he was visible to. Participants described using

sartorial style more often than specific pride paraphernalia, and Cat, who uses they/them pronouns, said that once they began attempting to be visibly queer through their style, they felt more confident and comfortable with themself. They said,

> I think I spent a lot of time existing in this version of myself that didn't really feel authentic…the way that I, like, aesthetically presented was a massive thing. I had long hair until, like, 2019. So it's only within the last few years that my appearance has changed, and as soon as I did that, I was like, "this feels so much better." I started looking at mirrors and being like, "oh, wow, I look really cool today." I just never really had that before. I didn't even realize that I was missing those moments, because I'd never had them (Cat, 25, white, non-binary).

Cat's newfound confidence did not necessarily stem from being perceived as queer by others, but from their own self-perception. This aligns with Hartman-Linck's (2014) finding that a bisexual display fosters feelings of wholeness and authenticity, independent from external recognition. Regardless of whether Cat's queerness was recognized, their visibility attempt could be deemed successful due to the positive feelings it evoked.

Due to the lack of specific bisexual appearance norms, participants described borrowing from gay and lesbian signifiers to communicate a bisexual identity. Joe described getting creative when attempting to make his bisexual identity visible, and said,

> I feel pretty confident in my own identity. It's nice to be able to, like, to not have as prescribed an identity as I would have if I was gay…I do sometimes leave the house and my friends are like, "you look exactly bisexual today." Because I'm, like, picking…I've got a few, like, gay signifiers and a few straight signifiers just sort of, like, mixed together (Joe, 26, white man).

Joe's use of hybridity in creating a bisexual display aligns with existing literature on bisexual appearances, highlighting its significance in performing bisexuality (Hartman, 2013; Hayfield, 2020; Miller, 2006; Nelson, 2020). While researchers argue that hybridity generally "fails" to communicate bisexuality as it still read as either hetero- or homosexual (Knopp-Schwyn and Fracentese, 2023; Nelson, 2020), Joe's visual hybridity was recognized, as reflected in his friends' remarks that he looks "exactly bisexual." While some participants expressed their desire for more explicit bisexual signifiers they could wear, other participants like Joe were happy there were none, preferring a less "prescribed" identity. When asked if he would wear specific bisexual signifiers if they existed, Joe said, "I feel like if there was, it's in my personality to not want to wear, like, a coded uniform. I think that's the good part…I can pick and choose based on, like, what I feel like as me." Joe's choice of words echo Hartman-Linck's (Hartman, 2013: 52) participants who described taking pleasure in "being out of uniform." Joe expressed that "the good part" of being bisexual is the fluidity it allows him in his expression of his identity. His description of a specific bisexual style as a "uniform" highlights how the creation of a bisexual style might close down opportunities for unique, diverse expressions. While the majority of research on bisexual appearance norms focuses on bisexual women (Knopp-Schwyn and Fracentese, 2023), the bisexual displays created by Jason, Cat, and Joe demonstrate the use of these strategies across gender. Although visual cues were the most common

visibility strategy among my participants, this approach has limitations. Not all bisexual people are able to safely use recognisable queer visual cues, and presenting as queer is less risky for those with more privilege. Edward described how his class privilege allows him to express his bisexuality more openly. Edward said,

> I think something about my class background probably made it slightly easier as well to be very kind of effeminate, in terms of fashion sense…you're allowed to kind of be a bit more flamboyant in terms of what you wear and get away with (Edward, 28, white man).

Because of Edward's class privilege, utilising queer signifiers that subvert gender norms was not as risky as it might be for working-class queer men. While many participants utilized queer signifiers in their bisexual displays, the strategy's success is limited by intersecting identities. The fluidity and adaptability that visual cues allow for help foster feelings of individuality, authenticity, and control, which are all qualities that participants valued. While a uniform bisexual style might make bisexual identity more recognisable to the viewer, this would limit their ability to be visible on their own terms. Additionally, the standardization of a bisexual look would limit fluidity, fixing the bisexual subject to a set of visual cues, which can reproduce exclusionary practices for those who cannot conform.

Verbal disclosure and control: "setting the story straight" and bringing people in

While the hybridity and fluidity of visual cues leave room for interpretation, verbally disclosing a bisexual identity through "coming out" provides greater control over how one is perceived. The majority of participants reported being out as bisexual in some aspects of their life while concealing their identity in others. For Sylvan, explicitly stating his bisexuality to his family allowed for clearer self-representation. He said,

> It was really…setting the story straight. I very explicitly asked my mom, "did you know this already?" And she was like, "I guess? I didn't really think about it," but someone had asked her if I was bisexual before, and she was like, "I'm not sure, maybe." So…it felt important, sort of speaking to them. I've always been very open with them, and have been able to share things in a way that hasn't required, like, loads of detail, but in this context it felt like it was, like, essential. There has been absolutely no reduction to the bisexual part at all (Sylvan, 26, white man).

