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# Navigating intersecting identities and disclosure strategies: qualitative insights from gay Arab Australian men

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## ABSTRACT

This study explored the intersecting identities and disclosure strategies of gay Arab Australian men, an under-researched subgroup within sexuality and ethnic minorities. Using an intersectionality framework and identity process theory, the study examines how overlapping identities – ethnicity, religion, and sexuality – shape their lived experiences. Semi-structured interviews with 11 men led to the development of two primary themes: *negotiating intersecting identities* and *disclosure management*. Participants described the emotional toll of compartmentalisation and selective disclosure, as they navigated the pressures within Arab and LGBTQ+ communities, where culture, religion, and sexuality intersect to shape identity negotiation. Compartmentalisation emerged as a means to navigate family expectations and cultural constraints, though often at the cost of emotional isolation and self-acceptance. Study findings highlight the multiple pressures gay Arab Australian men face within both cultural and LGBTQ+ spaces, exacerbated by racialised stereotypes and conflicting cultural and religious expectations. Findings contribute to theories of identity negotiation, providing insights into resilience strategies and challenges. Implications include the need for culturally sensitive health services that consider the unique familial and cultural dynamics of culturally diverse sexuality minorities, and advocacy for inclusive policies to support marginalised LGBTQ+ populations.

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## Introduction

In recent decades, Australia has made significant strides in promoting social inclusion for culturally and linguistically diverse populations<sup>1</sup> and increasing acceptance

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for gender and sexuality diverse minorities, who collectively comprise the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and/or queer (LGBTQ+) community. Nevertheless, individuals with intersecting cultural, gender and/or sexuality identities must balance cultural and familial expectations within their communities of heritage alongside broader societal pressures when it comes to the disclosure of their LGBTQ+ identities (Phillips et al. 2020; Pallotta-Chiarolli et al. 2022; Saxby et al. 2022; Chan et al. 2023).

Sexuality minority men from various ethnic minority backgrounds frequently encounter racialised stereotypes and cultural stigmatisation, which can impact their sense of belonging and acceptance (Han 2007; Poon and Ho 2008; Calabrese et al. 2015). Few studies to date have focused on sexuality minority Arab Australian men, leaving them largely invisible, which can result in heightened social isolation and limited access to culturally sensitive support. Notably, in Australia health disparities persist between culturally and linguistically diverse sexuality minority men, with those outside of inner-city LGBTQ+ spaces experiencing greater barriers to health service engagement (Grulich et al. 2021). Understanding their identity negotiation and disclosure strategies is key to addressing these gaps.

In predominantly white LGBTQ+ spaces, racialised stereotypes, including towards Arab men, persist (Warren et al. 2008; Kobrak et al. 2015; Phillips et al. 2020; Boussalem and Di Felicianantonio 2024), while homophobia within wider Arab Australian spaces pressures men to conceal their sexual identities (Kassisieh 2011). Although the Arab Australian community has a significant and growing presence, the experiences of sexuality minority Arab Australian men are frequently underexplored within research or broader datasets on gay Australian men's health and service access (Saliba et al. 2024).

### ***The Arab Australian context***

Originating from one or more of the 22 culturally, linguistically, and religiously diverse Middle East and North African (MENA) countries, Arab peoples in Australia comprise approximately 2.4% of the population, with Arabic languages being the third most commonly spoken in the country (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021).

However, this diversity exists within a broader context of racism and exclusion, compounding the experiences of sexuality minority Arab Australians. Arabs in Australia, both Muslim and Christian, have long been subject to racialisation as the 'other', a process intensified post-9/11 through pervasive anti-Islamic stereotypes (Australian Human Rights Commission 2004; Poynting and Noble 2004). These biases position Arab and Muslim identities as inherently oppositional to Western societal values which, in turn, heightens stigma and marginalisation in both culturally and linguistically diverse (Poynting 2002; Mansouri and Trembath 2005; Ajrouch and Jamal 2007; Foster et al. 2011) and LGBTQ+ spaces (Sirin et al. 2021). Notably, in the 2017 Australian Marriage Law Postal Survey, Western Sydney electorates, home to the largest concentration of Arabs in Australia, returned some of the nation's highest 'No' votes, reflecting the cultural and religious conservatism that shapes local dynamics (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017; Asquith et al. 2019).

