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Contested Sexual Identities and Bi+ Identity Disclosure Experiences

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ABSTRACT

Bi+ people (those who are attracted to or romantically involved with individuals of more than one gender, including bisexual people) face unique forms of social stigma, such as having their identity contested by heterosexual and sexual minority peers. The present work suggests that having one's identity contested by others is associated with poorer quality disclosure experiences. We first document differences in the disclosure experiences of people with bi+ identities and those with monosexual minority identities (i.e., lesbian, gay), demonstrating differences in identity contestedness and correlated disclosure outcomes (Study 1). Then, across Studies 1 and 2, totaling 397 bi+ participants in the U.S., we demonstrate that bi+ identity contestedness is associated with greater uncertainty about recipients' attitudes toward the discloser's identity, which is associated with less positive disclosure outcomes. Importantly, we also demonstrate that more engaging responses from recipients (i.e., those who discuss the discloser's bi+ identity) are associated with less uncertainty about recipients' attitudes and more positive outcomes. Together, these findings highlight targetable factors (e.g., reducing experiences of identity contestedness, increasing discussions of bi+ identity support) to improve the bi+ population's identity disclosure experiences, with implications for forming supportive social networks and improving health.

KEYWORDS

Contested identities; stigma; bisexuality; LGBTQ+; bi+; identity disclosure

People with bi+ identities (those who are attracted to or romantically involved with individuals of more than one gender, including bisexual people) report that people both inside and outside the LGBTQ+ community have told them that their identity is not a real sexual identity (Flanders, 2015; Garr-Schultz & Gardner, 2019; Israel & Mohr, 2004). The unique stigma of having one's identity denied, questioned, or contested by others is a likely precursor to identity concealment and has been documented to reduce bi+ groups' mental health (Maimon et al., 2021). Lower rates of identity disclosure among bi+ people (Barringer et al., 2017; Doan & Mize, 2020) limit their ability to receive valuable, health-benefiting social support

from others both inside and outside of the LGBTQ+ community (Friedman et al., 2019). The present work examines the role of sexual identity contestedness (i.e., having one's sexual identity contested or disputed by others, or perceiving that it is questioned; see Howarth, 2002) in bi+ Americans' disclosure experiences.

Bi+ identity contestedness and disclosure statement experiences

Established self-determination and emotional attachment theories suggest that all people are fundamentally motivated to seek belonging with others and to live autonomously in such a way that their actions align with their inner beliefs and values (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000). For people with concealable stigmatized identities (identities that are traditionally thought to be nonvisible and thus capable of being hidden, such as sexual orientation), identity disclosure serves as both a method to strengthen ties to their social network and an opportunity to live more authentically by presenting oneself in a way that is consistent with their sexual identity (Legate et al., 2017; Ryan & Ryan, 2019). Thus, sexual orientation disclosure, or the lack thereof, has long been explored as a predictor of sexual minorities' biological, psychological, and social outcomes (e.g., Pachankis, 2007; Rosario et al., 2009; Ryan et al., 2015). Indeed, although the majority of this work suggests positive outcomes of sexual identity disclosure, including promoting the discloser's relationships and well-being (e.g., Chaudoir & Quinn, 2010; Cipollina et al., 2022a, 2022b), disclosure also risks rejection by others and consequent negative outcomes such as poorer health and fear of disclosing again (see Quinn, 2017). Perception of such risks often reduces sexual orientation disclosure for lesbian/gay and bi+ people (e.g., JacquesAviñó et al. 2018).

We argue that the disclosure experiences of bi+ people may be unique due to the particular identity-disaffirming stressors they experience relative to their monosexual minority peers (i.e., those identifying as lesbian or gay). For instance, bi+ people must contend with the idea that their identity is not real or stable (e.g., that they are truly either gay/lesbian or heterosexual; Dyar & Feinstein, 2018; Maimon et al., 2021), and they have to defend their bi+ identity to preserve their autonomy. For instance, in qualitative research, bisexual participants report feeling that they must prove their bisexual identity to others by engaging in sexual acts with individuals of more than one gender (Flanders et al., 2016). When compared to lesbian and gay people, bisexual people report greater experiences of identity denial by others—both straight and lesbian/gay sources (Garr-Schultz & Gardner, 2019). Importantly, the pervasiveness of sexual identity denial is associated with poorer mental health and a lower sense of

belonging among bisexual participants in prior research (Maimon et al., 2021). Indeed, this unique identity stressor can be cognitively, physiologically, and emotionally taxing and can produce greater expectations of stereotyping by others (Albuja et al., 2019a; Feinstein et al., 2019; Maimon et al., 2021; Roberts et al., 2015), likely contributing to the various health disparities experienced by bi+ groups (e.g., Bostwick & Hequembourg, 2014; Steele et al., 2009).

Identity contestedness may shape bi+ identity disclosure experiences by influencing disclosers' perceptions of the attitudes of disclosure recipients and, in turn, the outcomes of identity disclosure (e.g., feelings of support from others). Due to self-fulfilling prophecy effects (see Madon et al., 2011, for a review), prior theorists have suggested that expectations of disclosure can shape outcomes. For instance, the disclosure processes model (Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010) suggests that those who have negative expectations may disclose in ways that promote negative responses from disclosure recipients. Some recent work supports this theory. Disclosers who were focused on ascertaining recipients' attitudes toward their identity reported less satisfying disclosure experiences than those who focused on potential positive outcomes (e.g., improving their relationship with the recipient; Cipollina et al., 2022a). To our knowledge, no disclosure research has considered the role of identity contestedness in sexual identity disclosure experiences.