For Sylvan, explicitly articulating his bisexual identity to his family was crucial for "setting the story straight." Coming out not only validated and secured acceptance of his bisexuality but also transformed his mother's previous uncertainty into a clearer understanding, giving Sylvan greater control over how his bisexuality was perceived. While participants like Sylvan felt validated by positive reactions from friends and family upon coming out, they generally acknowledged that coming out as bisexual could never be permanently accomplished, as coming out as bisexual is often more complicated than coming out as gay or lesbian (Hayfield, 2021; Nelson, 2020, 2024). Joe felt required to

repeatedly verbalize his bisexuality, and said, "you have to keep doing that to, like, everyone that you ever meet. Even if you're, like, in a relationship." Because sexual orientation is often read through relationships, bisexuality is frequently misread as either heterosexuality or homosexuality when monogamous bisexual people are understood in relation to their current partner (Hayfield, 2021; Madison, 2017b; Nelson, 2023, 2024). Although some participants expressed frustration at the perpetual need to come out, it allowed for more control over who participants revealed their bisexuality to.

Not all participants have been able to safely come out to friends, family, or their workplace. For Mary, coming out to her family is not a safe option. She said that cultural factors can make coming out particularly difficult for queer Black people like herself. Instead of coming out through direct verbal communication with everyone in her life, Mary found a different way to conceptualize successful visibility. She said,

> The way in which coming out as a Black queer person is…the concept of it is kind of, like, different, I guess. For me, I view it less as coming out and more of, like, bringing people to come in, and if they're trusted, then it's, like, I feel I can share this part of myself with you (Mary, 22, Black woman).

Mary's re-framing of coming out as "coming in" is utilized by other queer people of color and queer Black activists who challenge the disclosure imperative (Beckett, 2010; Sandler, 2022). This is an example of one way queer and bisexual people of color refuse to adhere to white and Western-centric norms of visibility and singular identity politics (Alimahomed, 2010). Rather than seeking acceptance and inclusion through coming out, queer and bisexual people of color like Mary create their own spaces, inviting others in without conforming to normative identity ideals. This practice of "bringing people to come in" is not a less healthy or less moral choice driven by shame, but rather a deliberate act of agency, resistance, and empathy (Alimahomed, 2010; Klein et al., 2015). Successful visibility does not necessarily mean being seen as bisexual by everyone in a person's life. Instead, it describes a range of possible positions between invisibility and visibility, where bisexual people have control over how, when, and who they come out to, as well as who they bring in.

Invisibility as successful visibility: Harm reduction and agential resistance

Many participants enacted control over their visibility through strategic invisibility. Being visible as bisexual was not always the goal, and a few participants discussed their attempts to pass as heterosexual or homosexual. Kate sometimes enjoys passing as heterosexual to avoid injury, and said,

> I had a lot of homophobic bullying as a teenager in school…and I had a lot of negative experiences associated with people identifying me as [queer] all the way up until I was 20 or 21. So now when people are surprised, I get a little gratification, like, okay, I can pass as a straight girl...I think after wanting to do it for years it's kind of nice…and I know that's not something I should want, but it's nice anyway (Kate, 22, white woman).

Bisexual people choose to pass for complex reasons which are generally discussed in relation to harm reduction, illustrated in Kate's experience (Maliepaard 2017; Nelson, 2020). While being seen as bisexual increases the risk of harm for anyone, those with intersecting marginalized identities may prioritize invisibility to avoid these dangers. Evie said that she attempts to hide her bisexual identity to reduce experiences of discrimination. She said,

> The bisexuality of myself is something that's most private to me that I don't often tell people about, and maybe that's because…there are so many minority sides of me already here. But I try to hide some of them so that I don't become too strange, or too much of the "other" to people (Evie, 28, East Asian woman).

Along with Evie, other women participants of color described intentionally passing as monosexual to avoid harm. While passing is often used to mitigate harm, it can be a source of stress for some bisexual people (Feinstein et al., 2020; Nelson, 2020). Kate felt guilty that passing as straight is something she desires, which stems from the disclosure imperative that frames identity concealment as unhealthy and immoral (Klein et al., 2015). Rowan discussed feeling pressured to come out to her family, and said,

> I've been in spaces before with, like, white queers who've said that young queer people owe it to the community and to society to come out fully to their families because, like, that's a noble thing to do. And if you don't do that, then you're, like, erasing queerness for the whole community, which needs to progress. That's something that has, like, always really bothered me to hear from people who don't understand what it would be like to navigate that [as a queer person of color] (Rowan, 25, biracial woman).

