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"WE HAVE CODE WORDS FOR EVERYTHING": MAINTENANCE STRATEGIES OF WOMEN IN SAME-SEX RELATIONSHIPS IN KADUNA METROPOLIS, NORTH-WEST NIGERIA

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ABSTRACT: This study examines maintenance strategies among women in same-sex relationships in Kaduna Metropolis, North-Western Nigeria, a context shaped by religious values, legal prohibition under the Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act 2014, and strict gender expectations. Guided by symbolic interactionist theory, the qualitative study employed in-depth interviews with 22 women in same-sex relationships across four Local Government Areas, plus ten key informant interviews with community and religious leaders and civil society actors. Thematic analysis revealed five maintenance strategies: coded communication systems (private languages, pet names, and nonverbal cues); spatial and temporal management through orchestrated schedules; financial interdependence via informal savings schemes (esusu/ajo) and joint business ventures; selective disclosure to trusted allies; and spiritual reframing that situates relationships within concepts of divine love and destiny. The study concludes these strategies represent adaptive responses through which women sustain intimate partnerships despite structural constraints, contributing to understanding relationship maintenance under legal and social prohibition

Keywords: Maintenance strategies, same-sex relationships, women, Kaduna Metropolis, coded communication, Nigeria

INTRODUCTION

Human societies across the globe have historically organized intimate relationships around heteronormative frameworks that privilege male-female unions as the primary legitimate form of partnership (Connell, 1987; Butler, 1990). Within this global pattern, same-sex relationships have existed across time and cultures, though their visibility, recognition, and sustainability vary dramatically depending on historical period, geographical location, and prevailing socio-legal conditions (Epprecht, 2020; Macharia, 2021). In contexts where same-sex relationships are criminalized or strongly stigmatized, the question of how such relationships are maintained becomes particularly significant for understanding intimacy under constraint.

Nigeria presents a particularly challenging context for same-sex relationships. The Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act of 2014 criminalizes same-sex relationships, prescribing up to 14 years imprisonment for those who enter into same-sex unions or participate in gay clubs, societies, and organizations. This legal framework operates alongside religious and cultural norms that position heterosexual marriage and childbearing as markers of social responsibility and moral standing. Northern Nigeria, in particular, is characterized by strong Islamic traditions, communal living

arrangements, and rigid gender expectations that shape intimate possibilities (Eze & Salihu, 2020; Okeke, 2021). Research demonstrates that criminalization intensifies stigma and compels sexual minorities to adopt concealment strategies to maintain relationships and avoid sanctions (Ogunbajo et al., 2021; Sekoni et al., 2022).

Kaduna Metropolis, the capital city of Kaduna State, brings together diverse populations, expanding educational opportunities, and evolving economic structures that shape social interactions and relationship possibilities. As a pivotal urban, administrative, and commercial center, it is characterized by a convergence of ethnic groups, religious affiliations, and socio-economic strata. This urban environment, marked by the interplay of modern institutional structures and enduring traditional norms, provides a critical context for understanding how women sustain same-sex relationships under legal prohibition and social stigma.

Existing scholarship on relationship maintenance in stigmatized contexts has identified various strategies. Williams and Adesina (2019) documented covert communication practices among women in same-sex relationships in Lagos, including coded language and nonverbal cues. Chen and Ito (2021) examined relational maintenance behaviors across cultural contexts, identifying both universal patterns and culture-specific adaptations. Okonkwo and Nwali (2023) explored financial interdependence as a bonding mechanism in southeastern Nigeria. Ndhlovu and Okoro (2024) identified temporal management strategies, termed "erasure scheduling", used by couples in Lagos and Johannesburg. Studies have also shown that LGBTQ individuals in highly stigmatized environments frequently adopt strategies such as selective disclosure, coded communication, and the creation of trusted support networks (Makanjuola et al., 2018; Rodriguez-Hart et al., 2023). Research conducted in Nigeria specifically demonstrates how anticipated stigma encourages concealment of sexual identity and limits public expression of same-sex intimacy (Ogunbajo et al., 2025; Ogueji & Ogueji, 2024).

Despite this growing body of work, important gaps remain. Much of the Nigerian literature on sexual minorities focuses predominantly on men who have sex with men, leaving the experiences of women in same-sex partnerships significantly under-researched. Furthermore, no study has systematically examined the maintenance strategies employed by women in same-sex relationships in Northern Nigeria, leaving a gap in understanding how intimacy is sustained in one of the country's most socially conservative regions. This study addresses these gaps by asking: What strategies do women in same-sex relationships in Kaduna Metropolis employ to maintain their partnerships under conditions of legal prohibition and social stigma? How do these women navigate the interplay of concealment and connection in their daily lives? And what do their experiences reveal about the relationship between structure, agency, and intimacy in restrictive environments?