Sexual identity disclosure can validate and affirm sexual minorities' sexual identity or leave disclosers with greater uncertainty about their identity. For instance, prior work suggests that disclosure recipients' responses vary, ranging from explicit discussions of the discloser's identity to less direct responses that brush over the disclosed identity (e.g., Cipollina et al., 2022b; Sylaska & Edwards, 2014). These studies suggest that more engaged responses that include a verbal discussion of the identity give disclosers greater identity-affirming support compared to responses that do not discuss the identity or discuss it less extensively (Cipollina et al., 2022b). For people whose identity has been contested, this additional verbal support may be needed to counteract negative expectations of how others will respond to their identity disclosure. In other words, disclosers who perceive their identity as being contested by others or by society may experience heightened uncertainty about disclosure recipients' attitudes toward their sexual identity, which, if left undiscussed, may produce more negative disclosure outcomes.

Some prior research has documented that bi+ people have more negative disclosure experiences than lesbian and gay people, and this effect may be exacerbated by the discloser's gender. For example, multiple studies have found that bisexual men report more disclosure stress compared to bisexual women (Mallory et al., 2021; Pollitt et al., 2017). Such gender

differences may stem in part from conceptions that bi+ men are more likely to “actually” be gay, while bi+ women are more often assumed to “actually” be straight (e.g., McGorray & Petsko, 2023; Morgenroth et al., 2021). Indeed, societal prejudices toward lesbian, gay, and bisexual people vary across time (for a review, see Worthen, 2013), with more recent research noting that bisexual men are subject to the most negative attitudes (e.g., Friedman et al., 2014), which may make their disclosure experiences particularly stressful (Baams et al., 2015). Critically, little prior research has compared the disclosure experiences of bi+ and lesbian and gay people (e.g., Baams, et al., 2015; Rosario et al., 2009), and no research has explored how bi+ people’s experiences with identity contestedness may negatively influence their identity disclosure experiences.

Current research

The present work focuses on people with bi+ identities to expand the prior literature in a variety of ways. First, the present work examines differences in identity contestedness across sexual minorities, comparing those with bi+ identities and those with monosexual minority identities (lesbian and gay people) in Study 1. We hypothesize that bi+ people will report greater identity contestedness than lesbian and gay people and that identity contestedness will be more strongly associated with disclosure outcomes for bi+ people than for lesbian and gay people. Specifically, we anticipate that the hypothesized negative relationship between identity contestedness and disclosure outcome positivity will be stronger among bi+ individuals (Study 1), as identity contestedness may be uniquely salient to bi+ people due to persistent stereotypes about them (e.g., the belief that they are just unsure about their sexuality or are in the process of coming out as monosexual; see Burke & LaFrance, 2016; Dodge et al., 2016).

Across Studies 1 and 2, we test the proposed model, described in Figure 1, linking identity contestedness and recipient response engagement to disclosure outcomes via recipient attitude uncertainty. Specifically, we hypothesize that higher ratings of identity contestedness will be associated with greater uncertainty about recipient attitude and, in turn, poorer disclosure experience outcomes. We position recipients’ response engagement as a moderator of identity contestedness and recipient attitude uncertainty; specifically, we anticipate that the positive association between identity contestedness and recipient attitude uncertainty will be weakened among those who receive more engaged recipient responses. In other words, we anticipate that the verbal feedback that exemplifies a more engaged response to disclosure can reduce recipient attitude uncertainty, which may be particularly impactful for disclosers with high levels of identity contestedness. Expanding prior research on recipient engagement in disclosure experiences (e.g., Cipollina et al., 2022b), we anticipate a positive

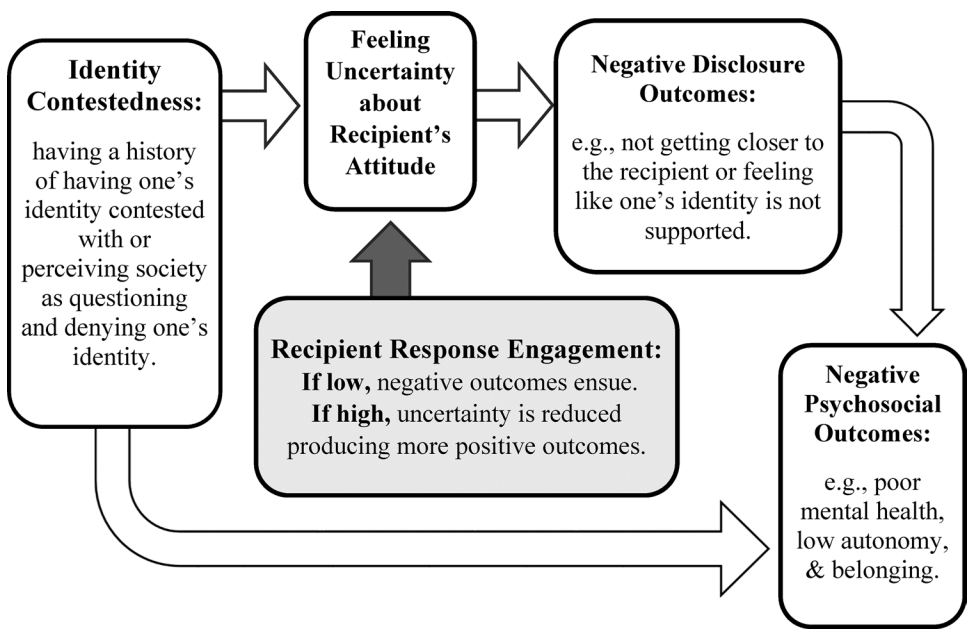


Figure 1. Theoretical model linking identity contestedness to disclosure experiences and outcomes. *Note:* Psychosocial outcomes are not assessed in the present research.

association between recipient response engagement and positive disclosure outcomes, which in this study would be mediated by less uncertainty about recipient attitude. Study 1 examines the proposed model among lesbian or gay and bi+ individuals' disclosure experiences, while Study 2 replicates the findings and rules out potential confounders of the proposed model in a sample of exclusively bi+ respondents.

Study 1

In Study 1 we examine our proposed model, which analyzes relationships between identity contestedness, recipient response engagement, recipient attitude uncertainty, and reported positive outcomes of prior disclosure experiences.

