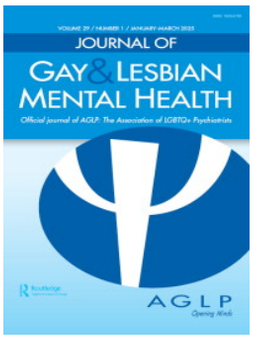

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Exposure to negative LGBT-related media messages as a social determinant of mental health inequities for LGBT+ people in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Media dissemination of anti-LGBT+ sentiments is commonplace in Malaysia. This study examines the prevalence of negative media exposure among LGBT+ people in Malaysia, the association between negative media exposure and mental health outcomes, and the role of negative future expectations for societal unacceptance as a mediator of the association.

Method: Drawing data from a cross-sectional survey of Malaysia-based LGBT+ adults ($n = 675$; mean age = 27.78), we conducted a series of regression and mediation analyses to determine whether exposure to negative media messages was predictive of heightened levels of negative future expectations, depression, non-suicidal self-injury, and suicidality.

Results: More than two-thirds (76%) saw negative LGBT-related messages regularly on newspapers, television, and social media in the past year. Frequent exposure of negative messages on media platforms was positively associated with depression, NSSI, and suicidal ideation. Negative future expectations partially mediated the relationship between exposure to negative messages and mental health outcomes.

Conclusions: The study highlights the role of negative media messages as a social determinant of mental health inequities for LGBT+ people. The findings call for a multi-level intervention to mobilize members in government sectors, healthcare settings, and academic institutions to discern and actively challenge disinformation targeting LGBT+ communities.

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Media; stigma; mental health; LGBT; Malaysia

Introduction

LGBT+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and other) identities in Malaysia encompass a wide spectrum of sexual orientations and gender identities

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that extend beyond the heterosexual and cisgender norm. "Perikatan MPs [Members of Parliament] suggest LGBT+ community be categorised as having mental health disorder" was the headline of a prominent Malaysian newspaper in 2023 (Ibrahim, 2023). Media dissemination of anti-LGBT+ sentiments is common in Malaysia (Justice for Sisters et al., 2021; Ting et al., 2022, 2023)—a country that normalizes cisgenderism and heterosexism through pathologizing LGBT+ identities and criminalizes LGBT+ communities through legislation (i.e., Penal Code Act 574) passed down during the British colonial era (Singaravelu & Cheah, 2020; Tan et al., 2021). Islamic Sharia laws also exist to grant religious officers the authority to persecute Muslim LGBT+ members (Justice for Sisters et al., 2021). While there is an emerging body of international literature on the ramifications of negative LGBT-related messages on mental health (Hughto et al., 2021; Phogat & Verma, 2022) and provision of LGBT+ affirming healthcare (Indremo et al., 2022; Pang et al., 2022), few studies have been conducted in Southeast Asia on this structural issue wherein the spreading of LGBT-phobic messages and disinformation are legitimized and actively promoted (Manalastas et al., 2017; Neo & Yin, 2023; Tan, 2022).

In this paper, we define negative LGBT-related messages as a form of structural stigma that shapes the public's cisgenderist and heterosexist attitudes by perpetuating stigmatizing depictions of LGBT+ people (e.g., sexual and gender deviants, mentally disordered, and in need of treatment) (Hughto et al., 2015, 2021). These stereotypical portrayals of LGBT+ individuals are often grounded in pseudoscience and reinforced by an anti-LGBT+ stance (Pang et al., 2022; Tan, 2022). Agents in positions of power in Malaysia, including politicians, religious leaders, and media reporters, often harbor prejudicial attitudes and behaviors toward LGBT+ individuals (Justice for Sisters et al., 2021; Ting et al., 2022, 2023). These actors purposefully craft negative messages about the LGBT+ community, including anti-LGBT+ narratives, with the intent of marginalizing this population and impeding their access to resources and opportunities available to dominant groups (Hughto et al., 2015; Justice for Sisters et al., 2021).

