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Lesbian Identity Negotiation within Conservative Muslim Families: A Dramaturgical Perspective

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Abstract: This study examines the identity experiences of lesbian women within conservative Muslim family environments in Indonesia through the perspective of dramaturgical theory. The research was motivated by the complex social and religious pressures experienced by queer individuals in maintaining personal authenticity while preserving family acceptance. The study aimed to analyze how lesbian women negotiate identity, manage social expectations, and construct adaptive strategies within restrictive religious environments. This research employed a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, digital observation, and documentation studies involving four female university students in Surabaya who had direct experiences in same-sex relationships and were raised in Muslim families with strong religious values. The findings reveal that participants continuously negotiated their identities through front-stage and back-stage performances in everyday life. Religious appearance, behavioral adaptation, and selective openness functioned as strategies for maintaining emotional security and social acceptance within family environments. In addition, safe spaces, supportive friendships, and digital platforms played significant roles in enabling identity expression and emotional resilience. This study contributes to discussions on queer Muslim identity, dramaturgy, religiosity, and social adaptation within contemporary Indonesian society.

Keyword: Lesbian Identity, Dramaturgy, Queer Muslim, Religiosity, Identity Negotiation

INTRODUCTION

Sexual identity within religious societies remains a complex social issue in Indonesia, particularly when it intersects with conservative Islamic values. In conservative Muslim families, non-heteronormative sexual orientations are frequently perceived as deviations from dominant moral, cultural, and religious norms. This condition places lesbian women in a vulnerable position, as they encounter not only social stigma but also emotional pressure originating from the family as the primary space of identity formation and social control. Religious families in Muslim-majority societies often preserve heteronormative standards as part of maintaining family honor, social stability, and religious legitimacy. Consequently, lesbian individuals frequently limit the expression of their identities to avoid rejection,

discrimination, and interpersonal conflict within their family environments (Asbi et al., 2024; Azmi, 2025; Rodríguez, 2022).

Lesbian women in conservative Islamic families commonly experience dual pressures arising from gender constructions and expectations of religiosity. Women are often positioned as representations of family morality, causing expressions of non-heteronormative identities to be perceived as threats to the family's social image and moral integrity. Scholarship on queer Muslim experiences demonstrates that sexual minority individuals frequently experience identity conflict due to tensions between personal authenticity and socio-religious expectations that emphasize heterosexual conformity. As a result, many lesbians develop adaptive social strategies by regulating their behavior, appearance, language, and religious performances in order to maintain social acceptance within both family and community settings (Rahmawati & Poerwandari, 2024; Rodríguez, 2024; Rodríguez, 2022).

Within conservative Muslim communities, the family functions not only as a social institution but also as a moral surveillance system that closely regulates the conduct of its members. Strong religious norms shape expectations regarding how women should dress, communicate, interact, and present themselves in social spaces. Studies on queer Muslims in Indonesia reveal that religious performativity is frequently utilized as a strategy to maintain social acceptance while simultaneously concealing sexual identities considered incompatible with dominant religious values. In this context, lesbian identity is not merely hidden verbally but is continuously negotiated through bodily expressions, religious symbols, and everyday communication practices (Kholid, 2024; Rodríguez, 2024; Rodríguez, 2022).

This phenomenon can be effectively understood through Erving Goffman's dramaturgical perspective, which conceptualizes social life as a performance occurring between the front stage and the back stage. On the front stage, individuals present behaviors aligned with societal expectations in order to secure acceptance from their surrounding environment. Conversely, the back stage becomes a relatively safer space where individuals can express personal identities that cannot be openly displayed in public settings. In studies of queer religiosity, dramaturgical theory has been widely employed to explain how sexual minorities construct dual identities as survival strategies within dominant moral and religious structures. Recent scholarship further emphasizes that queer individuals within religious communities continuously negotiate visibility, belonging, and identity through performative social interactions shaped by cultural and moral expectations. Through this perspective, identity is understood not as a fixed condition but as a continuous process of social negotiation shaped by relations of power, culture, and religion (Golriz, 2025; Kara, 2025; Rodríguez, 2024).