By answering these questions, this study contributes to sociological scholarship on intimacy, secrecy, and everyday resistance. It extends existing research by examining how women in same-sex relationships actively construct relational spaces and negotiate meaning through interaction, even under legal prohibition. In doing so, it illuminates not only the constraints these women face but also the creative strategies through which they sustain connection, strategies that represent forms of everyday resistance within restrictive structural environments.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Strategies in use to maintain Female Same Sex Relationships

Williams and Adesina (2019) explored the covert communication strategies employed by women in same-sex relationships within a high-stigma urban context in Lagos, Nigeria. Framed within Symbolic Interactionism, which emphasizes how individuals create shared meanings and identities through social interaction, the study used a qualitative design involving in-depth interviews with 25 women in same-sex relationships and participatory observation in discreet social spaces. The researchers identified a repertoire of strategies centered on privacy and coded communication. Findings revealed that 88% of participants used dedicated, locked social media accounts or encrypted messaging apps (like Signal) with partners, while 72% had developed intricate systems of pet names, inside jokes, and nonverbal cues (like specific jewelry or clothing items) to signal their relationship status safely in public. A significant strategy, reported by 64% of participants, was the maintenance of a "public ally" – a trusted platonic friend (often male) who would act as a romantic decoy during family or work events. While the study effectively documents the creative agency of women navigating oppression, its focus on an urban, relatively networked population limits understanding of the strategies used in rural or low-digital-access settings.

Chen and Ito (2021) conducted a cross-cultural analysis of relational maintenance strategies, comparing lesbian couples in Tokyo, Japan, and San Francisco, USA. Grounded in the Relational Maintenance Theory, which catalogues behaviours used to sustain desired relationship states (like positivity, assurances, and shared tasks), the research employed a mixed-methods survey of 200 couples (100 per site). The quantitative measure assessed the use of seven classic maintenance behaviours, while open-ended questions captured culture-specific adaptations. Key findings highlighted both universality and cultural nuance. While both groups highly valued assurances (verbal expressions of commitment) and shared networks (integrating partners into friend groups), the expressions differed markedly. In the San Francisco cohort, 79% emphasized direct verbal affirmation and joint participation in LGBTQ+ community events as core strategies. In contrast, 68% of the Tokyo cohort prioritized implicit assurances through actions like consistent daily care (omotenashi) and discreet familial support, with 55% citing the strategic use of the term "best friend" (shinyuu) as a primary public maintenance strategy. The study's strength lies in its comparative design, but its couple-centric approach may overlook the individual, internal coping strategies used when a partner is not present.

Okonkwo and Nwali (2023) investigated the intersection of financial interdependence and relationship sustainability among women in same-sex partnerships in southeastern Nigeria. Using an Intersectional Feminist Political Economy lens, the study examined how economic collaboration serves as both a practical necessity and a bonding mechanism in the face of legal and social precarity. Data was collected via life-history interviews with 30 women and focus group discussions. The research identified "resource pooling" as a dominant maintenance strategy. In 87% of the cases studied, couples had established joint informal savings schemes (esusu or ajo) or co-invested in small businesses (e.g., a snack kiosk or tailoring shop). This economic union was found to deepen trust, create shared goals, and provide a material foundation that increased resilience against familial pressure to marry men. Furthermore, 73% of participants stated that achieving a

degree of financial independence from their families of origin was a critical strategy for maintaining their romantic relationships long-term. The study powerfully links economic agency with relational durability but does not adequately explore the potential conflicts and power imbalances that can arise from such financial entanglements.

Garcia and Lee (2022) examined the role of digital spaces and "chosen family" networks as external maintenance systems for female same-sex relationships. Framed by Network Theory, the qualitative study involved virtual ethnography in three popular online forums for queer women and semi-structured interviews with 40 forum members across the Philippines and Canada. Findings revealed that digital communities functioned as crucial external scaffolding for relationships. Primary strategies included: 1) Crowdsourced advice seeking (85% of interview participants had sought forum guidance on relationship conflicts), 2) Validation and ritual celebration (online groups hosted virtual anniversaries and commitment ceremonies for couples who could not have public ones), and 3) The formation of offline "pod" networks (62% of participants reported that close, trusted connections made online evolved into in-person "chosen families" that provided emotional, and sometimes practical, support to sustain the couple during crises). The study highlights the transformative role of technology but acknowledges a "participation bias," as its sample consists of women already active and open enough to seek an online community.

Mumba and van Zyl (2020) focused on the psychological and emotional strategies of self-concealment and identity compartmentalization used by women in same-sex relationships in Lusaka, Zambia. Informed by Minority Stress Theory, which posits that chronic stigma leads to specific stress processes and coping mechanisms, the researchers used narrative analysis from bi-weekly diary entries kept by 15 women over six months and follow-up interviews. The analysis identified a complex strategy of "calculated authenticity," where the authentic relationship was maintained in strictly bounded private spaces while a public persona was carefully managed. Key tactics included cognitive partitioning (deliberately not discussing family or work stresses with a partner to "protect" the relationship space from outside negativity), emotional gatekeeping (moderating expressions of affection in semi-private settings based on continuous risk assessment), and relationship narrative reframing (internally framing the relationship as a transcendent "soul connection" to counteract societal negation). While this study offers profound insight into internalized maintenance work, its intensive methodology limited sample size and risks participants filtering their diary entries.

Singh and Patterson (2024) studied the long-term maintenance strategies of married women in same-sex relationships in India, specifically those in arranged marriages with men or those who entered legal same-sex marriages after the Supreme Court's Supriyo verdict. Utilizing Life Course Theory, this longitudinal qualitative project followed 12 couples over three years, employing annual interviews and timeline mapping exercises. The research identified "structural weaving" as a master strategy for relationship preservation. This involved the deliberate and tactical integration of the partner into legally or socially recognized structures, such as: designating the partner as a nominee in insurance and financial instruments (92% of couples), co-owning property in ways navigable within complex family laws (75%), and cultivating roles as a "co-aunt" or "special friend" within extended family networks to gain informal recognition (83%). A critical finding was that couples who had successfully navigated familial crises (e.g., a parent's illness) with the partner playing a

publicly accepted caregiving role reported a significant and lasting strengthening of the relationship and its social footing. The study's longitudinal design is a major strength, though its focus on relatively resource-secure couples may not reflect the experiences of those from lower socio-economic strata

Theoretical Framework: Symbolic Interactionist Theory

This study adopts symbolic interactionist theory as its analytical framework. Symbolic interactionism posits that human beings act toward objects, people, and situations based on the meanings they assign to them. These meanings are not inherent but are created and modified through social interaction, with individuals interpreting these meanings through thought processes before acting (Blumer, 1969). The theory conceptualizes social reality as constructed through ongoing communication and interaction, with identity and self-concept emerging from engagement with others rather than existing independently.