Literature review

However, to date, no studies have empirically tested the mediating role of negative expectations for the future, or the level of fear and anxiety arousal related to discrimination and rejection from authority and the wider society resulting from exposure to negative messages about LGBT+ people. As a core proximal stressor variable in the minority stress model (Testa et al., 2015), some studies have found evidence for negative future expectations as an intermediary variable of distal stressors that predict poor mental health (Scandurra et al., 2021; Zheng et al., 2025). A qualitative study of

LGBT+ youth in urban India reported that negative media representation of LGBT+ people can impact the decision-making process of coming out due to fear of own safety in public (Phogat & Verma, 2022). Similarly, a Malaysian survey that surveyed LGBT+ participants ($N = 220$) about the impacts of anti-LGBT narratives during the Covid-pandemic reported aspects of fear regarding the future (Justice for Sisters et al., 2021). In descending order, participants reported having to tone down "queerness" to avoid trouble (48%); reducing social media postings of LGBT+ content (44%); increased fear of being "outed" (41%); increased fear of discrimination and violence from the public (41%); increased fear of expressing affection publicly with an intimate partner (36%); and increased fear of participating in LGBT+ spaces and events (32%). This descriptive study provides a foundational base for us to delve into the mechanism of proximal stressors, specifically focusing on the fear of LGBT+ people in anticipating distal stressors and its relationship with mental health.

In line with studies that documented an overwhelming prejudicial attitudes among the general public in Malaysia (Flores, 2021; Manalastas et al., 2017), Ting et al. (2023) found 60% of Malaysian newspapers articles in 2019 displayed LGBT+ issues negatively. In Malaysia, LGBT+ issues are commonly framed in relation to morality (perspectives compelled by religious doctrine, ethics, and righteousness), constitution and jurisprudence (constraints on individual freedom), and crime and justice (law enforcement and policy implications) (Ting et al., 2023). In contrast to the predominant overseas coverage of contemporary LGBT+ challenges such as LGBT parenting and reproductive rights (Chen, 2023), transgender's rights to participate in competitive sports (Scovel et al., 2023), and myths around rapid-onset gender dysphoria (Turban et al., 2023), the typical framing of LGBT+ topics on Malaysian media platforms center on fundamental human rights issues embedded within the criminalizing context of LGBT+ identities (Ting et al., 2022, 2023). Generalizing evidence from overseas, particularly from the Global North countries where progress has been made in curbing hate speech and enhancing public awareness of LGBT+ rights, thus has its own limitations.

Objectives

To address the literature gap regarding negative LGBT-related messages as a structural determinant of health inequities in Malaysia, we present findings from one of the largest community-based surveys of LGBT+ people in Malaysia conducted to date—the Kami Survey. The objective of this paper is threefold. First, we provide an overview of manifestation of negative LGBT-related messages in Malaysia by reporting on the frequency, types, and perpetrators of these messages. Sociodemographic differences were assessed for frequency of exposure to negative messages across three

types of media: newspapers; TV; and social media. Second, we examine the association between negative media messages across each medium and the prevalence of depression, non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI), and suicidality. Third, we build on a recent study that found an association between negative messages and mental ill-health (Hughto et al., 2021) by empirically testing the mediating role of negative expectations for the future as a proximal stressor (Testa et al., 2015). We utilized mediation models to determine the extent negative messages forewarn one's anticipation of experiencing societal rejection for disclosing their LGBT+ identity that subsequently affect their mental health outcomes.

Method

The survey was named "Kami"—a Malay term that translates to "we" to mobilize a collective sense of LGBT+ identity and build solidarity among allies of these communities. Ethics approval for the Kami Survey was granted by TAR University of Management and Technology. Kami Survey is a survey comprising multiple sections with a total of 60 questions. The questions were either adapted from existing research or developed in consultation with LGBT+ community organizations. The online anonymous survey was accessible in both English and Malay languages, and eligible participants (i.e., self-identifying LGBT+ individuals residing in Malaysia aged 18 years old and above) could respond to the survey from 1 October to 16 December 2023.

Purposive sampling was utilized wherein the survey was disseminated through social media (Facebook and X) and word-of-mouth referrals by LGBT+ community organizations in Malaysia. A Facebook page for the project was created for recruitment purposes. The intent of the study and biographical information of the team members were highlighted in recruitment messages (Kami Survey Team, 2024). These recruitment efforts yield a sample of 757 participants. Participants provided their consent by proceeding with the survey after reading an information sheet detailing their rights (e.g., withdrawal and support available). The first 250 participants who completed the questionnaire were each offered a voucher of 10 Malaysian Ringgit (MYR).