Methods

Participants

Bi+ and lesbian or gay participants currently residing in the U.S. were recruited using Prolific's research platform. In addition to the screening criteria, participants needed to affirm that they had disclosed or revealed their sexual orientation to at least one other person, as survey procedures involved recalling a prior disclosure. Any respondents who failed two or

more attention check questions or eligibility criteria ($n = 4$) were removed from the data set and were not compensated following institutional review board (IRB) approval. IRB approval was granted from Rutgers University Arts and Sciences IRB. The analytic sample of 351 participants exceeded our sample goal of 340, which was determined to be sufficient based on Bentler and Chou's (1987) recommendation of at least 10 participants per estimated regression parameter in a mediation model. A power analysis using G*Power (Erdfelder et al., 1996) also suggested that the sample size was sufficient to examine between-group mean differences (i.e., 90% powered to identify a Cohen's d effect size of .35, and 80% powered to identify our hypothesized small to medium-sized interaction effect). See Table 1 for sample demographics. The sample ($M_{age} = 30.52$, $SD_{age} = 10.86$) was almost 70% White; more than half the participants identified as women, and 50.4% identified as lesbian or gay (LG).

Procedure

After providing online consent, participants were asked to recall a past disclosure experience. They were told that they would be answering questions about this experience as well as about their identity. First, participants recalled how they felt initiating the disclosure experience and how they disclosed their identity to the recipient. Participants then reported how the recipient responded to their identity disclosure with a measure of response engagement, followed by a measure of recipient attitude

Table 1. Sample demographics across studies.

	Study 1 $N = 351$ %	Study 2 $N = 223$ %
Sexual Orientation		
Bisexual	49.6	92.8
Pansexual	0	6.3
Queer	0	0.9
Lesbian or gay	50.4	0
Heterosexual	0	0
Gender		
Cisgender woman	55.6	45.7
Cisgender man	35.0	40.4
Not listed above (e.g., transgender, nonbinary)	9.4	13.9
Race		
White/Caucasian	69.8	70.9
Black, Caribbean, or African American	8.0	9.9
Hispanic or Latino	4.8	4.0
South, East, or Southeast Asian	6.8	4.0
Native American or American Indian	0	0.4
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	0.6	0
Biracial or multiracial	10.0	10.8

Note: The term *cisgender* did not appear in the Study 1 demographics questionnaire.

uncertainty. Next, participants reported on items assessing positive outcomes of the disclosure, including how they felt after the experience. Participants then answered a few items about other features of the disclosure experience (e.g., who they were disclosing to), followed by questions about demographics and their current psychological well-being. Last, participants were asked to respond to a measure of identity contestedness, followed by a measure of identity centrality to be examined for future work. Other measures related to the present work, including attitudes toward disclosing again and perceived identity support, are described in the supplemental text due to high covariance with and low conceptual distinction from the model variables.

Measures

Identity contestedness

Participants answered a five-item PI-created measure of bisexual identity contestedness. Scale items were derived from past work on identity denial and questioning by Albuja et al. (2019b) and Maimon et al. (2021). The items followed the prompt: “When talking about your sexual orientation with others, to what extent does each of the following happen to you?” Respondents answered on a 1 (Not at all) to 5 (Very often) Likert scale. The items were reliable as a scale ($\alpha = .89$), fell into one factor when entered into an exploratory factor analysis (with principal axis factoring and Oblimin rotation), and were averaged ($M = 1.78$, $SD = 0.88$).¹ See the Appendix for all items.

Response engagement

Participants answered Cipollina et al.’s (2022b) five-item measure of response engagement. The items followed the prompt: “To what extent did the following occur when you disclosed your identity/background?” Respondents answered on a 1 (Not at all) to 7 (A great deal) Likert scale. The items, such as “They talked about my sexual orientation with me” and “They asked me details about my sexual orientation, or something related to it,” were reliable ($\alpha = .76$) and were averaged ($M = 4.24$, $SD = 1.44$).

Recipient attitude uncertainty

Participants’ uncertainty about how the recipient felt immediately after they disclosed was reported with four PI-created items on a 1 (Not at all) to 7 (Completely) Likert scale. The items, such as “I felt unsure about how they felt about me being bisexual,” were reliable ($\alpha = .94$) as a measure and were averaged ($M = 2.72$, $SD = 1.81$).

Disclosure experience positivity

Participants answered six items rating how satisfied they were with the disclosure event, as well as whether the disclosure had a positive impact on their relationship with the recipient. The items were adapted from Cipollina et al. (2022b). The items, such as “I felt happy with how they responded” and “I felt closer to the person I told,” were reliable ($\alpha = .97$) and were averaged ($M = 4.83$, $SD = 1.87$).

Analytic strategy

To test our hypothesis that identity contestedness is greater among bi+ versus LG participants, we conducted an independent samples t-test on identity contestedness, followed by t-tests on the remaining variables to explore how participant identity impacts disclosure experiences and outcomes. We then conducted a series of split-file Pearson’s correlation analyses to test our hypothesis that identity contestedness is more strongly associated with disclosure experience outcomes for bi+ than for LG participants.

To test our proposed mediation model linking identity contestedness to disclosure outcome positivity through the mediator of recipient attitude uncertainty, we used Hayes’s process macro for SPSS (Hayes, 2013). This SPSS add-on enables user-friendly mediation analyses. Specifically, we utilized the process macro to test our proposed moderator (recipient response engagement) using model 8. In all tests of moderation, both hypothesized interacting predictors (identity contestedness and response engagement) were entered as predictors of the outcome variable; then their interaction term was tested as a predictor. Evidence of a moderated mediation would indicate that recipient response engagement “moderates” or changes the significance of our proposed mediation paths. Separate moderated mediation models were conducted for the LG and bi+ groups, as a significant three-way interaction (contestedness by response engagement by sample) is difficult to both power and interpret. Instead, each sample was adequately powered, and estimates of indirect effects in each sample were calculated using 10,000 bootstrapped samples.