Zoya echoed Rowan's frustration with the Western- and white-centric disclosure imperative, and said,

> It's a very dangerous narrative to have, where it's like, "but this is more important"…people don't understand the way that it is in my culture, where leaving my home, and "choosing myself," obviously means, like, not having parents. It's a luxury to say "just come out." I don't think you should ever have to come out if you don't want to (Zoya, 24, South Asian woman).

For Zoya, coming out to her Muslim family could result in being disowned, an experience that many queer people of color must navigate (Ghabrial, 2017). Recent studies highlight how bisexual visibility strategies are often used for activism (Davila et al., 2021; Korinth et al., 2024), yet not all bisexual people can do this safely or comfortably. Rowan and Zoya expressed frustration with the expectation that coming out is a community obligation, emphasizing that visibility carries greater risks for them than for their white counterparts. However, while some participants utilize strategic invisibility for harm reduction, they also found invisibility to be a source of power. Ethan said,

> I don't feel the need to tell anyone. I don't want to have to, like, be any category for anyone. So I've avoided that generally, and I think I enjoy demarcating my life a little bit. I don't want to be everything I am to everyone all the time…I don't feel the need to give everything of me to everyone. I found it more comfortable to be able to negotiate new relationships of any kind with that degree of power (Ethan, 26, white man).

Ethan rejected the pressure to make his identity visible and coherent for other people through coming out. Rather than framing this choice as strictly harm reduction, Ethan described enjoying the degree of power that passing afforded him. Thus, passing is not simply an undesirable and stressful identity management strategy, but a source of power and resistance (Alimahomed, 2010; Ghabrial, 2019). While being visibly bisexual is an undeniably important and impactful activist strategy, it is not the only resistance strategy. When intentional passing is solely understood through a lens of fear and shame, we deny agency to those who utilize invisibility for subversive purposes. Strategic invisibility can be successful in mitigating biphobic and homophobic harm, as well as challenging wider hegemonic queer identity politics that demand visible, coherent identities, which perpetuate intersectional vulnerabilities.

Unsuccessful visibility: Erasure, misrecognition, and unwanted exposure

While bisexual people attempt to control how they are seen through visual cues, direct communication, and strategic invisibility, they may still experience erasure and unwanted exposure. Direct verbal communication does not always result in successful visibility. Rowan said,

> I feel like I've already had several years of saying to friends in conversations that I was bi and that feeling like an important part of me, but just in the interactions that we had, it sort of felt like that side of my identity was never really kind of affirmed or acknowledged (Rowan, 25, biracial woman).

Although Rowan explicitly communicated to her friends that she was bisexual, her attempt at visibility was unsuccessful as she felt invalidated. Even when bisexual identity is explicitly communicated, it may still be dismissed or invalidated, contributing to the persistent invisibility bisexual individuals can experience despite making visibility attempts (Nelson, 2024). While engagement in queer communities can enhance visibility (Davila et al., 2019; Korinth et al., 2024), bisexual people encounter unique barriers to these spaces, often facing discrimination from gay and lesbian members (Nelson, 2023). Even when participating in queer community, many participants felt like their identities were misread. Harry described feeling reluctant to engage in queer community because he was in a heterosexual relationship and feared the repercussions of unsuccessful visibility. He said,

> I feel like sometimes these days, maybe part of the reason I'm less likely to go to stuff…because I have a girlfriend, I feel like sometimes I could be seen as a phoney, or, you know, somebody who's just, like... wants to be labelled as bi because it makes them interesting, or something like that (Harry, 28, white man).

Due to the way sexual orientation is often read through relationships (Hayfield, 2021; Madison, 2017b; Nelson, 2024), Harry was reluctant to engage in queer community events for fear of being misrecognized as heterosexual. While intentional passing can be a source of power and resistance, unintentional passing impedes positive experiences of recognition and validation. Bisexual people of color and working-class bisexual people face additional and intersectional discrimination within queer community (Alimahomed, 2010; Das Nair and Thomas, 2012; Lim and Hewitt, 2018), and Khadija said,

> I've been to queer events and have been the only, like, person of color there…You always feel, like, a little bit outside everybody else. Or there will be, like, a discussion going and obviously I didn't grow up in the same sort of, like, cultural spaces that everybody else did. And I'm like, I don't actually know what you're talking about, or people will just say really insensitive things in terms of race or class (Khadija, 20, South Asian woman).