Participants

Not all participants completed the whole survey. The completion rate for the series of questions on negative LGBT-related messages is 89% ($n = 675$). The mean age of the participants was 27.28 (SD = 7.00), with a range of 18 to 61. While the majority of the participants live in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur and the state of Selangor (74.5%), the rest reside in the

other states within Peninsular Malaysia (18.9%), and East Malaysia (6.6%). The three largest ethnic groups represented in the sample include: Chinese (44.9%), Malay and the Indigenous people who live in Malay Peninsula (29.8%; including only one Indigenous participant), and Indian (13.9%). Most of the participants held Malaysian citizenship (97.2%). More than two-thirds of the participants identified as cisgender (45.0% men and 28.1% women), with about one-fifth identified as transgender (5.3% men and 4.0% women) or non-binary (12.6%), and the rest questioning their gender (5.0%). As for sexual orientation, 55.2% of the participants identified as gay or lesbian, 31.3% as bisexual or pansexual, and 7.7% questioning their respective sexual orientation.

Measures

Demographics.

Sexual orientation. Participants were asked to select a term that best describes your current sexual orientation. Options included *gay*; *lesbian*; *bisexual*; *asexual*; *heterosexual/straight*; *I am questioning or exploring my sexual orientation*; *other*.

Gender groups. Participants were allowed to select multiple options on a close-ended question that best match their gender. Options included *man*; *woman*; *trans man*; *trans woman*; *mak nyah*; *pengkid*; *genderqueer*; *agender*; *I'm questioning or exploring my gender*; *other*. We employed the two-step method (Fraser, 2018) for categorizing gender groups, which involved asking participants about their current gender identification and the sex assigned to them at birth.

Ethnicity. We adopted a question about Malaysian National Health and Morbidity Survey (National Institutes of Health, 2019) to ask participant to indicate their primary ethnicity. Options were *Malay*; *Chinese*; *Indian*; *Aborigines (Orang Asli Semenanjung)*; *Indigenous peoples of Sabah*; *Indigenous peoples of Sarawak*; *others*.

Household income. Participants were asked about their average monthly household income. We defined household income as the total accumulated income received by people who live together and share expenses for food, shelter, and other living necessities.

Predictor variables.

Negative LGBT-related messages. A series of questions were adapted from studies from the United States (Hughto et al., 2021) and New Zealand (Yee et al., 2025) to assess the frequency of exposure to negative media messages. Participants were asked "How often in the past 12 months have you seen negative messages related to LGBT+ people (or anti-LGBT+ sentiments)?" for three media sources: Newspapers; Television (TV); and Social media. Participants could respond on a 5-point scale from *Never* (0) to *Very often* (4) (see Table 1).

Table 1. Frequency of exposure to negative LGBT-related messages from three media sources.

	Never, *n* (%)	Rarely, *n* (%)	Sometimes, *n* (%)	Often, *n* (%)	Very often, *n* (%)
Newspapers including printed and online (e.g., Malaysiakini, The Star, and Sin Chew) (*n* = 674)	41 (6.1)	73 (10.8)	246 (36.5)	166 (24.6)	148 (22.0)
TV including messages spoken by persons interviewed, reporters, or commentators (*n* = 673)	43 (6.4)	109 (16.2)	228 (33.9)	158 (23.5)	135 (20.1)
Social media including hate speech online (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) (*n* = 673)	14 (2.1)	48 (7.1)	130 (19.3)	168 (25.0)	313 (46.5)

Table 2. Examples of negative LGBT-related messages.

	n (%)
Reports of legal persecution or punishment of LGBT+ people under various laws, including Federal and state Sharia laws	545 (80.7)
Messages that mention or imply that LGBT+ people are mentally disordered or ill	540 (80.0)
Messages that mention or imply that LGBT+ people have to be treated or "cured"	484 (71.7)
Messages that advocate for legal amendments to increase punishment against LGBT+ people	475 (70.4)

Table 3. Perpetrators of negative LGBT-related messages.

	n (%)
Religious leaders	588 (87.1)
Politicians	568 (84.1)
Anti-LGBT+ groups	206 (30.5)
University lecturers and academic researchers	166 (24.6)
Health professionals	135 (20.0)
Mental health professionals	74 (11.0)

Examples of negative LGBT-related messages. Participants were asked "What were the examples of these negative messages or anti-LGBT+ sentiments shared on media platforms? Please select all that apply." Response options were listed in Table 2.

Perpetrators of negative LGBT-related messages. Participants were asked "Who were the perpetrators or source of anti-LGBT+ sentiments on media platforms? Please select all that apply." Response options were listed in Table 3.

Proximal stressor.

Negative expectations for the future. We adapted three items from the Gender Minority Stress and Resilience Measure (Testa et al., 2015) to examine the construct of "negative expectations" as a proximal stressor. A shortened version of the scale was used to reduce participants' response burden. Participants were queried on a 5-point scale from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5) with statements such as "Others wouldn't accept me," "I could be arrested or harassed by the police," and "People would think I am mentally ill or crazy" if they expressed their LGBT+ identity. These items exhibited acceptable internal consistency (α = .77), and removing any item would not improve Cronbach's alpha. The mean score of these items was 10.53 (SD = 3.02).