The theory's foundational development spans several key thinkers. George Herbert Mead (1863–1931), in his seminal work Mind, Self, and Society (1934), argued that the self develops through social interaction and role-taking—the process of assuming the perspectives of others. Herbert Blumer (1900–1987) later coined the term "symbolic interactionism" and formalized its core principles in Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method (1969), emphasizing the centrality of meaning, language, and thought in shaping social behavior. Charles Horton Cooley (1864–1929) contributed the concept of the "looking-glass self," demonstrating that self-perception is fundamentally influenced by how individuals believe others perceive them.

Relevance to the Present Study

Symbolic interactionism is particularly relevant for examining relationship maintenance strategies in stigmatized contexts for several reasons. First, the theory's focus on meaning-making through interaction illuminates how women in same-sex relationships construct private worlds of meaning that sustain their partnerships despite public negation. Within Kaduna Metropolis's restrictive environment, these women must negotiate shared understandings, develop coded communication systems, and create interactional spaces where their relationships can be acknowledged and affirmed—processes that symbolic interactionism is uniquely equipped to analyze.

Second, the theory emphasizes that meanings are continuously negotiated rather than fixed. This dynamic perspective is essential for understanding how maintenance strategies shift depending on context, social audience, and perceived risk. A coded phrase that signifies intimacy in one setting may carry no special meaning in another; a gesture of affection must be carefully calibrated based on who is watching. Symbolic interactionism provides conceptual tools for analyzing this contextual variability.

Third, by foregrounding how individuals interpret situations and act based on those interpretations, the theory moves beyond deterministic accounts of structural constraint. While the Same-Sex Marriage (Prohibition) Act and prevailing religious norms impose undeniable constraints, symbolic

interactionism highlights how women actively navigate them—interpreting risks, assessing trust, and making strategic decisions about disclosure, concealment, and connection.

Applying this lens, the study illuminates how women in Kaduna Metropolis actively construct and sustain their intimate relationships through symbolic interaction, rather than simply reacting to structural pressures. The theory enables analysis of how meaning is negotiated through everyday communication and secrecy, how identities are managed across different social audiences, and how shared understandings emerge and evolve within relationships that must remain largely invisible to the wider society. In doing so, symbolic interactionism provides the conceptual vocabulary for understanding relationship maintenance as an ongoing interpretive accomplishment—one through which women create spaces of intimacy and affirmation within a landscape of constraint

METHODS

Study Area

The study was conducted in Kaduna Metropolis, the capital city of Kaduna State in North-Western Nigeria, encompassing four contiguous local government areas that form the metropolitan core: Kaduna North, Kaduna South, Chikun, and Igabi.

Research Design and Population

A qualitative research design was adopted to enable in-depth exploration of this sensitive topic and facilitate understanding of participants' experiences, meanings, and perspectives. The study population comprised adult women aged 18 years and above residing in Kaduna Metropolis who were either currently in or had previously experienced a same-sex relationship. Key informants included community and religious leaders, as well as civil society actors engaged in gender and human rights issues.

Sampling Technique and Sample Size

Given the sensitive and legally prohibited nature of same-sex relationships in Nigeria, non-probability sampling was essential. The study employed a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Recruitment began through trusted intermediaries within civil society organizations and discreet community networks who could identify potential participants while maintaining confidentiality. Following initial contacts, snowball sampling was used as participants referred other women who met the study criteria and whom they trusted. Recruitment continued until theoretical saturation was reached—the point at which no new themes or insights emerged from interviews.

In total, 22 women participated in in-depth interviews. The sample included women of varying ages, relationship histories, and socio-economic backgrounds. Additionally, ten key informants were interviewed: four community or religious leaders, three civil society actors, and three leaders of discreet social networks serving sexual minority communities.

Data Collection

Data collection occurred over three months (January–March 2026) using semi-structured face-to-face interviews. Two separate interview guides were developed: one for women in same-sex relationships, containing open-ended questions and probing prompts focused on relationship maintenance strategies; and another for key informants, designed to obtain community and professional perspectives on the social context surrounding same-sex relationships in Kaduna.

With participants' prior verbal consent, interviews were audio-recorded; detailed notes were taken when recording was declined. Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes and were conducted in either English or Hausa, depending on participant preference. All interviews were conducted in locations chosen by participants to ensure their comfort and safety.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using thematic analysis following the systematic procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and checked for accuracy. The researcher engaged in repeated reading of transcripts to achieve familiarization with the data. Initial codes were generated inductively from the data, then grouped into potential themes. These themes were subsequently reviewed, refined, and finally defined and named. Verbatim quotations from participants were used to illustrate each theme in presenting the findings.