## ***The present study***

The choice to disclose one's sexual identity (i.e. to come out) is a deeply personal and profound step in an individual's life. However, this choice is particularly complex for culturally and linguistically diverse sexuality minorities who often have to navigate multiple intersecting identities. Many individuals face a choice between maintaining cultural ties and engaging with LGBTQ+ communities, not as separate pressures but as intersecting forces that shape their identity negotiation and sense of belonging.

For many, disclosure of their minority sexuality identity can carry risks such as family rejection, isolation, or even violence (Abraham 2010; Jaspal and Cinnirella 2010; Abboud et al. 2024). In collectivist Arab cultures, 'coming out' is often seen as a Western imposition, challenging conservative norms that prioritise heteronormativity, traditional gender roles, and family honour. These cultural values, while fostering strong family ties and interdependence, can also create pressures to conform, ultimately prompting selective disclosure (Hammoud-Beckett 2022) or no disclosure at all, to preserve bonds. Research in other collectivist cultures, such as some Asian communities, highlights similar patterns where preserving harmony and avoiding conflict often shapes disclosure decisions (Mao et al. 2004). Meyer (2003) documents the cumulative toll of navigating both societal stigma and internal conflict in such contexts. Culturally and linguistically diverse sexuality minorities, therefore, often engage in a careful balancing act, managing their authenticity while attempting to maintain cultural ties (Pachankis et al. 2020).

This study employed intersectionality and identity process theory (IPT) to examine how overlapping identities intersect and interact to shape the lives of a subgroup of Arab Australian sexuality minority men, henceforth referred to as gay Arab Australian men. Intersectionality, as introduced by Crenshaw (1989), highlights how social identities such as race, gender, and sexuality, intersect to produce unique forms of marginalisation, emphasising how systems of oppression can operate in a co-constitutive manner to shape lived experience (Read and Eagle 2011; Abrams et al. 2020; Agénor 2020; Lapalme et al. 2020). IPT complements this by examining how individuals respond to identity threats, such as conflicts between cultural expectations and sexual orientation (Breakwell 1986). It posits that individuals seek to preserve four identity principles: continuity, self-esteem, distinctiveness, and self-efficacy (Breakwell 1986). When these principles are threatened, such as by cultural rejection or societal stigma, individuals engage in coping strategies to manage the threat, including through compartmentalisation and selective disclosure.

This study aimed to explore the ways in which gay Arab Australian men navigate intersecting challenges of cultural and sexual identities and to describe some of the strategies employed to manage identity and disclosure.

## **Methods**

### ***Research design***

Qualitative methods were used in the study to capture complex identity negotiations and disclosure processes within their intersecting spaces. The research followed

principles of reflexivity, with the researchers' positionality informing data collection and interpretation (Braun and Clarke 2022).

### **Participants**

Participants were recruited through purposive and snowball sampling, targeting self-identified sexuality minority men (including both trans and cis men) aged 16.5 and above with family roots in one or more Arab countries. The age threshold ensured ethically appropriate discussion about sexual experience within the past 6 months, as participants were above the legal age for sexual activity in Australia.

Recruitment strategies included: direct recruitment of participants attending a culturally tailored stall at Fair Day (an annual LGBTQ+ event held during the 2022 Sydney Gay & Lesbian Mardi Gras); social media outreach *via* a private Facebook group for gay Arab men in Sydney; discreet business cards with QR codes linking to the screening questionnaire distributed at Fair Day and snowball sampling. The first strategy recruited nine participants, with snowball sampling recruiting an additional two individuals. Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Sociodemographic profile of study participants ( $N=11$ ).