Although studies concerning LGBTQ+ communities in Indonesia have continued to expand, research specifically examining the experiences of lesbian women within conservative Muslim families remains limited. Previous studies have predominantly focused on public acceptance, discrimination, or queer identities within broader social contexts. However, the family represents the closest social environment influencing identity formation, emotional experiences, and adaptive strategies among lesbian individuals. Recent studies have emphasized the importance of examining queer experiences within intimate and familial spaces because family acceptance and rejection significantly affect psychological well-being and identity development among sexual minorities. Therefore, this study aims to analyze how lesbian women in conservative Islamic families manage and negotiate their identities through dramaturgical practices in everyday life. In addition, this research explores how front-stage and back-stage performances are utilized to navigate familial pressure, religiosity, and the desire to preserve personal authenticity. Ultimately, this study is expected to contribute theoretically to discussions on identity, sociology of religion, and gender studies in Indonesia, particularly

regarding the lived experiences of queer Muslims within conservative family structures (Battista et al., 2025; Rodriguez, 2024).

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of lesbian women within conservative Muslim family environments. A phenomenological perspective was selected because it enables researchers to understand the subjective meanings, emotional experiences, and social realities directly experienced by participants in their everyday lives. Through this approach, the study examined how lesbian individuals negotiate their identities, manage social expectations, and construct self-presentation strategies within family settings shaped by strong religious values. Furthermore, this research adopted a descriptive-analytical approach to interpret the relationship between personal experiences, family dynamics, and religious norms through the perspective of Erving Goffman’s dramaturgical theory. The dramaturgical framework was specifically utilized to analyze how participants performed different identities in front-stage and back-stage social situations as strategies for maintaining social acceptance within conservative family structures (Alvi & Zaidi, 2021; Arnez, 2024).

The participants in this study consisted of four female university students in Surabaya who met the predetermined research criteria. Participants were selected based on several considerations, including having direct experience in same-sex relationships, being raised in Muslim families with strong Islamic values, and voluntarily agreeing to share their personal experiences openly for research purposes. Participant recruitment was conducted using purposive sampling to ensure that the selected informants possessed experiences directly relevant to the focus of the study. The interview process was conducted over a three-month period, from September to November, allowing participants sufficient time to reflect upon and narrate their lived experiences in depth (Arnez, 2024; Asbi et al., 2024).

Table 1. Characteristics of Research Participants

Informant	Age	Educational Status	Family Background	Identity Experience
Informant 1	21	Undergraduate Student	Conservative Muslim Family	Experienced same-sex romantic relationship
Informant 2	22	Undergraduate Student	Moderately Religious Muslim Family	Experienced same-sex romantic relationship
Informant 3	20	Undergraduate Student	Conservative Muslim Family	Openly expressed identity within close social circles
Informant 4	23	Undergraduate Student	Religious Muslim Family	Experienced identity negotiation within family environment

To strengthen data validity and develop a comprehensive understanding of participants’ experiences, this study employed multiple data collection techniques, including in-depth interviews, limited observations, digital observations, and documentation studies. In-depth interviews served as the primary method for exploring participants’ emotional experiences, identity management strategies, and social interactions within family environments. In addition, digital observation was conducted to examine how participants managed identity expression and social interaction within online spaces and trusted social circles. Documentation and literature studies were also utilized to review scholarly articles, books, and supporting materials related to queer identity, religiosity, dramaturgy, and family dynamics in conservative societies. The combination of these techniques enabled richer contextual interpretation and strengthened the credibility of the findings (Ahmed et al., 2025; Naeem et al., 2023; Oluka, 2025).

Table 2. Data Collection Techniques

Data Collection Technique	Purpose
In-Depth Interviews	To explore participants’ lived experiences, emotional conditions, and identity negotiation processes
Digital Observation	To examine online self-presentation, identity expression, and social interaction patterns
Documentation and Literature Study	To support contextual interpretation and strengthen theoretical analysis

The data analysis process employed thematic analysis techniques. The initial stage involved data reduction, in which interview transcripts, observation notes, and supporting documents were systematically reviewed and organized according to the relevance of the research objectives. Subsequently, recurring patterns and themes related to identity management, religious performativity, emotional conflict, family control, and strategies of concealment were identified and categorized. The final stage involved interpreting the identified themes through the dramaturgical perspective in order to understand how participants continuously negotiated their identities within restrictive social and religious environments. Thematic analysis was selected because it allows researchers to interpret patterns of meaning within qualitative data while maintaining sensitivity toward participants’ lived experiences and social contexts (Ahmed et al., 2025; Naeem et al., 2023; Polat, 2025).