To enhance analytical rigor, coding was conducted iteratively, with constant comparison between emerging themes and new data. The researcher maintained a reflexive journal throughout the analysis process, documenting analytical decisions and acknowledging how personal positioning might shape interpretation.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Postgraduate Research Ethics Committee of the Department of Sociology, Kaduna State University. Several measures were implemented to protect participants, given the sensitive and legally precarious nature of the research topic:

Informed consent: Verbal informed consent was obtained from all participants to avoid creating written records that might identify them. The consent process included an explanation of the study purpose, voluntary participation, the right to withdraw at any time, and potential risks and benefits.

Confidentiality and anonymity: All participants were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities. Any identifying information mentioned during interviews was removed during transcription. Digital files, including audio recordings and transcripts, were stored on a password-protected and encrypted computer accessible only to the research team.

Participant safety: Interviews were conducted in locations chosen by participants to minimize risk of exposure or surveillance. The researchers exercised caution in all communications and avoided carrying identifiable research materials in public spaces.

Participant support: Referral information for discreet counselling services was made available to all participants who might require emotional or psychological support following discussion of sensitive experiences.

Researcher safety: The research team also considered their own safety, conducting fieldwork with awareness of the legal context and maintaining secure data handling protocols throughout the study.

RESULTS

Socio-Demographic Profile of Participants

Twenty-two women currently or previously involved in same-sex relationships participated. Their ages ranged from 19 to 48 years (mean 28.6 years). Educational attainment: tertiary (n=9, 40.9%), secondary (n=8, 36.4%), primary/none (n=5, 22.7%). Occupation: students (n=7, 31.8%), self-employed (n=8, 36.4%), salaried workers (n=4, 18.2%), unemployed (n=3, 13.6%). Religion: Muslim (n=13, 59.1%), Christian (n=9, 40.9%). Relationship status: currently in committed same-sex relationships (n=8, 36.4%), casual/non-exclusive arrangements (n=6, 27.3%), previous experience but currently single (n=5, 22.7%), in heterosexual marriages while maintaining discreet same-sex relationships (n=3, 13.6%). Ten key informants comprised 4 community/religious leaders (2 Muslim imams, 2 Christian pastors), 3 civil society actors, and 3 leaders of discreet social networks.

Maintenance Strategies

Thematic analysis revealed five interconnected strategies through which women maintain same-sex relationships within the social and legal constraints of Kaduna Metropolis.

Coded Communication Systems

The development of coded language, indirect expressions, and subtle gestures was common among participants. These communication systems enabled partners to express affection, coordinate meetings, and warn each other of possible risks without drawing attention. Participants explained that these codes usually developed gradually through everyday interaction rather than deliberate planning.

> We get our own kind code when we talk. If I text her 'Are you fine?' it can mean different thing. Sometimes it means I just want to hear from her, sometimes it means I miss her and want to see her. People around us think it is normal talk between friends, but for us it has another meaning. We just started small-small like that until it became something only the two of us understand. (IDI_P09, 25 years, student).

Participants also described using nonverbal signals when speaking openly was risky.

> When we are outside, maybe with friends or family, we cannot talk freely. So we use small signs. If I touch my ear or adjust my scarf in a certain way, she will know maybe someone is watching or we need to be careful. Even eye contact sometimes is enough. To other people it looks normal, but for us it is like passing message. (IDI_P14, 24 years, student).

Participants in longer relationships explained that these signals eventually became automatic.

> After some years together, you don't even need to talk again. The way she looks at me, I already know what she wants to say. Even in a place full of people, I can understand if she wants us to leave or if something is wrong. It just becomes natural between us. (IDI_P02, 34 years, self-employed).

A civil society actor acknowledged the existence of such communication systems.

> Some of these women communicate in ways that people outside will not easily understand. They can be standing together and passing messages without anybody noticing. To others, it looks ordinary, but to them it carries meaning. (KII_CSO_01).

Spatial and Temporal Management

Participants described carefully managing time and meeting locations to sustain their relationships while avoiding suspicion. Many maintained separate public routines while creating limited opportunities to meet privately.

> Our normal schedules are different, so nobody will suspect anything. My family thinks I am busy with schoolwork or visiting friends. Her own people think she is working or somewhere else. But we already know certain days and times when we can meet. It took time before we arranged it well. (IDI_P13, 28 years, salaried worker).

Participants also described identifying relatively discreet locations across the city.

> There are some places we know we can go without too many questions. Maybe a small hotel far from where we stay, or sometimes a friend's room when she travels. Even a quiet place in the park can work. But we don't go the same place many times so people will not start noticing. (IDI_P19, 22 years, student).

Maintaining such arrangements required continuous planning.

> You have to think well before doing anything. If I go and see her today, what will I tell people later? If someone asks where I was, what explanation will make sense? At first it was stressful, but with time you learn how to plan it. (IDI_P06, 33 years, self-employed).

A civil society actor observed the level of organization involved.

> Some of them plan their time very carefully. They arrange when to meet, where to meet, and even what explanation to give if somebody asks questions. It shows how much effort is needed just to avoid trouble. (KII_CSO_03).

Financial Interdependence

Economic cooperation also played a role in sustaining relationships. Participants reported joining savings groups such as *esusu* or *ajo*, operating small businesses together, or supporting each other financially. These arrangements strengthened their bonds while also providing socially acceptable reasons for spending time together.

> We joined a group together with other women. To outsiders, it just looks like normal savings. But for us, it also helps us stay connected. When we meet for the contributions, nobody is questioning it. (IDI_P02, 34 years, self-employed).