Pseudonym	Age	Gender, Sexual Identity	Country of birth	Area of residence in Sydney	Ethnicity	Religious upbringing
Nadeem	25	Cis, Gay/Queer	Australia	Inner city	Lebanese	Christian
Francis	29	Cis, Gay	Australia	North Sydney	Lebanese	Christian
Mina	31	Cis, Gay	Australia	Sydney	Egyptian	Christian
Mansoor	33	Cis, Gay	Australia	Sydney Inner-West	Lebanese	Muslim
Wael	33	Cis, Gay	Australia	Sydney Inner-West	Lebanese	Muslim
Anthony	34	Cis, Gay	Australia	Sydney Inner-West	Lebanese	Christian
Rami	35	Cis, Gay	Australia	Western Sydney	Lebanese	Christian
Charbel	37	Cis, Gay	Australia	Western Sydney	Lebanese	Christian
Nemer	43	Cis, Gay	Australia	Western Sydney	Lebanese and Caucasian	Muslim
Michael	45	Cis, Gay	Australia	Western Sydney	Iraqi (Assyrian)	Christian
Khalil	59	Cis, Gay	Lebanon	East Sydney	Lebanese	Christian

### **Data collection**

Interviews (each lasting 45–60 min) were conducted between April 2022 and January 2023 via Zoom. Written and verbal consent were obtained. No financial incentive was offered for participation. Each session was audio-recorded and auto-transcribed using Zoom's transcription feature, after which the first author manually reviewed and corrected to ensure accuracy. Although participants were offered an Arabic option, all the interviews were conducted in English. Participants chose to disclose their first names (pseudonymised for publication) and opted to keep their cameras on throughout the interviews.

The interview schedule included both structured sociodemographic questions and semi-structured, open-ended questions designed to encourage reflection on

participants' experiences with identity negotiation and disclosure. Topics included experiences of navigating multiple identities across family, religious, and social contexts, strategies for managing disclosure within cultural communities and LGBTQ+ spaces.

### ***Data analysis***

Individual transcripts (i.e. the units of analysis) were thematically analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach. The first author led the analysis, beginning with multiple readings of the transcripts to ensure deep familiarisation. One transcript was then independently coded by the first and second authors to assess coding consistency and refine the coding framework. This process was repeated on an additional three transcripts to ensure reliability. After reaching consensus, the first author coded the remaining transcripts inductively in NVivo, identifying salient patterns related to the intersections of ethnicity, religion, and sexuality. Codes were then iteratively reviewed and grouped into candidate themes, which were refined through repeated engagement with the data and guided by the theoretical frameworks of Intersectionality and IPT. Final themes were named and structured into a coherent narrative that highlighted the tensions and strategies involved in identity negotiation and disclosure among gay Arab Australian men. This phased approach enhanced the reliability and depth of the analysis while preserving the cultural and linguistic nuances captured during transcription, and was particularly suited to the under-researched nature of this population, allowing participants' voices to guide the interpretation of the findings (Larkin et al. 2021).

### ***Ethics statement***

The study was approved by the University of New South Wales (UNSW) Human Research Ethics Committee (Reference: HC210747) and the ACON Research Ethics Review Committee (Reference: 202140). ACON is a community organisation dedicated to protecting the rights and well-being of LGBTQ+ communities in the Australian state of New South Wales.

### ***Researcher reflexivity***

The first author led the research process, including data collection, analysis, and manuscript preparation. His identity as a gay Arab Australian man, born in Lebanon, informed the study's design, recruitment, data collection and analysis. As an 'insider' researcher connected to the community, he was able to build rapport and trust with participants, which facilitated recruitment and encouraged open and meaningful discussions of sensitive topics during the interviews (Braun and Clarke 2022). Recognising that all research is shaped by the social position of the researcher, steps were taken to minimise undue influence and ensure rigour. The lead author avoided leading questions or signalling agreement during interviews, and early transcripts and recordings were reviewed by co-authors to assess consistency and tone. Reflexive journaling was used throughout data collection and analysis to

document reflections and assumptions. Regular team discussions further supported critical engagement with the data and helped refine interpretations. All the authors contributed significantly to the conceptualisation, design and development of the manuscript. This collaborative approach supported transparency and strengthened the credibility of the findings. The second and third authors identify as bicultural and Asian-born Australian women, respectively, with long-standing research and clinical experience working with culturally and sexually diverse populations. The fourth author is a white Australian gay man with extensive experience in LGBTQ+ health research, including work with Arabic-speaking gay men. The senior author is a gay Lebanese man, born in Australia, with longstanding connections to Arab communities in Australia. His extensive research with LGBTQ+ communities in Australia, combined with his cultural insight, informed the interpretation and contextualisation of the findings.