Table 3. Thematic Analysis Framework

Main Theme	Subtheme
Identity Management	Front-stage and back-stage performance
Religious Performativity	Use of religious symbols and behavioral adaptation
Emotional Conflict	Fear of rejection and social pressure
Safe Space Construction	Identity expression within trusted environments
Resistance and Negotiation	Strategies of concealment and selective openness

To maintain ethical integrity, all participant identities were anonymized, and informed consent was obtained prior to the interview process. This ethical consideration was essential to ensure participants’ privacy, emotional safety, and confidentiality throughout the study. Additionally, the researcher prioritized empathy, respect, and nonjudgmental engagement during the interview process to create a safe environment in which participants could share their experiences openly and comfortably. Ethical principles in qualitative research emphasize the importance of informed consent, participant protection, confidentiality, and emotionally sensitive interactions, particularly when research involves vulnerable or marginalized communities (Scheytt & Pflüger, 2024; Westland et al., 2025).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Identity Representation Within the Family Environment

The findings demonstrate that all participants constructed different identities when interacting within the family environment compared to other social spaces. The performance of identity among queer individuals, particularly lesbian university students raised in conservative Muslim families, reflects a complex and layered process shaped by social expectations, religious values, and the desire to preserve an authentic sense of self. Within family settings, participants frequently performed identities that contrasted with their personal sexual identities in order to maintain social harmony and avoid familial conflict. This finding indicates that identity negotiation among lesbian individuals is strongly influenced by heteronormative expectations embedded within conservative religious family structures (Golriz, 2025; Hlaimi & Littlewood, 2023).

Participant 1, who was raised in a highly religious family with a strong Islamic educational background, explained that she had been accustomed since childhood to presenting herself according to the moral expectations established by her family. She described consistently wearing modest clothing, actively participating in religious activities, and maintaining an image associated with obedience and religiosity. These findings suggest that religious identity functions not only as a spiritual expression but also as a form of social performance intended to preserve acceptance within the family environment. In this context, lesbian identity was perceived as incompatible with dominant religious values, encouraging participants to conceal aspects of their sexuality in order to avoid emotional rejection and social tension within the household (Arnez, 2024; Golriz, 2025).

The findings further reveal that religious performativity became an important strategy for managing identity within conservative family spaces. Participants emphasized the importance of maintaining outward religious appearances, including the use of hijab, polite communication styles, and adherence to expected gender behaviors. These practices functioned as symbolic forms of self-protection that enabled participants to minimize suspicion and maintain emotional security within the family. Interestingly, even participants from moderately religious family backgrounds reported experiencing pressure to conform to heteronormative expectations. This suggests that heteronormative values operate not only through formal religious doctrine but also through broader cultural and familial norms that regulate women’s behavior and sexuality (Binder, 2026; Raghavan, 2026).

From a dramaturgical perspective, these findings illustrate how participants continuously navigated front-stage and back-stage performances in everyday life. The family environment functioned as a front-stage setting in which participants carefully managed gestures, appearance, speech, and social interaction to align with religious expectations. Meanwhile, their authentic identities were more likely to emerge within trusted social spaces outside the household. The findings support the argument that identity among queer individuals within conservative religious environments is not static but continuously negotiated through social interaction, emotional adaptation, and performative self-management (Binder, 2026; Lodge et al., 2026).