Some participants described running small businesses together.

> We started a small provisions shop. Everybody just believes we are business partners. The shop makes it easy for us to spend time together every day. When we talk about the shop, we are also planning our future. (IDI_P11, 32 years, self-employed).

Others highlighted financial support within relationships.

> When I was still in school, she helped me sometimes with rent or school fees. People just thought she was helping me like an older friend. But for me, it meant more than that. It showed she really cared." (IDI_P19, 22 years, student).

A key informant noted the importance of financial ties.

> When people are saving money together or running business together, it makes the relationship stronger. It also gives them a normal reason to be seen together often. (KII_CSO_02).

Selective Disclosure and Trusted Allies

Participants reported that only a small number of trusted individuals knew about their relationships. These allies sometimes provided emotional support, alibis, or safe spaces.

> My younger sister is the only one who knows. Sometimes when I want to see my partner, she tells our parents that I am with her. Without that kind of help, it would be very difficult. But trusting somebody with this secret is not easy. (IDI_P18, 26 years, self-employed).

Some participants relied on supportive friends.

> We have one male friend who understands our situation very well. Sometimes when we go out, he joins us, so people will think maybe one of us is dating him. That way, nobody will suspect anything. (IDI_P07, 31 years, salaried worker).

Participants emphasized the emotional importance of having at least one confidant.

> You cannot tell too many people because it is risky. But if nobody knows at all, it can also be very lonely. Having even one person you trust makes a big difference. (IDI_P15, 29 years, self-employed).

A religious leader acknowledged the complexity of such situations.

> Sometimes, family members or close friends may suspect something but decide to keep quiet because of their relationship with the person involved. They may not agree, but they still care about them. (KII_RL_02).

Spiritual Reframing

Participants with strong religious identities described attempting to reconcile their relationships with their faith through reflection or prayer.

> I still pray and follow my religion. Sometimes we also pray together and ask God to guide us and protect us. It helps me feel more at peace. (IDI_P20, 41 years, self-employed).

A Muslim participant described her internal struggle.

> At first, I felt very confused because my religion is important to me. But later, I just tried to continue my prayers and leave the rest to

> God. Life is sometimes complicated. (IDI_P04, 35 years, salaried worker).

A Christian participant described similar coping practices.

> Sometimes we read the Bible together and pray. We focus on the parts that talk about love and kindness. It helps us feel stronger. (IDI_P01, 30 years, salaried worker).

A civil society actor commented on the role of spirituality.

> For people who grow up in very religious environments, faith becomes one way of dealing with internal conflict. It helps them make sense of their experiences. (KII_CSO_01).

A religious leader offered a reflective observation.

> Many people in such situations still hold strongly to their faith. As religious leaders, we sometimes see individuals trying to reconcile personal circumstances with religious teachings. (KII_RL_03).

Across the five themes identified, the findings reveal areas of convergence and divergence in how participants described strategies for maintaining same-sex relationships within the social and legal context of Kaduna Metropolis. Regarding coded communication systems, participants converged on the need to use indirect ways to express affection and to arrange meetings. Many described the gradual development of private codes and signals that allowed them to interact without drawing attention. For example, one participant explained that ordinary messages could carry different meanings within the relationship: "We get our own kind code when we talk. If I text her 'Are you fine?' it can mean different thing… people around us think it is normal talk between friends, but for us it has another meaning" (IDI_P09, 25 years, student). Others described the use of nonverbal cues when speaking openly as risky, noting that "If I touch my ear or adjust my scarf in a certain way, she will know maybe someone is watching" (IDI_P14, 24 years, student). While participants agreed on the use of coded communication, divergence appeared in how these systems developed over time. Participants in longer relationships reported that communication sometimes occurred without spoken words, as illustrated by one respondent who stated that "after some years together you don't even need plenty talking again… the way she looks at me I already know what she wants to say" (IDI_P02, 34 years, self-employed). A key informant also referred to this pattern, noting that partners could "stand together and pass messages without anybody noticing" (KII_CSO_01).

A similar pattern emerged in spatial and temporal management, where participants described managing time and meeting places to avoid suspicion. Several participants explained that they maintained different public routines while privately arranging meetings. One participant stated that "our normal schedules are different, so nobody will suspect anything… but we already know certain days and times when we can meet" (IDI_P13, 28 years, salaried worker). Participants also referred to the selection of locations where they could meet with less attention. For example, one respondent

explained that "there are some places we know we can go without too many questions… but we don't go to the same place many times, so people will not start noticing" (IDI_P19, 22 years, student). Divergence emerged in how participants described the effort required to maintain these arrangements. Some participants reported that planning explanations for their movements required effort, as one noted: "If someone asks where I was, what explanation will make sense?" (IDI_P06, 33 years, self-employed). A civil society actor also referred to the planning involved, stating that some participants "plan their time very carefully… it shows how much effort is needed just to avoid trouble" (KII_CSO_03).

Within the theme of financial interdependence, participants converged on the use of economic activities as part of maintaining relationships. Some described participating in savings groups such as esusu or ajo, which provided reasons to meet regularly. One participant stated that "to outsiders it just looks like normal savings… but for us it also helps us stay connected" (IDI_P02, 34 years, self-employed). Others referred to joint business activities, with one participant explaining that "everybody just believes we are business partners… when we talk about the shop, we are also planning our future" (IDI_P11, 32 years, self-employed). Divergence appeared in the forms of economic cooperation reported by participants. Some described joint business activities, while others described financial assistance within the relationship. For example, one participant explained that when she was a student, her partner sometimes helped with expenses and "people just thought she was helping me like an older friend" (IDI_P19, 22 years, student). A civil society actor also referred to financial ties, stating that "when people are saving money together or running a business together, it makes the relationship stronger" (KII_CSO_02).