## **Findings**

Two primary themes were developed through thematic analysis: negotiating intersecting identities and disclosure management. These themes highlight the complex ways in which gay Arab Australian men navigate their ethnic, religious, and sexual identities across different social contexts.

### ***Negotiating intersecting identities***

Participants in this study reported navigating a complex and multifaceted sense of identity shaped by the intersections between their ethnic, religious, and sexual self-understandings. These understandings were not static but dynamically interacted, creating tensions as participants moved between different cultural, religious, and LGBTQ+ spaces. Importantly, participants' experiences were shaped by their positions as integral members of Australian society. While Khalil, who had moved to Australia as a teenager, and Mansoor, who had spent part of his youth moving between Lebanon and Australia, had connections to multiple cultural contexts, the majority of participants had been born and raised in Australia, reflecting their deep-rooted connection to Australia as home. These dynamics are explored through two sub-themes, as detailed below.

### ***Cultural contradictions***

Participants described their connection to their Arab heritage as both a source of pride and a challenge, shaped by family expectations, societal perceptions, and the pressures of navigating a predominantly white Australian context. This connection intersected with their sexual identity, complicating how participants disclosed or embodied their identities. Mina shared how he identified, balancing his Arab heritage with his Australian nationality:

"I would say that I am Egyptian Australian, or sometimes I might say I'm Arab Australian."  
(Mina, 31)

Others, like Nemer, highlighted the dual nature of their cultural heritage, often referencing specific family backgrounds:

"[I'd say I'm of a] mixed culture, Lebanese and Australian heritage. I've got a Lebanese parent and a Caucasian Australian parent." (Nemer, 43)

The multiplicity of identities was not static. Participants often modified how they self-identified based on social context, personal experiences, or even geographical location. For example, Michael spoke of adjusting his identity label depending on where he was:

"I guess I'm Assyrian Australian. It's funny, when I'm in Australia I say I'm [of] "Assyrian background," but when I leave the country and I'm traveling around I say I'm Australian." (Michael, 45)

Similarly, Rami reflected on how his confidence in his Lebanese identity had changed over time, particularly as he became aware of the negative assumptions and stereotypes that could be associated with being Lebanese in Australia:

"I'd usually [tell people] I'm Lebanese Australian, but I think [that] has definitely changed [over time] ... I realised that maybe there were negative stereotypes [associated with] with being Lebanese. People assume certain things about you. So, then it slowly became something that I was conscious of sharing with people" (Rami, 35)

While some participants became more cautious about disclosing their Lebanese identity due to negative stereotypes, others expressed unwavering pride in their heritage. Charbel highlighted the achievements of the Lebanese diaspora:

"I'm proud [to be Lebanese]. I know how progressive Lebanese people are, and the success stories of people who emigrated from Lebanon globally." (Charbel, 37)

However, this pride was also complicated by encounters with ignorance and prejudice. Charbel went on to recount how non-Arab Australians sometimes reacted to his Lebanese background with stereotypical assumptions:

"I remember once saying to someone "I'm Lebanese." or "I've got Lebanese background." They're like, "Oh, do you have a gun?" or "Oh, have you seen people get shot?" ... it's like no... I'm just a normal person with a Lebanese background." (Charbel, 37)

Negative perceptions of Arabs in broader Australian society also influenced participants' willingness to disclose their ethnic background, particularly in professional settings. Charbel continued by explaining how external perceptions of his cultural heritage could be both triggering and reductive:

"It triggers me. Not because I'm ashamed to be Lebanese, if anything I'm proud. But I think what triggers me is [...] sometimes people tend to have preconceived ideas of [...] Lebanese [people] as being rebels or uneducated, or primitive, or things like that." (Charbel, 37)

Anthony, however, expressed ambivalence about identifying with the Arab Australian community, finding it difficult to reconcile his personal beliefs with the values he perceived to exist within that community:

"[My perception of the Arab Australian community is that] they are just really bigoted, religious, very ghettoised, and closed-minded [...] Although, I guess the [Arab Australians] that are maybe more like me don't really advertise their Arabness." (Anthony, 34)