Results

A series of independent samples t-tests were conducted on all study variables. The bi+ sample scored significantly higher ($M = 1.78$, $SD = 0.88$) on their ratings of experienced identity contestedness than the LG sample ($M = 1.59$, $SD = 0.76$), $t(340.25) = -2.24$, $p = .026$, $d = -0.24$. There were no significant differences between any other model variables across the two groups ($ps > .49$). See Table 2 for descriptive statistics by sample.

Table 2. Correlation coefficients and descriptive statistics across the two samples.

	<i>M(SD)</i>	2	3	4
Bi + Sample				
1. Identity contestedness	1.78(0.88)	−0.18*	.36***	−0.21**
2. Response engagement	4.24(1.44)		−0.33***	.48***
3. Recipient attitude uncertainty	2.72(1.81)			−0.55***
4. Positive disclosure outcome	4.83(1.87)			
LG Sample				
1. Identity contestedness	1.59(0.76)	.11	.24**	−0.12
2. Response engagement	4.30(1.24)		−0.08	.44***
3. Recipient attitude uncertainty	2.85(1.84)			−0.40***
4. Positive disclosure outcome	4.70(1.86)			

Note: *** denotes $p < .001$, ** denotes $p < .01$, and * denotes $p < .05$.

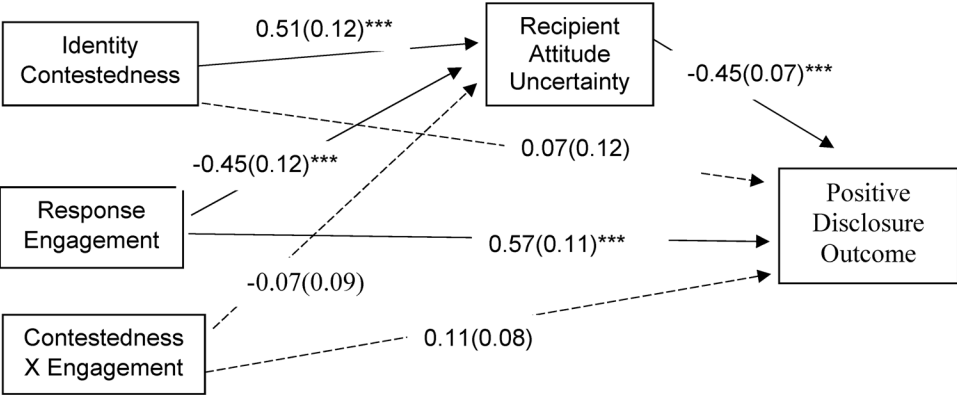
Next, a series of split-file Pearson's correlations were conducted, and Fisher's comparison tests were used to compare relationship strength across the two groups. See Table 2 for correlation coefficients by sample. Across both groups, greater identity contestedness was significantly associated with higher recipient attitude uncertainty, and the relative strength of the correlation did not differ significantly across the two groups ($Z = 1.31$, $p = .095$). Importantly, in the bi+ group, ratings of identity contestedness were significantly associated with poorer disclosure outcomes, while in the LG group, this relationship was not significant.

Higher ratings of recipient response engagement were associated with significantly lower recipient attitude uncertainty for the bi+ sample, but this relationship was not significant for the LG sample. However, greater response engagement was significantly associated with more positive disclosure outcomes across both groups. There was no difference in the strength of these associations across the samples ($Z = 0.42$, $p = .34$).

We tested our proposed moderated mediation model linking identity contestedness and response engagement to positive disclosure outcomes via recipient attitude uncertainty with separate models conducted for the LG and bi+ groups. Visual comparisons between the two models' respective pathways are described. See Figure 2.

In the bi+ sample, there was a significant indirect effect of contestedness through recipient attitude uncertainty ($B = -0.23$, $SE = 0.07$, 95% CI $[-0.39, -0.10]$), such that greater contestedness was associated with greater uncertainty and, in turn, lower disclosure positivity. There was also a significant indirect effect of response engagement, such that greater response engagement reduced uncertainty and was associated with a more positive disclosure experience ($B = 0.21$, $SE = 0.07$, 95% CI $[0.09, 0.35]$). The interaction between contestedness and response engagement was not significant for recipient attitude uncertainty or disclosure positivity, so there was no evidence of a significant moderated mediation ($B = 0.04$, $SE = 0.05$, 95% CI $[-0.07, 0.14]$). The direct effect of response engagement on disclosure experience positivity was

Bi+ Sample



Lesbian or Gay (LG) Sample

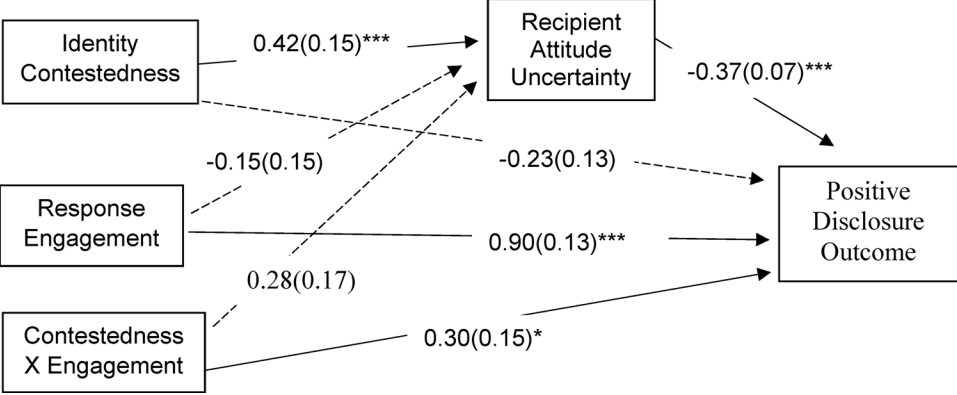


Figure 2. Study 1 model split by sample. *Note:* Unstandardized betas and errors are presented on model paths. Dashed paths are not significant. Identity contestedness was the only significant predictor of recipient attitude uncertainty in the LG sample, while in the bi+ sample, identity contestedness and response engagement predicted recipient attitude uncertainty. *** denotes $p < .001$, ** denotes $p < .01$, and * denotes $p < .05$.

significant when accounting for other model variables, while the effect of identity contestedness on disclosure experience positivity was no longer significant. Together, this indicates that recipient attitude uncertainty is the mechanism through which contestedness is associated with poorer disclosure outcomes. Contrary to our hypothesis, there was no significant interaction between response engagement and identity contestedness on disclosure experience satisfaction; instead, response engagement helped promote more positive disclosure outcomes across all levels of identity contestedness.