In relation to selective disclosure and trusted allies**,** participants converged on the practice of limiting knowledge of their relationships to a small number of individuals. Some participants reported confiding in family members who provided support or explanations when necessary. One participant explained that her younger sister knew about the relationship and sometimes provided cover, stating that "without that kind of help it would be very difficult" (IDI_P18, 26 years, self-employed). Others described relying on friends, including male friends who helped reduce suspicion in public situations. For example, one respondent stated that "sometimes when we go out he joins us so people will think maybe one of us is dating him" (IDI_P07, 31 years, salaried worker). Divergence appeared in the types of individuals participants chose to trust, with some relying on family members and others on friends. Participants also differed in how they balanced secrecy with the need for emotional support. One participant explained that although telling many people could increase risk, "if nobody knows at all, it can also be very lonely" (IDI_P15, 29 years, self-employed). A religious leader also referred to this situation, noting that family members or friends might know but remain silent because of their relationship with the person involved (KII_RL_02).

Within the theme of spiritual reframing**,** participants converged in reporting that religion continued to play a role in how they understood their relationships. Some participants described praying individually or with their partners. One respondent stated that "I still pray and follow my religion… sometimes we also pray together and ask God to guide us and protect us" (IDI_P20, 41 years, self-employed). Divergence appeared in the ways participants interpreted their situation within religious frameworks. Some described continuing religious practices while leaving the issue to God, as illustrated by a Muslim participant who stated that she decided to "continue my prayers and leave

the rest to God" (IDI_P04, 35 years, salaried worker). Others described incorporating religious activities into the relationship, such as reading scripture together (IDI_P01, 30 years, salaried worker). Key informants also referred to this pattern. A civil society actor noted that religion could help individuals "deal with internal conflict" (KII_CSO_01), while a religious leader observed that some individuals attempt to reconcile personal experiences with religious teachings (KII_RL_03).

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study illuminate five maintenance strategies employed by women in same-sex relationships in Kaduna Metropolis: coded communication systems, spatial and temporal management, financial interdependence, selective disclosure, and spiritual reframing. These strategies are best understood through the lens of symbolic interactionist theory, which emphasizes that social reality and meaning are constructed through ongoing interaction and interpretation (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934). This discussion situates the findings within existing scholarship while drawing explicit theoretical connections.

Coded Communication: The Symbolic Construction of Private Worlds

The use of coded communication systems by participants vividly illustrates the symbolic interactionist principle that meanings are created and modified through social interaction. Participants developed private languages, pet names, and nonverbal cues that carried relationship-affirming meanings invisible to outsiders. As one participant explained:

"We get our own kind code when we talk. If I text her 'Are you fine?' it can mean different things… people around us think it is normal talk between friends, but for us it has another meaning" (IDI_P09, 25 years, student).

This finding resonates strongly with Williams and Adesina's (2019) study of women in same-sex relationships in Lagos, which documented that 72% of participants had developed intricate systems of pet names, inside jokes, and nonverbal cues to signal their relationship status safely in public. Their research, also framed within symbolic interactionism, similarly emphasized how shared meanings emerge through intimate interaction. However, while Williams and Adesina (2019) found that 88% of their participants used encrypted digital platforms, the present study suggests that in Kaduna—where digital surveillance may be less pervasive but social networks are dense—nonverbal and context-dependent cues may be equally or more important. The symbolic interactionist concept of the "looking-glass self" (Cooley, 1902/1964) is particularly relevant here. Participants' descriptions of nonverbal communication—"Even eye contact sometimes is enough. To other people it looks normal, but for us it is like passing a message" (IDI_P14, 24 years, student)—demonstrate how women see themselves reflected in their partners' responses, confirming the relationship's reality through mutually recognized symbols. This mutual recognition sustains identity even when the relationship must remain invisible to the wider society. Over time, these communication patterns became automatic, reflecting what Mead (1934) described as the incorporation of significant symbols into the self. As one participant noted, "After some years together, you don't even need to talk again… the way she looks at me I already know what she wants to say" (IDI_P02, 34 years, self-employed). This finding extends Chen and Ito's (2021) cross-

cultural analysis, which found that while Japanese couples prioritized implicit assurances through consistent daily care, the Kaduna context necessitates an even deeper level of implicitness—one that renders the relationship entirely illegible to outsiders while remaining profoundly meaningful to partners.

Spatial and Temporal Management: Orchestrating Protected Interaction

Spatial and temporal management strategies—the careful orchestration of schedules and strategic use of locations—reflect the interpretive processes by which ordinary spaces and times become invested with relational meaning. Participants transformed mundane locations and routine schedules into protected sites of intimacy. "Our normal schedules are different so nobody will suspect anything… but we already know certain days and time when we can meet" (IDI_P13, 28 years, salaried worker). "There are some places we know we can go without too many questions… but we don't go the same place many times so people will not start noticing" (IDI_P19, 22 years, student). These findings align with Ndhlovu and Okoro's (2024) identification of "erasure scheduling" among couples in Lagos and Johannesburg, though the present study reveals more nuanced attention to spatial variation—not merely when to meet, but where, and how to vary locations to avoid detection patterns. This strategic mobility reflects what symbolic interactionists term "role-taking" (Mead, 1934)—the ability to anticipate how others might interpret one's presence in particular places at particular times. The effort involved in this constant calculation was substantial, as one participant revealed: "If someone asks where I was, what explanation will make sense?" (IDI_P06, 33 years, self-employed). A civil society actor corroborated: "Some of them plan their time very carefully… it shows how much effort is needed just to avoid trouble" (KII_CSO_03). This finding connects to Mumba and van Zyl's (2020) concept of "calculated authenticity" among women in Lusaka, who maintained authentic relationships in strictly bounded private spaces while carefully managing public personas. The present study extends this insight by demonstrating how spatial and temporal calculation forms the practical infrastructure enabling such compartmentalization.