Several participants highlighted the internal struggle to reconcile their cultural identity with their personal sense of self. These narratives revealed how participants navigated the tension between cultural pride and societal stigma, reflecting their integration into Australian society while managing the complexities of identity negotiation. As Rami explained, religion is deeply intertwined with Lebanese culture, shaping both values and norms:

"Well, if you're gonna look at the Lebanese culture, it's a culture that is intertwined with religion. So, you can't separate the two. I think that if you're homophobic through religion, it's the same, it's a cultural thing. They [the Lebanese Australian community] are quite homophobic." (Rami, 35)

This interconnectedness between culture and religion sets the stage for the next sub-theme, which demonstrates how participants grapple with reconciling their faith and sexuality.

### *Reconciling faith and sexuality*

Religion played a significant role in shaping participants' identities, although their level of affiliation with the religion of their upbringing varied significantly. Most participants had been raised in Christian households, but as adults, almost all described moving away from formal religious practices while retaining some cultural connections to their faith. Michael described his current relationship with religion as one of selective spirituality:

"I'm more spiritual [in] life and my connection with the Christian faith, but I don't agree with everything they preach at church." (Michael, 45)

Rami also reflected on his religious upbringing, highlighting how it continued to inform his identity even as he moved away from formal religious practices:

"[I] grew up Maronite catholic. I would say I'm atheist, but culturally Catholic." (Rami, 35)

Wael, who had grown up in a Muslim household, described his move away from religious practice as part of a broader personal evolution:

"Growing up [my religious affiliation was] Islam, and now I would say [I'm] atheist." (Wael, 33)

The impact of external perceptions of religion was also significant, particularly for Muslim participants or those perceived as such. Rami recounted how, as a Christian Arab, he often felt pressured to clarify his religious affiliation to avoid being stereotyped:

"When I would say that I was Lebanese, the next question was always "Oh, are you Muslim or Christian?" and I'd say "Christian" and they would say "Okay, that's good." So, I learned from other people that being Christian was meant to the better of the two. I don't agree with it, but it definitely is a thing." (Rami, 35)

Some participants also highlighted how divisions between Christians and Muslims exist within the Arab Australian community itself. Rami further contextualised this experience:

“[This] was during the post-9/11 world, so obviously people would want to know if you’re a Christian or Muslim, and then they’d make a judgement on you based on that.” (Rami, 35)

Some participants described guilt, shame or anxiety about their sexuality, often shaped by religious and cultural teachings. While Nadeem explicitly referred to ‘internalised homophobia,’ others feared divine punishment, avoided discussions about sexuality, or delayed self-acceptance due to familial and religious expectations. Nadeem reflected on this struggle:

“Living at home, probably, up until I was about 20. I had like internalised homophobia [...] I would think about men, and I’d go ... I’m going to hell.” (Nadeem, 25)

These narratives show the profound tension between deeply embedded religious teachings and participants’ personal identities. While many participants distanced themselves from formal religious practices, they retained a sense of cultural and emotional connection to a faith and its traditions.

### ***Disclosure management***

The decision to disclose one’s sexual identity is a complex process for gay Arab Australian men. Participants described disclosure as a continuous process that required negotiating multiple identities amidst significant social, cultural, and religious pressures within conservative Arab Australian communities. This process involved balancing personal authenticity with the need to manage expectations and mitigate risks of stigma and rejection.

### ***The burden of disclosure***

For most participants, disclosure was not a one-time event, but an ongoing negotiation influenced by family expectations, societal stigma, and individual identity. They strategically managed their identities to maintain authenticity while conforming to cultural and social norms. Whilst some participants expressed confidence in their sexual identity, others described feelings of ambivalence, fluidity, or resistance to labelling.