In the LG sample, there was a significant indirect effect of contestedness through recipient attitude uncertainty ($B = -0.16$, $SE = 0.07$, 95% CI $[-0.30, -0.03]$), such that greater contestedness was associated with greater

recipient attitude uncertainty and, in turn, lower disclosure positivity. There was no significant indirect effect of response engagement, as response engagement was not significantly associated with recipient attitude uncertainty. The interaction between contestedness and response engagement was not significant either, so there was no evidence of a significant moderated mediation ($B = -0.11$, $SE = 0.08$, 95% CI $[-0.25, 0.05]$). There was, however, a direct positive effect of response engagement on disclosure experience positivity when accounting for other model variables. As hypothesized, there was a significant interaction between response engagement and identity contestedness on disclosure experience satisfaction, such that identity contestedness had a significant negative effect on disclosure experience positivity only when response engagement was low (-1 SD) ($B = -0.50$, $SE = 0.21$, $p = 0.018$, 95% CI $[-0.92, -0.09]$), but it was not significant when response engagement was high ($+1$ SD) ($B = 0.95$, $SE = 0.05$, $p = 0.77$, 95% CI $[-0.28, 0.38]$).

Last, we conducted a series of exploratory analyses of the potential impact of participants' gender and race on our primary model variables. We found no evidence of significant racial effects on all outcomes (comparing non-Hispanic White participants with biracial participants and participants of color) and nonsignificant gender effects on two of the model variables. However, cisgender men reported significantly greater response engagement and disclosure experience positivity compared with cisgender women and transgender and gender-diverse participants. See the supplemental analysis for more details.

Discussion

Study 1 documented that bi+ participants experience more identity contestedness than their LG peers (a small identified effect, $d = 0.24$). Moreover, results suggest that such differences in identity contestedness may contribute to different disclosure experiences for bi+ versus LG disclosers. Specifically, for bi+ participants, prior experiences of identity contestedness were associated with greater perceptions of the recipient's uncertain attitude toward their identity, which in turn was associated with less positive disclosure outcomes. Although these relationships were also documented in the LG sample, they were significantly stronger in the bi+ group. In addition, recipient response engagement played a role in disclosure experiences across both groups, but the relationships differed by group. Greater response engagement from disclosure recipients was associated with less uncertainty about recipient attitude and more positive disclosure outcomes among bi+ participants, while response engagement was not associated with LG participants' perceptions of recipient attitude uncertainty. Additionally, the hypothesized interaction between response engagement and identity

contestedness was partially supported, such that the interaction was significant (demonstrating a protective effect of response engagement) only among LG disclosers. Conversely, bi+ disclosers' ratings of identity contestedness were consistently associated with less positive disclosures across all levels of recipient response engagement.

Study 2

Study 2 examined disclosure experiences and identity contestedness in a larger sample of bi+ people. We sought to replicate the bi+ sample findings of Study 1 with stricter model testing that ruled out potential confounders of our hypothesized relationships. Specifically, we conducted our proposed model controlling for (a) closeness with the disclosure recipient, (b) expected outcome positivity, and (c) desired response engagement. In prior work, closer recipients provided more engaging and more satisfying responses to disclosure (see Cipollina et al., 2022b). In the present study's context, closeness with the disclosure recipient (at the time of disclosure) may also be associated with perceptions of recipient attitude uncertainty; thus, controlling for closeness provided a stricter test of all hypothesized paths in our model. Expected outcome positivity (the extent to which the discloser expected a positive outcome) was examined to rule out expectations as a confounder of our theorized pathway from identity contestedness to recipient attitude uncertainty. Finally, participants' desired response engagement (the type of response wanted from recipients) was assessed, as participants with higher levels of identity contestedness may desire more engaging responses from recipients to reduce their uncertainty about recipients' attitudes.

Study 2 also sought to clarify a possible source of error by adjusting the identity contestedness measure prompt. The measure in Study 1 assessed the frequency of prior identity contestedness experiences when participants discussed their identity with others. The measure in Study 2 examined broader societal perceptions that bi+ people experience identity contestedness. This change separated the measurement of identity contestedness from participants' prior disclosures of their sexual identity to others. This revision was made to reduce the dependence of scale items on prior identity discussions, as some participants may have had little or no experience discussing their identity with others, while all participants can reflect on whether their identity is broadly contested by society.

Study 2's measures and hypotheses were preregistered on Open Science Framework (OSF). Additional variables in the OSF preregistration are included in the supplemental analysis.

Methods

Participants

Bi+ participants currently residing in the U.S. were recruited using Prolific's research platform and the same procedure and inclusion criteria as in Study 1. Three participants were removed for failing multiple attention checks or inclusion criteria. The analytic sample of 223 participants ($M_{\text{age}} = 31.69$, $SD_{\text{age}} = 9.92$) exceeded our desired sample size of at least 220, which was determined following Bentler and Chou's (1987) recommendation of 10 to 15 participants per estimated regression parameter. More than half our participants identified as White/Caucasian, bisexual, and cisgender women. See [Table 1](#) for demographics.