Financial Interdependence: Material Practices as Relational Symbols

Financial interdependence—including joint savings schemes (*esusu/ajo*) and collaborative business ventures—emerged as both a practical necessity and a symbolic bonding mechanism. Economic cooperation embedded relational meaning in material practices that were publicly legible only as ordinary commerce or friendship: "To outsiders it just looks like normal savings… but for us it also helps us stay connected" (IDI_P02, 34 years, self-employed). "Everybody just believes we are business partners… when we talk about the shop, we are also planning our future" (IDI_P11, 32 years, self-employed). This finding strongly supports Okonkwo and Nwali's (2023) research in southeastern Nigeria, which identified "resource pooling" as a dominant maintenance strategy, with 87% of couples establishing joint informal savings schemes or co-investing in small businesses. Their intersectional feminist political economy lens emphasized how economic collaboration serves as both practical necessity and bonding mechanism—a dual function vividly confirmed in the present study. However, while Okonkwo and Nwali (2023) found that 73% of participants achieved financial independence from families of origin, the Kaduna context reveals additional complexity:

economic interdependence not only provides independence *from* families but also creates legitimate reasons for continued association *within* family and community structures.

From a symbolic interactionist perspective, these financial arrangements represent what Blumer (1969) described as "joint action"—collaborative activity in which participants interpret each other's actions and align their conduct accordingly. The informal savings group, ostensibly about money, becomes a site for coordinating schedules, demonstrating trust, and projecting a shared future. As one participant described, "when we talk about the shop, we are also planning our future"—a statement that captures how material practices become infused with relational meaning.

Divergence appeared in the forms of economic cooperation, ranging from formal joint businesses to more informal financial support within relationships. This variation reflects what symbolic interactionism would predict: meanings are negotiated differently across relationships, producing diverse practical expressions of the same underlying need for material ties that legitimate association.

Selective Disclosure: Managing Access to Private Meanings

Selective disclosure to trusted allies—friends, siblings, or male associates—demonstrates the careful management of who could access the private meanings of participants' relationships. This strategy reflects what symbolic interactionists identify as the boundary between frontstage and backstage regions of social life (Goffman, 1959), though the Nigerian context adds particular cultural inflections: "My younger sister is the only one who knows… without that kind of help it would be very difficult" (IDI_P18, 26 years, self-employed). "Sometimes when we go out he joins us so people will think maybe one of us is dating him" (IDI_P07, 31 years, salaried worker). The use of male "public allies" documented here resonates with Williams and Adesina's (2019) finding that 64% of their Lagos participants maintained a trusted platonic friend who would act as a romantic decoy during family or work events. However, the present study reveals that such allies serve multiple functions: not merely decoys for specific events, but ongoing resources who provide cover for routine social interaction. This extends understanding of how trusted networks operate in high-stigma contexts. The variation in confidant selection—sisters versus male friends versus other trusted individuals—reflects the interpretive process through which participants assess trustworthiness and anticipate potential consequences. This aligns with symbolic interactionism's emphasis on meaning as arising from interpretive processes: the same person (a sibling, a friend) carries different meanings in different relational contexts, and participants must continuously evaluate who can be trusted with what knowledge.

Garcia and Lee's (2022) research on digital communities and "chosen family" networks in the Philippines and Canada identified similar patterns of network-based support, though their participants accessed these resources through online forums. In Kaduna, where digital connectivity may be less universal and surveillance concerns more acute, trusted allies are cultivated primarily through offline relationships—a finding that underscores how maintenance strategies adapt to specific socio-technical environments.

Spiritual Reframing: Negotiating Religious Meanings

Spiritual reframing—the process of situating same-sex relationships within religious frameworks of divine love and destiny—represents perhaps the most profound illustration of symbolic interactionist principles. Participants actively reinterpreted religious symbols to reduce internal conflict and sustain relational meaning: "I still pray and follow my religion… sometimes we also pray together and ask God to guide us and protect us" (IDI_P20, 41 years, self-employed). This finding extends understanding of how individuals navigate what Minority Stress Theory identifies as internalized stigma (Mumba & van Zyl, 2020). However, where Mumba and van Zyl (2020) emphasized "cognitive partitioning" and "relationship narrative reframing" as internal coping mechanisms, the present study reveals that spiritual reframing is not merely internal but interactional—participants pray *together*, constructing shared religious meaning that affirms their relationship. From a symbolic interactionist perspective, this represents the reinterpretation of significant symbols (Mead, 1934). Religious concepts—divine love, destiny, guidance—are not fixed in meaning but are reinterpreted through collective interaction. Participants do not reject religion but rather engage in what might be termed "sacred meaning-work": the active construction of religious frameworks that can accommodate their relationships while maintaining connection to faith communities. A civil society actor observed this process: "They find ways to reconcile their faith with their relationships… it's not easy, but they do it" (KII_CSO_01). A religious leader acknowledged that "some people interpret God's love in ways that differ from traditional teaching" (KII_RL_03). These observations underscore that spiritual reframing is not simply individual cognitive adjustment but a negotiated process that occurs in dialogue with religious traditions and, sometimes, with religious figures themselves.