Charbel described his reluctance to define himself within rigid identity categories, prioritising personal authenticity:

“[Answering the question about my sexual identity is] hard because [I] don’t necessarily want to identify [myself] in any way. I probably identify myself as Charbel, and that’s all that really matters. [...] As soon as you come out, people try to fit you into a stereotype. My brother and friends would say, “Oh, that guy’s gay, but you’d never know – he’s not wearing a dress or prancing around.” And you think, well, you do know that most gay people aren’t like that, right? But as soon as you come out, you feel like they’ll box you into that extreme stereotype.” (Charbel, 37)

This resistance to labels resonated with others, reflecting both societal and cultural pressures tied to sexual identity. Wael, for instance, reflected on how his cultural upbringing had delayed his understanding of his sexual identity, describing how discussion of sexuality was largely taboo within his family:

"I didn't even know what *gay* meant [...] I didn't even know what [straight] sex was, let alone know that you shouldn't be attracted to men. [It was] always "Oh my god, it's so rude, it's *haram* [forbidden]," it [was] bad to kiss or to even look at someone [of the opposite sex]." (Wael, 33)

Nemer, on the other hand, identified confidently as a gay man:

"[I identify as] gay. I'm not shy about it." (Nemer, 43)

Mina noted that his self-description varied depending on the social context, using different labels based on his audience:

"To people in public, in a day to day setting I would probably say I'm just a "gay" man. When I write or describe myself to [a professional] audience, I say that I'm a "queer Arab Australian" because I think that's more exclusive and less explicit." (Mina, 31)

This strategic management of identity often intersected with the fear of being outed. While some participants sought to live authentically, for several others, like Charbel, disclosure was about survival – balancing authenticity with the fear of rejection. He went on to say:

"Another impact [of being a gay Arab Australian man] is, you find it hard to make [such a] concrete decision [to disclose] because you're constantly sitting on the fence. You know that as soon as you come out, there's no coming back in." (Charbel, 37)

This balancing act often extended to protecting their families from perceived stigma. Charbel further elaborated:

"I don't care so much about how people react [to my disclosure]. The main thing is protecting my parents from it all. That's my main concern." (Charbel, 37)

In some cases, the decision to disclose was taken out of participants' hands through forced disclosure. Nemer shared his experience of being outed without his consent:

"[It was] a point of shame for my father that other people [in the Arab Australian community] knew about my sexuality before he did. That was his biggest issue with it. He [asked] me 'Why did you have to tell other people first?' Frankly, it's because other people asked me first, and other people happen to be [someone he knows]. [This person] went straight to him as soon as they left being in the space with me [and outed me to my father]." (Nemer, 43)

### ***Reactions from family and community***

When participants disclosed their sexual identities to family members, reactions varied widely – from muted disappointment to outright hostility. Some families accepted their children in private but insisted on keeping their sexual orientation hidden from the wider community. Charbel described his father's reaction:

"I have spoken to my father about [being gay], and in his own way he sort of gives me a pat on the back and he's like "do as you please." I think his biggest issue would be saving face, you know "do as you please, but don't make it as public as you'd want to." (Charbel, 37)

Others were met with more extreme reactions. Nadeem recounted the hostility he faced:

"[The day I told them I was gay] was actually the day after Easter Monday, I [sat my parents] down, [and told them I'd] been struggling a lot with depression, anxiety [...] Mum started crying [but], dad was like: "Well, I should take you down to the park with me and my mates, and... we'll bash the poof out of you." [My dad] said "You're going against God; you're going against the family. If your grandmother knows she will die." (Nadeem, 25)

For Khalil, the experience was more positive, although he recognised this was not the norm within the community:

"I would say that my experience has been positive, it's not a negative experience, and I think that may not be everybody else's experience. I come from a really very supportive family, very loving family kind of thing. I've had it easy." (Khalil, 59)

### *Selective disclosure and 'inviting in'*

Several participants preferred selective disclosure or 'inviting in' trusted individuals, (Hammoud-Beckett 2007) maintaining family ties while expressing their identity in safer spaces:

"As [I] get older... I made a choice to say "no, I want to live my true self" and so you come out or invite people into your life. I think at that point I decided, no, I want to live my life as a gay man." (Wael, 33)

Rami echoed this sentiment, stating that the decision not to come out to his father was based on the desire to avoid unnecessary conflict:

'My dad will be disappointed [if he finds out] definitely... He would be fine with it; he wouldn't be violent or anything. He probably would just be upset about it. [Not coming out to him] would be [a way of] avoiding that whole conversation and avoiding the feeling [of] knowing that your parent is upset with you.' (Rami, 35)

Together, these findings illustrate the complex ways in which gay Arab Australian men navigate disclosure. By balancing authenticity, cultural expectations, and familial relationships, they demonstrate resilience in the face of significant personal and societal challenges.