Procedure

Participants answered the same disclosure and recipient measures assessed in Study 1. The identity contestedness measure was assessed at the start of the survey, and covariates were incorporated into it. In Study 2, instead of reporting how frequently their bi+ identity was contested (as in Study 1), participants responded by stating the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that bi+ people's identities are contested in society (i.e., a measure of perceived identity contestedness rather than enacted or experienced identity contestedness, as in Study 1). To strengthen the measure, a few extra items were added to reflect other ways bi+ identities may be contested in society (e.g., "People often misperceive bisexual people as being heterosexual/straight," rated on a 1 [Strongly disagree] to 7 [Strongly agree] Likert scale; see Hartman-Linck, 2014). The new identity contestedness items fell into one factor when entered into an exploratory factor analysis (with principal axis factoring and Oblimin rotation). The items were reliable as a scale and were averaged such that higher values indicated greater perceived identity contestedness. Study 2 also included additional measures to be examined as covariates. Specifically, participants answered one question about their closeness to the disclosure recipient prior to disclosure, three items assessing their expectations of the disclosure experience (e.g., "I thought it would go well," rated on a 1 [Not at all] to 7 [Completely] Likert scale), and three items assessing their desired response engagement from the recipient (e.g., "Did you want the other person to talk about your sexual orientation with you," rated on a 1 [Not at all] to 7 [Very much] Likert scale). After their online participation, participants were debriefed and compensated. See OSF for the full questionnaire materials. See [Table 3](#) for measure descriptives.

Table 3. Study 2 measure descriptives and correlations.

	<i>M(SD)</i>	α	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Identity contestedness	5.39(1.12)	.89	.06	.15*	−0.10	−0.03	−0.10	−0.07
2. Response engagement	4.65(1.31)	.77		−0.21**	.49***	.17**	.17*	.45***
3. Recipient attitude uncertainty	2.60(1.76)	.96			−0.58***	−0.10	−0.47***	.01
4. Positive disclosure outcomes	5.10(1.90)	.97				.21**	.38***	.27***
5. Closeness to recipient prior to disclosure	5.25(1.54)	–					.24***	.11
6. Expected positive outcome	5.26(1.45)	.88						.08
7. Desired response engagement	4.12(1.51)	.84						

Note: ***denotes $p < .001$, ** denotes $p < .01$, and * denotes $p < .05$.

Analytic strategy

After conducting a series of Pearson’s correlation analyses between all model variables and proposed covariates, we tested our proposed model linking identity contestedness and response engagement to disclosure outcomes using model 8 in the Hayes (2013) process macro for SPSS. The tested moderated mediation model included our three proposed covariates (closeness, expected outcome positivity, and desired response engagement) to demonstrate the robustness of our proposed effects. Finally, we conducted exploratory demographic analyses examining the impact of participant race and gender, as in Study 1.

Results

As in Study 1, identity contestedness was positively associated with recipient attitude uncertainty, but it was not significantly associated with any other variables, including the new proposed model covariates. Replicating Study 1 bi+sample results, response engagement was positively associated with more positive disclosure outcomes and negatively associated with recipient attitude uncertainty. Response engagement was also positively correlated with our examined covariates, such that participants reported receiving more engaged responses from recipients they were closer to, from recipients they expected positive outcomes with, and when they desired more engaged responses from recipients. See Table 3 for all correlation coefficients.

In our proposed mediation analysis that accounted for model covariates, there was a significant indirect effect of identity contestedness through recipient attitude uncertainty ($B = -0.11$, $SE = 0.06$, 95% CI $[-0.24, -0.02]$),

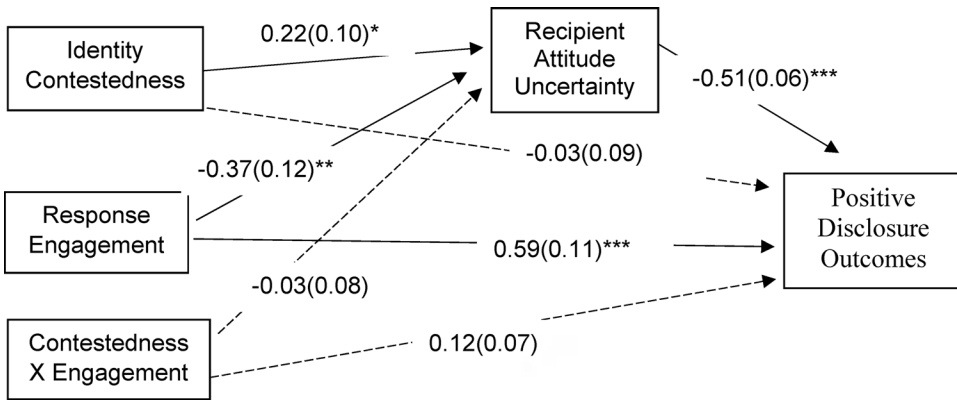


Figure 3. Study 2 mediation model replicating Study 1 bi+ sample. *Note:* Covariates of closeness, desired response engagement, and expected outcome are included in the presented model and described in the text. Unstandardized beta coefficients and standard errors are presented. Sample $N=223$. Dashed paths are not significant. *** denotes $p < .001$, ** denotes $p < .01$, and * denotes $p < .05$.

such that greater contestedness was associated with greater uncertainty about recipients' attitude and, in turn, lower disclosure positivity. See Figure 3 for all regression coefficients and standardized errors. There was also a significant indirect effect of response engagement, such that greater response engagement reduced recipient attitude uncertainty and, in turn, was associated with a more positive disclosure experience ($B=0.19$, $SE=0.07$, 95% CI [0.05, 0.34]). The interaction between identity contestedness and response engagement was not significant for recipient attitude uncertainty or disclosure experience positivity (see Figure 3), so there was no evidence of a significant moderated mediation ($B=0.02$, $SE=0.04$, 95% CI [-0.05, 0.09]). All described effects remained significant in the same direction and of similar size when model covariates were removed.