Table 4. Identity Representation and Dramaturgical Performance

Main Theme	Participant Statement	Analytical Interpretation
Front-Stage Identity	“I always appear religious and obedient in front of my family.”	Religious appearance functions as a strategy for social acceptance within the family.
Back-Stage Identity	“Outside the house, I can express myself more honestly.”	Participants construct alternative spaces for authentic identity expression.
Religious Performativity	“Wearing hijab makes my family trust me more.”	Religious symbols become forms of identity management and protection.
Emotional Conflict	“At home, I often feel like I am not my real self.”	Identity suppression contributes to emotional and psychological tension.

Safe Spaces and Identity Expression

The study found that participants perceived safe spaces as environments where they could express their identities without fear of judgment, rejection, or moral surveillance. These spaces were not limited to physical locations but also included emotional and digital environments, such as close friendship circles and private social media platforms. Several participants explained that becoming university students and living away from home provided greater opportunities to express themselves more openly and honestly. This finding reflects how queer individuals often construct alternative spaces of belonging outside restrictive family environments in order to preserve emotional security and personal authenticity (Rodriguez, 2024; Kara, 2025).

One participant described feeling more comfortable sharing her romantic relationship through the “close friends” feature on social media because it allowed her to selectively control who could access her identity. She intentionally limited visibility to individuals whom she considered emotionally supportive and accepting of her sexual orientation. This finding demonstrates that digital platforms can function as alternative safe spaces where queer individuals negotiate visibility while simultaneously protecting themselves from hostile social environments.

The findings also indicate that identity expression among participants was strongly influenced by the social climate within educational institutions. Some participants described campus environments as relatively open and supportive toward diversity, while others perceived implicit social regulations discouraging open expressions of LGBTQ+ identity. In several cases, participants feared stigma, exclusion, and potential social sanctions if their identities became publicly known. Consequently, participants carefully adjusted their social interactions and identity performances depending on the social environment they inhabited. These findings align with previous studies emphasizing that queer individuals within religious societies often negotiate visibility selectively based on perceptions of safety, acceptance, and social risk (Rahmawati & Poerwandari, 2024).

These findings highlight the important role of safe spaces in supporting emotional well-being and identity affirmation among lesbian individuals living within restrictive religious environments. Through trusted friendships, selective online visibility, and supportive social networks, participants were able to create alternative spaces that provided temporary relief from social pressure and identity concealment. The existence of these spaces reflects the broader struggle of queer individuals to establish belonging, emotional security, and self-recognition within societies shaped by dominant heteronormative values (Battista et al., 2025).

Relationship Experiences and Emotional Conflict

All participants reported having direct experiences in same-sex romantic relationships, although the emotional intensity and relational dynamics varied among individuals. Participant 1 explained that she experienced stronger emotional and romantic attraction toward women despite having previously encountered emotionally unhealthy relationships. Nevertheless, these experiences did not alter her emotional preferences or sexual orientation.

The findings reveal that emotional conflict among participants emerged not only from family and religious pressure but also from the complexity of maintaining intimate same-sex relationships within socially restrictive environments. Participants frequently described feelings of fear, anxiety, guilt, and emotional exhaustion resulting from the need to continuously conceal their identities. In addition, participants experienced internal conflict between maintaining family expectations and preserving personal authenticity. These experiences are closely associated with minority stress experienced by queer individuals living within socially restrictive and heteronormative environments (Azmi, 2025; Hlaimi & Littlewood, 2023).

These experiences demonstrate that emotional vulnerability among lesbian individuals cannot be understood solely through the lens of sexual orientation. Rather, emotional conflict is closely connected to broader social structures, including religious norms, family control, and heteronormative expectations. The pressure to conform to socially accepted identities contributed to psychological strain and identity fragmentation among participants. However, despite these pressures, participants also demonstrated resilience through adaptive strategies, selective openness, and emotionally supportive relationships.

Religious Performativity and Family Control

Religiosity emerged as one of the most influential factors shaping social control over participants' identities and behaviors. Within conservative Muslim families, religious values operated not only as spiritual guidance but also as mechanisms for regulating morality, gender roles, and socially acceptable forms of sexuality. Participants described family environments characterized by strong expectations regarding modesty, obedience, and conformity to heterosexual norms. These findings reinforce previous scholarship suggesting that religiosity within conservative Muslim societies frequently functions as a mechanism for maintaining heteronormative social order and regulating sexual identity (Arnez, 2024; Kholid, 2024).