## **Discussion**

Using the frameworks of Intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989) and IPT (Breakwell 1986), this research highlights the unique challenges gay Arab Australian men face in reconciling ethnic, religious, and sexual identities. Intersectionality reveals how overlapping identities – at the crossroads of race, culture, religion, and sexuality – intensify both internal and external conflicts, while IPT offers insight into coping mechanisms

such as compartmentalisation and selective disclosure used to manage the tension between authenticity and cultural and familial expectations.

The findings highlight the compounded pressures that gay Arab Australian men face within both socially conservative Arab Australian communities and predominantly white LGBTQ+ spaces. Marginalised in both contexts, we have demonstrated how these overlapping identities shaped their experiences of strategic identity management and disclosure, echoing findings with other sexuality minorities (Meyer 2003; Minwalla et al. 2005; Poon and Ho 2008; Jaspal and Cinnirella 2010). This study also builds on research by Hayek et al. (2023), affirming how familial, societal, and interpersonal encounters shape the identity management strategies of gay men of Arab heritage and descent.

Intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989) explains how systems of oppression – such as racism, homophobia, and religious discrimination – are interlocking and co-constructive. Indeed, in this study, participants' narratives illustrate that their marginalisation cannot be understood as a simple sum of separate disadvantages, but rather as a process shaped by the entanglement of cultural, racial, religious, and sexual identities in ways that produce unique and context-dependent forms of exclusion. This aligns with IPT, where compartmentalisation may emerge as a coping mechanism in response to identity threats (Breakwell 1986). Many participants described adopting different selves depending on social context – a strategy that mitigates immediate risk but can exacerbate long-term emotional fragmentation (Pachankis et al. 2020).

The significance of family honour and reputation is particularly pronounced in Arab communities, shaping disclosure decisions not only within families but also in response to a broader community-level surveillance. Study findings demonstrate that family plays a central role in the lives of gay Arab Australian men, offering both emotional resilience and minority stress (Aboulhassan and Brumley 2019). While family ties can provide protection against broader societal discrimination, the collectivist emphasis given to family honour can create pressure to conform (Dwairy 2002). This tension reflects established findings on family expectations taking precedence over individual authenticity for sexuality minorities in Arab cultural contexts (Hammoud-Beckett 2007).

While parallels exist between the experiences of gay Arab Australian men and other culturally and linguistically diverse LGBTQ+ individuals, this study highlights the additional sociocultural and historical factors that distinguish them from other groups. Unlike other collectivist cultural contexts – where remaining closeted may be primarily a family-based decision (Tan and Weisbart 2023) – the racialisation of Arab men in the post-9/11 Australian context adds a layer of scrutiny, making disclosure even more precarious. Furthermore, the distinction between Christian and Muslim participants suggests that religious identity operates as a visible marker within both Arab and non-Arab spaces, influencing external perceptions of their social acceptability. Participants in this study not only navigated expectations within their cultural and religious communities but also had to contend with broader racialisation processes, where assumptions about their religious affiliation influenced societal interactions. This added another layer of complexity to their identity negotiation, reinforcing how ethnic, religious, and sexual identities intersect in ways that shape disclosure decisions.

These intersecting pressures mean that compartmentalisation is not just an individual coping mechanism but also a socially enforced survival strategy in cultural and religiously conservative contexts. In navigating these constraints, some participants also resisted fixed identity labels such as 'gay', instead framing their sexual identity in more fluid or situational terms. This aligns with broader research on LGBTQ+ identity negotiation among men from collectivist backgrounds, to whom Western LGBTQ+ identity categories may not always feel appropriate (Hammoud-Beckett 2007; Jaspal and Cinnirella 2010).