Closeness to the disclosure recipient was not significantly associated with recipient attitude uncertainty ($B=0.04$, $SE=0.07$, $t = .55$, $p = .06$). In the model, expected outcome positivity was significantly negatively associated with perceived recipient attitude uncertainty ($B=-0.53$, $SE = 0.07$, $t=-7.18$, $p < .001$), such that participants who expected a more negative outcome reported higher recipient attitude uncertainty even when accounting for other model variables such as identity contestedness. Desired response engagement was positively associated with perceived recipient attitude uncertainty, such that participants with more perceived recipient attitude uncertainty reported desiring a more direct response ($B=0.16$, $SE=0.08$, $t=2.15$, $p = .03$). When predicting disclosure outcome positivity, closeness was not a significant predictor ($B=0.09$, $SE=0.06$, $t=1.54$, $p = .13$); nor was expected outcome ($B=0.09$, $SE=0.07$, $t=1.30$, $p = .20$). Participants who desired a more engaged

response reported more positive disclosure outcomes ($B = 0.14$, $SE = 0.07$, $t = 2.09$, $p = .04$).

The direct effect of response engagement on disclosure experience positivity was significant when accounting for other model variables, while the effect of identity contestedness on disclosure experience positivity was no longer significant. Together, these results indicate that recipient attitude uncertainty is the mechanism through which identity contestedness is associated with poorer disclosure outcomes. As in Study 1, there was no significant interaction between response engagement and identity contestedness on disclosure experience satisfaction; instead, response engagement helped promote more positive disclosure outcomes across all levels of identity contestedness.

Exploratory participant gender and racial effects revealed no racial effects and only one significant gender effect; cisgender men reported significantly lower identity contestedness than cisgender women and transgender and gender-diverse participants. See the supplemental analysis for more details.

Discussion

Study 2 replicated the findings of Study 1 with a larger bi+ sample and demonstrated the robustness of our proposed model to potential confounding variables, thus providing more rigorous evidence for our theorized model.

General discussion

Across two studies, the present work documented that identity contestedness is associated with more negative outcomes of identity disclosure due to greater uncertainty about disclosure recipients' attitudes toward participants' sexual identities. However, the present work also suggested that response engagement may help reduce this negative influence. Across both studies, bi+ participants who received more engaged responses during a past disclosure (i.e., recipients talked about the disclosed identity) reported less perceived uncertainty about recipients' attitudes, which in turn was associated with more positive disclosure outcomes. The present work also examined potential differences between bi+ and LG participants' disclosure experiences, documenting that bi+ participants experienced more identity contestation and that such contestedness had a stronger negative relationship with their disclosure experience positivity when compared with the LG sample (Study 1).

Other differences between the two samples pointed to the unique disclosure experiences of people who perceive their identity as being contested

by others. Specifically, in the bi+ sample of Study 1, identity contestedness had a persistent negative effect on disclosure outcomes, regardless of response engagement (i.e., no significant interaction), while LG participants' ratings of identity contestedness were negatively associated with disclosure experience positivity only when they received less engaged responses from recipients. These findings indicate that bi+ people may require additional types of support during identity disclosures to combat identity contestedness and their awareness of the unique stereotypes they face (e.g., they are just unsure about their identity or are in the process of coming out as monosexual; Dyar & Feinstein, 2018; Morgenroth et al., 2021).

The present work identified a likely mechanism (i.e., poorer disclosure experiences) through which identity contestedness can negatively impact the health and sense of belonging of bi+ people (see Maimon et al., 2021). Moreover, the present work found distinct associations between identity contestedness and anticipated disclosure outcomes, such that both perceptions of identity contestedness and expectations of poor outcomes were associated with more negative disclosure experiences (Study 2). This finding adds to prior work on how disclosure expectations can shape disclosure interactions (e.g., Chaudoir & Fisher, 2010; Cipollina et al., 2022a), highlighting a novel identity-based factor that may guide disclosers' expectations and demeanor during disclosure. The present findings also replicated the relationships documented in prior work on broader samples of people with concealable stigmas (see Cipollina et al., 2022b), indicating that more engaging responses are associated with more positive disclosure experiences for people with bi+ and LG identities.

Thus, the present research expands on and complements the prior literature on factors that contribute to more positive disclosure outcomes for LG and bi+ groups (e.g., Cipollina et al., 2022b; Rosario et al., 2009) by highlighting the adverse effect of identity contestedness on disclosure experiences. Our derived measure of identity contestedness focuses on LG and bi+ individuals' experiences of identity denial or challenge by others (see Maimon et al., 2021), which differs from prior research that focuses on measuring perceptions of negative attitudes toward LG and bi+ groups (e.g., Morgenroth et al., 2021). Our identity contestedness measures also differ from other bi+ stigma measures (e.g., the anti-bisexual experiences scale, Brewster & Moradi, 2010; the bisexual identity inventory, Paul et al., 2014). While our scale taps into similar experiences of bi+ identity illegitimacy and instability, our measurement can be used with both LG and bi+ groups. Further, in Study 2, our measure considers broader perceptions of bi+ identity contestedness rather than assessing only prior experiences of identity contestedness. We encourage future research to examine the impact of additional types of anti-bisexual experiences and attitudes (e.g.,

believing that society sees bi+ people as overly sexual or dangerous) on expectations and outcomes of disclosure experiences.

Limitations and future research

This research package was correlational and included participants' recall of prior disclosure events. Such methods prevent causal conclusions regarding the influence of identity contestedness on disclosure experiences. However, this method allows an uninterrupted snapshot of a common identity experience that likely plays a role in disclosure success for sexual minorities. To form causal conclusions, future work may seek to reduce identity contestedness perceptions (e.g., reading an article that affirms bisexuality as a valid, stable identity) and examine how such reduction shapes perceptions of an in-lab disclosure experience.