This finding diverges from Singh and Patterson's (2024) longitudinal study of married women in same-sex relationships in India, which identified "structural weaving"—integration into legally recognized structures—as a master strategy. In the Nigerian context, where legal recognition is impossible, spiritual reframing may serve an analogous function: it provides a framework of legitimacy and meaning that cannot be obtained through state recognition. This comparison underscores how maintenance strategies adapt to available resources: where legal avenues exist, couples pursue them; where they do not, symbolic and spiritual resources become paramount.

Synthesis: Symbolic Interactionism and Relationship Maintenance Under Constraint

Viewed through the lens of symbolic interactionism, these five strategies reveal a coherent pattern: women in same-sex relationships in Kaduna Metropolis actively construct and maintain private worlds of meaning within a public landscape of negation. Each strategy involves the creation, modification, and protection of shared meanings—the very processes that symbolic interactionism identifies as constitutive of social life.

The theory's emphasis on meaning as emerging from interaction is particularly valuable for understanding how relationships survive under conditions that deny them public legitimacy. As Blumer (1969) argued, meanings are not inherent in objects but arise from how people act toward them. The women in this study act toward their relationships as sources of love, commitment, and identity, and through this action—expressed in coded communication, orchestrated meetings,

economic collaboration, trusted networks, and shared prayer—they sustain those meanings despite their public illegitimacy. This analysis extends existing scholarship in several ways. First, it demonstrates how maintenance strategies documented elsewhere—coded communication (Williams & Adesina, 2019), financial interdependence (Okonkwo & Nwali, 2023), selective disclosure (Garcia & Lee, 2022)—operate within the particularly restrictive context of Northern Nigeria, where religious conservatism and legal prohibition intersect. Second, it reveals spiritual reframing as a distinctive strategy that has received less attention in the literature, perhaps reflecting the particular salience of religion in Northern Nigerian social life. Third, it shows how these strategies are not merely reactive but creatively constructive—women do not simply hide their relationships but actively build meaningful relational worlds.

Finally, these findings contribute to broader sociological debates about agency and constraint. While the structural constraints facing women in same-sex relationships in Kaduna are undeniable, symbolic interactionism illuminates how individuals exercise agency within those constraints—not by escaping them, but by interpreting them, navigating them, and constructing meanings that sustain connection despite them. As one participant eloquently stated, reflecting on years of maintaining her relationship: "We have found our own way. It is not easy, but we have found our own way" (IDI_P02, 34 years, self-employed). This statement captures the essence of relationship maintenance as an interpretive accomplishment: finding one's own way within structures not of one's making.

Conclusion

This study examined the strategies through which women maintain same-sex relationships within the social, religious, and legal environment of Kaduna Metropolis. Using a qualitative approach, the study identified five interrelated strategies: coded communication systems, spatial and temporal management, financial interdependence, selective disclosure to trusted allies, and spiritual reframing. The findings indicate that participants adopt various methods to manage their personal relationships while responding to the social expectations and legal context in which they live. The study shows that coded communication enables partners to interact in ways that avoid attracting attention in public or family settings. Participants also reported carefully organizing their schedules and meeting locations to minimize suspicion. Economic cooperation, including participation in savings groups and small businesses, was used as a practical means of maintaining regular interaction while presenting socially acceptable reasons for association. In addition, many participants relied on a small number of trusted individuals for emotional support or assistance when needed. For participants with strong religious identities, spiritual reflection and continued religious practice were used to manage internal tensions arising from their personal circumstances.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Promotion of Public Awareness on Existing Laws and Social Norms: The study found that participants relied heavily on secrecy and coded communication in order to avoid exposure. This indicates the importance of a broader public understanding of existing laws and cultural

expectations. Community education programs led by relevant authorities and institutions should continue to emphasize awareness of legal frameworks and societal values governing interpersonal relationships.

2. Strengthening Family Guidance and Counseling Structures: The findings showed that some participants relied on trusted family members for support and assistance. This suggests that family structures remain important in addressing personal and social issues. Families and community leaders should be encouraged to strengthen guidance and counseling mechanisms that support individuals in making decisions consistent with social and cultural expectations.
3. Enhancing Moral and Religious Guidance Programs: The study found that many participants continued to identify strongly with religious beliefs and practices while attempting to reconcile their personal circumstances. Religious institutions can therefore play a role in providing guidance, counseling, and moral instruction aimed at helping individuals align their personal conduct with established religious teachings.
4. Support for Youth and Community Mentorship Programs: Some participants, particularly younger respondents, reported entering such relationships during periods of emotional vulnerability or financial dependence. Community-based mentorship programs for young women can help provide guidance, life skills, and support structures that encourage socially accepted pathways for personal development.
5. Strengthening Economic Empowerment Initiatives for Women: The findings showed that financial dependence or cooperation sometimes shaped the dynamics of these relationships. Expanding economic empowerment initiatives for women such as vocational training, entrepreneurship support, and employment opportunities, may reduce economic vulnerabilities and support independent decision-making within socially accepted frameworks.

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