Together, the findings reported here extend existing theories of identity negotiation in collectivist cultures by illustrating the resilience strategies employed by marginalised LGBTQ+ groups. While compartmentalisation has been discussed broadly in the identity literature, this study underscores its nuanced application in contexts of overlapping cultural, religious, and sexual identities. Gay Arab Australian men demonstrate a unique form of resilience by redefining the boundaries of their cultural affiliations while selectively integrating their sexual identities, offering new insight into identity management (Jaspal and Cinnirella 2010; Calabrese et al. 2015).

Our findings support the view that disclosure for gay Arab Australia men is an ongoing, selective process, aligning with Hammoud-Beckett's (2007) concept of 'inviting in,' whereby disclosure is carefully managed based on anticipated reactions. This study further suggests that while inviting in allows individuals to maintain control over disclosure, it may also create barriers to accessing timely mental and sexual health support. The fear of identity exposure in potentially culturally insensitive settings could discourage some men from seeking counselling, HIV testing, or other mental and sexual health services, contributing to delayed engagement with services (Pachankis 2007).

Although homophobia exists in many Arab families, this does not negate the simultaneous presence of family support. Indeed, many participants grappled with complex emotions – navigating family love, conflict, and resilience. These findings challenge simplistic narratives that frame Arab cultures as monolithically homophobic, demonstrating that two truths can coexist. First and foremost, Arab families may hold deeply homophobic attitudes. Second, family remains a fundamental source of identity, belonging, and support. Acknowledging this nuance is essential in shifting reductive Western framings that position Arab cultures as uniquely repressive while failing to account for similar experiences in other conservative cultural groups.

### ***Implications for culturally sensitive support***

This study highlights the need for culturally sensitive support that responds to the intersecting cultural, religious, and familial pressures shaping the experiences of gay Arab Australian men. Existing support networks for gay men in Sydney frequently cluster in inner-city areas, limiting access for those living in Western Sydney and other multicultural parts of the city. This geographic and cultural gap can contribute to feelings of exclusion and limited service engagement (Chan et al. 2022; Saxby et al. 2022). There is a clear need for community-based programmes and interventions that offer safe spaces for both sexual identity exploration and the preservation of familial ties rather than forcing individuals to choose between the two. The concept of inviting

in was evident in this study in terms of how participants selectively disclosed their identities based on anticipated risks and support, underscoring its potential as a guiding framework for future mental health and sexual health services.

### **Limitations**

Several limitations need to be acknowledged. Despite ambitious recruitment efforts (i.e. direct recruitment at a family-friendly LGBTQ+ event in Sydney and subsequent snowballing), the sample size in this study was modest. The majority of participants were recruited from Fair Day, which may have skewed the sample towards individuals who were more socially connected within LGBTQ+ spaces and comfortable with some level of visibility. As a result, the perspectives of more closeted or socially isolated gay Arab Australian men may be underrepresented. Additionally, all participants self-identified as cis-gender gay men, with the majority being well-educated and employed. While the sample included participants from both Christian and Muslim backgrounds, it predominantly comprised Australian-born individuals. This reflects broader demographic trends among Australia's Arab population and provides valuable insight into the experiences of second- and third-generation Arab Australians, who navigate the complex intersections between cultural heritage, family expectations, and a predominantly Western social context. However, it also means that the perspectives of more recently arrived Arab migrants – who may face distinct structural and social challenges – are less well represented. Given the difficulty in reaching members of this population, our sample may not represent the broader spectrum of sexuality minority Arab Australian men, including those with Syrian or Iraqi refugee backgrounds, those of lower socio-economic status background, self-identified bisexual men, and trans men. Future research should aim to engage with the broader range of samples mentioned.

### **Conclusion**

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of the intersectional experiences of culturally and linguistically diverse sexuality minorities by focusing on a sample of gay Arab Australia men. The findings reveal the emotional labour of navigating multiple conflicting identities in contexts that may not fully accept them, despite residing in a large 'gay-friendly' city. Through compartmentalisation and selective disclosure, men may attempt to mitigate risks associated with being a sexuality minority in a culturally and religiously conservative cultural context. Greater awareness and sensitivity to the unique cultural and familial dynamics faced by this group is essential for support services working with culturally and linguistically diverse LGBTQ+ individuals.

### **Note**

1. The term culturally and linguistically diverse is used here to refer to individuals from other than Anglo-Celtic backgrounds, excluding Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare 2024).

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