Future work may also take a longitudinal approach, measuring factors that change perceptions of sexual identity contestedness over time. This research could examine outcomes of disclosure experiences in which the discloser's sexual identity is contested to document downstream effects on sexual minorities' sense of belonging and mental health. Indeed, prior instances of having one's identity contested (like the measure in Study 1) may shape expectations of perceived identity contestedness in society (like the measure in Study 2). Although we suspect that these two measures are highly correlated, the latter does not depend on previous discussions about one's sexual orientation, making it an inclusive measure to use with less "out" sexual minorities. Studies 1 and 2 both demonstrate the significant effect of identity contestedness using different forms of measurement, suggesting the reliable role of identity contestedness on bi+ disclosure experiences. Further, we suspect that perceptions of bi+ identity contestedness can be derived from other types of interactions, such as media portrayals of bi+ people, thus making it a more encompassing measure than those that rely on an individual's prior experiences with identity denial.

In addition, more research is needed on the frequency of identity contestation experiences among various sexual minority groups (including those under the bi+ umbrella), as the overwhelming majority of research on sexual orientation disclosure does not focus on the experiences of sexual minorities with emergent identities (e.g., pansexual, demisexual, omnisexual; see Watson et al., 2019). Moreover, this research may reveal that identity-contesting reactions to identity disclosure are more common for bi+ people in heterosexual-appearing relationships or among those without long-term relationships. Indeed, disclosure recipients' potential bias toward bi+ people may become apparent when bi+ disclosers share their identity while seemingly adhering to stereotypes for bi+ people (e.g., a bisexual woman disclosing her bi+ identity while dating a cisgender

man and thus adhering to the stereotype that bi+ women are “actually straight”).

While the present research found nonsignificant racial effects on our model variables, this may be due to our lack of power to examine specific racial minority subgroups. There were also inconsistent significant gender effects on model variables (i.e., response engagement and disclosure experience positivity in Study 1 and identity contestedness in Study 2) that warrant further investigation. Our significant gender effects point to differences in the experiences of LG and bi+cisgender men compared with cisgender women and transgender and gender-diverse people. We suspect that future research accounting for intersectional experiences (see Albuja et al., 2019c; Bowleg, 2013) may identify unique responses to identity disclosure, aligned with prior research on intersectional bi+ coming-out experiences (e.g., Abreu et al., 2022; Brown, 2002; Rosario et al., 2004).

Future research could also document individuals' sensitivity to identity-contesting experiences, which could be assessed with adjusted measures of rejection sensitivity (see Pachankis et al., 2008). Such rejection sensitivity may impact a person's willingness to disclose (see Feinstein et al., 2020), with downstream impacts on bi+ groups' health and well-being. Indeed, as suggested in our theoretical model, identity contestedness may be one important factor contributing to bi+ health disparities and maladaptive health behaviors (e.g., heavy drinking, marijuana use; see Bostwick & Hequembourg, 2014; Dyar et al., 2019; Matthews et al., 2013), and should be examined as a potential source for interpersonal and structural intervention.

Note

1. Some identity contestedness items referred to the participant's bisexual identity, as all bi+ participants across the studies identified as bisexual on Prolific's screening survey. Some of them identified with a different bi+ identity in the demographics section of our studies.

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Rebecca Cipollina, PhD, is a postdoctoral fellow at the Center for Interdisciplinary Research on AIDS at Yale University. Dr. Cipollina's research program focuses on how belonging to a socially derogated group influences marginalized group members' interactions with others in varied contexts (e.g., in interpersonal relationships, disclosure experiences, interactions with healthcare professionals). Her research often explores when and why discussions of stigmatized topics and identities are avoided yet beneficial to individuals with marginalized identities.

Zoey Eddy, BS, is a doctoral student in social psychology at Rutgers University–New Brunswick. Her research aims to contribute to the literature on individuals who are stigmatized by both majority and minority group members, with a focus on people from biracial or multiracial backgrounds. To date, her research has documented social predictors of multiracial students' sense of belonging on campus and has examined how thinking about identity constructs with a less essentialist frame can reduce prejudice.

Diana T. Sanchez, PhD, is a professor of psychology and current chair of the Department of Psychology at Rutgers University–New Brunswick. Her research explores the complexities associated with close relationships, identities, and stigma. Within these themes, her work on dual identities (e.g., those possessing multiple identities in a singular social category), stigma and coping, and gender dynamics in close relationships has received wide recognition. Her laboratory utilizes a diversity science approach to identify the factors that promote relationship satisfaction, belonging, and psychological health for individuals who are targets of discrimination (e.g., women, racial and ethnic minorities, sexual minorities).

Data availability statement

All data and survey materials can be found on the OSF (link: https://osf.io/7bgp4/?view_only=6d312cd2c7794eaf8fc513b30553c9d0).

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Appendix

Identity contestedness measures

Study 1 (Experienced)

When talking about your sexual orientation with others, to what extent does each of the following happen to you?

1 (Not at all) to 5 (Very often)

1. People question my sexual orientation.
2. Other people challenge my identity as a [bisexual/lesbian/gay] person.
3. People ask me to prove my sexual orientation to them.
4. People dispute that my sexual orientation is a real identity.
5. People question the validity of my [bisexual/lesbian/gay] identity.

Study 2 (Perceived)

Please indicate your level of agreement/disagreement with the following statements.

1 (Strongly disagree) to 7 (Strongly agree)

1. People often perceive bisexual people as being a different sexual orientation than they actually are.
2. People often misperceive bisexual people as being heterosexual/straight.
3. People often tell bisexual people that they should identify with a different sexual orientation.

4. People tell bisexual people that they should choose to identify as heterosexual or as gay or lesbian.
5. People ask bisexual people to prove that they are bisexual.
6. People question if bisexuality is a valid or “real” sexual identity.
7. People often ask questions about bisexual people’s past romantic/sexual relationships.
8. People often deny bisexual people’s sexual identity when they are in relationships where the couple appears heterosexual.