As a working-class woman of color, Khadija has experienced exclusion from predominantly white, middle-class queer spaces. While such communities are often celebrated for promoting queer visibility, they can simultaneously erase the subjectivities of working-class queer people of color. Consequently, engagement in queer communities does not necessarily result in successful visibility, as bisexuality can be misrecognized and intersectional bisexual subjectivities are often ignored and erased.

Participants described discomfort with unwanted exposure, disproportionately impacting those subjected to intersecting relations of domination. Many women participants experienced fetishization, emphasizing the way racism, misogyny, and biphobia intersect to intensify experiences of sexual objectification (Ghabrial, 2019; Rodríguez, 2016). Amber, a 22-year-old biracial woman, said "feeling like an object for men as both a woman of color and as a bisexual person is…a very unpleasant experience." For participants like Amber, being seen as bisexual by white men led to feelings of objectification and reduced feelings of agency. Experiences of misrecognition and unwanted exposure can take place in the online sphere as well as offline. Robin was uncomfortable with the way her queerness was commodified on TikTok, and said,

> It felt like it was, like, telling me who I was, and I was like, this is annoying, I'm not choosing these things. It felt very much, like, exploitive…I started getting loads of ads that were like, "as a queer person, you should buy this thing." I don't like the pre-packaging of, like, who I am to be sold (Robin, 22, biracial woman).

Robin's experience aligns with Simpson and Semaan's (2020) findings, where participants expressed discomfort with being "seen," categorized, and commodified by the TikTok algorithm. While research highlights social media's potential to enhance bisexual

self-representation and agency (Nelson, 2023; Wood, 2022), participants like Robin reported diminished agency, feeling powerless against the algorithmic categorization that reinforces rigid identity categories. Under data capitalism, platforms like TikTok prioritize data aggregation, requiring a coherent visual bisexual identity to optimize targeted advertising. In today's media landscape, surveillance technologies transform users into data points, often resulting in unwanted exposure and unsuccessful visibility (Jones, 2023).

Conclusion

When advocating for bisexual visibility, we must be careful not to assume a one-size-fits-all model where heightened visibility is always desirable, and invisibility is always injurious. Rather than framing the success of a visibility attempt as the extent that a person will be recognized as bisexual, I argue that a focus on the visibility goals of the person making the attempt determines its success. According to this framework, successful visibility describes experiences of being recognized as bisexual by others as well as experiences of intentional passing and strategic invisibility. While unsuccessful visibility describes experiences of bisexual erasure and misrecognition, it also encapsulates experiences of unwanted exposure. Bisexual people are situated within a range of diverse identity intersections which shape their relationships with visibility. For bisexual people with multiple marginalized identities, heightened visibility can become vulnerability, and many participants of color utilized strategic invisibility to manage the risks of unwanted exposure. An intersectional approach to bisexual visibility is thus crucial in prioritizing the bisexual visibility needs of those most vulnerable, where uncritical calls for visibility can reproduce hegemonic relations of domination and exclusion. Through the reification of bisexual appearance norms and the proliferation of the disclosure imperative, a white, middle- and upper-class bisexual subject is constructed, perpetuating the erasure of bisexual people of color and working-class bisexual people. This process is intensified in today's media landscape where algorithms reinforce fixed identity categories, perpetuating the exclusions of those who cannot conform (Andersen, 2025; Jones, 2023). While a framework of (un)successful visibility risks the reification of yet another binary, it crucially destabilizes the moral values placed on visibility strategies that privilege a singular identity politics and erase intersectional bisexual subjectivities. Although successful visibility is valued over unsuccessful visibility, this framework does not privilege any strategy over another. Because visibility strategies that utilize visual cues, verbal communication, and community involvement are often easier for those with more privilege, they should not be framed as morally superior or crucial for liberation. For some, strategic invisibility is not a product of shame or internalized biphobia, but an agential resistance strategy that challenges the disclosure imperative and the commodification of identity categories. Uncritical calls for visibility fight bisexual erasure with a double-edged sword, simultaneously increasing recognition and heightening vulnerability. Through an exploration of the unequal risks associated with bisexual visibility, we see how uncritical calls for inclusion that do not consider intersectional experiences put those most vulnerable on the frontlines.

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Consent to participate

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Consent for publication

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Data Availability Statement

The datasets generated during and/or analyzed during the current study are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

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