Several participants explained that maintaining religious appearances became essential for preserving family relationships and avoiding interpersonal conflict. The use of religious symbols, participation in religious activities, and the performance of socially accepted femininity functioned as strategies for maintaining acceptance within the family structure. In this context, religious performance cannot be interpreted solely as an expression of personal faith; rather, it also reflects adaptive responses to social pressure within conservative religious environments.

The findings further demonstrate that family control extended beyond direct verbal supervision. Participants described experiencing indirect forms of monitoring through questions regarding romantic relationships, expectations of marriage, and evaluations of feminine behavior. Consequently, participants developed strategies to regulate speech, body language, clothing choices, and emotional expression in order to avoid suspicion regarding their sexual identities.

Resistance, Negotiation, and Identity Survival

Although participants lived within socially restrictive environments, the findings reveal various forms of resistance and identity negotiation. Resistance was not always expressed through direct confrontation; instead, it frequently appeared through subtle symbolic actions and selective identity disclosure. Several participants described moments in which they intentionally displayed aspects of their identities within limited social spaces as acts of personal autonomy and emotional resistance.

For example, one participant explained that occasionally sharing photographs without religious symbols on private social media accounts felt like a quiet form of resistance against family control. Such actions illustrate how participants negotiated visibility while remaining aware of the social and emotional risks associated with open disclosure. These forms of resistance reflect the complexity of queer existence within conservative Muslim environments, where identity expression must be carefully balanced against emotional safety and social acceptance. Similar patterns of symbolic resistance and identity negotiation among queer Muslims have also been identified in previous studies on queer visibility and belonging (Golriz, 2025; Rodríguez, 2022).

The findings further indicate that participants continuously reconstructed meanings of home, belonging, and emotional security through alternative social networks and supportive interpersonal relationships. Trusted friendships, online communities, and intimate relationships became important spaces where participants could experience recognition and authenticity that were often absent within family environments.

Overall, this study demonstrates that lesbian identity within conservative Muslim families is shaped through continuous negotiation between religious expectations, family control, emotional survival, and personal authenticity. Dramaturgical theory provides a valuable framework for understanding how participants strategically managed identity performances across different social spaces. Rather than viewing identity solely as a fixed sexual orientation, the findings suggest that identity is socially constructed, emotionally

negotiated, and continuously performed within broader relations of power, culture, and religion (Binder, 2026; Lodge et al., 2026).

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the identity experiences of lesbian women within conservative Muslim family environments in Indonesia are shaped through continuous negotiation between religious expectations, family control, social stigma, and personal authenticity. The findings reveal that participants strategically managed their identities through dramaturgical practices, particularly by differentiating front-stage and back-stage performances in everyday social interactions. Within family spaces, participants frequently performed religious and heteronormative identities in order to maintain social acceptance and emotional security, while more authentic forms of self-expression emerged within trusted social and digital environments. These findings confirm that lesbian identity in conservative religious contexts is not static, but socially constructed and continuously negotiated through adaptive and performative strategies.

This study also highlights the significant role of safe spaces in supporting emotional well-being, identity affirmation, and psychological resilience among queer individuals living within restrictive social environments. The existence of supportive friendships, selective online visibility, and alternative social networks enabled participants to maintain a sense of belonging and personal integrity despite experiencing social pressure and identity concealment. In addition, religiosity within conservative family structures functioned not only as a spiritual value system but also as a mechanism of moral regulation that shaped acceptable forms of gender expression and sexuality.

Through the application of dramaturgical theory, this research contributes to the broader discussion of identity, sociology of religion, and queer studies in Indonesia by demonstrating how queer Muslim individuals actively negotiate visibility, belonging, and self-preservation within dominant heteronormative structures. The study further emphasizes the importance of developing more inclusive educational, social, and interpersonal environments that recognize emotional safety and human dignity as essential aspects of social well-being. Overall, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of lesbian individuals in conservative Muslim families and expands scholarly discussions regarding identity negotiation, religious performativity, and social adaptation within contemporary Indonesian society.

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