Outcome variables.

Depression. We employed the Patient Health Questionnaire (PHQ-9) to determine severity of depressive symptoms (Kroenke et al., 2001). Participants were asked how often they had experienced each of the nine symptoms of depression over the past 2 weeks. Items were scored from not at all (0) to nearly every day (3). PHQ-9 is a measure validated by the National Institutes of Health in Malaysia (2019) and it demonstrated a good internal consistency. In this study, the mean score of PHQ-9 is 10.93 (SD = 6.64) and the scale displayed good internal consistency (α = .90).

Questions on non-suicidal self-injury, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts were adopted from a study of self-destructive behaviors among Malaysian young adults (Lim et al., 2017). Response options were either *yes* or *no*.

Non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI). Participants were asked "Have you purposely injured yourself without suicide intent in the past 12 months?" Over one-tenth (14.0%) reported engaging in NSSI.

Suicidality. Participants were asked whether they have "seriously considered attempting suicide" and "made a suicide attempt" in the past 12 months? Close to a quarter (23.8%) reported having suicidal thoughts and 4.9% had made a suicide attempt.

Data analysis

There were less than 1% missing data due to participant attrition for each item within PHQ-9 and 3-item Negative Expectations for Future scales, respectively. In SPSS v29, we imputed missing data using the expectation maximization method through the estimation of means and covariances of available data in regression models (Vold et al., 2023). Next, we conducted chi-square goodness-of-fit (nominal) and Kendall's tau (ordinal) tests to identify the extent of association between the negative LGBT-related message variables and sociodemographic variables. Standardized adjusted residual values that exceed ± 2 indicate the proportion of participants who left a comment versus those who did not, to differ significantly for a demographic group (Sharpe, 2019).

To explore the association between exposure of negative LGBT-related messages and mental health variables, we carried out bivariate and multivariable linear (for depression) and logistic (for NSSI and suicidality) regression analyses in jamovi v2.3.21 (The jamovi project, 2022). Multivariate regression analyses included sociodemographic variables that demonstrated statistically significant correlations with the respective media source for negative LGBT-related messages. Subsequently, we employed the jAMM jamovi module for mediation analyses of negative expectations for the future and we presented the results using the bootstrap (percent) estimation method with 1,000 samples. Only mental health variables that

demonstrated a significant association with the exposure to negative messages in respective media source were included in the mediation analyses. All mediation models incorporated relevant sociodemographic variables as covariates. The threshold for statistical significance was set at $p < 0.05$ for all analyses.

Results

More than two-thirds of participants reported seeing negative LGBT-related messages on social media "often" or "very often" in the past year (see Table 1). Over two-fifths experienced regular exposure to such messages through newspapers or TV last year. When participants were queried about the nature of these messages (see Table 2), more than four-fifths encountered reports on the legal persecution of LGBT+ people or messages implying that LGBT+ people are mentally disordered. Further, more than two-thirds reported seeing messages suggesting that LGBT+ people need to be "treated" or advocating for increased legal punishment against the population. Table 3 details information about the specific perpetrators of negative LGBT-related messages, with politicians and religious leaders being the two most common.

Appendices 1, 2, and 3 present the prevalence of exposure to negative LGBT-related messages across sociodemographic groups for newspapers, TV, and social media, accordingly. Cis women and non-binary participants reported more frequent exposure to negative messages in newspapers, whereas this was less common for cis men. Non-binary participants and those questioning their genders were more likely, while cis men were less likely, to report regular exposure to negative messages on TV. Participants reporting more frequent exposure to negative messages on social media were Malay, younger, and bisexual or pansexual. Conversely, Chinese participants and those identifying as gay or lesbian had a lower likelihood of encountering negative messages on social media.

Table 4 shows the regression results of negative LGBT-related messages predicting depression, NSSI, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts. More frequent exposure of negative messages on newspapers, as well as TV, were significantly associated with depression, NSSI, and suicidal ideation, even after adjusting for gender groups. More frequent exposure of negative messages on social media were linked with heightened odds of depression and suicidal ideation after adjusting for age, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation. However, no significant relationship between negative media exposures and suicide attempts was detected.

We conducted mediation analyses to examine hypothesized causal pathways (exposure to negative LGBT-related messages heighten risks

Table 4. Associations between negative LGBT-related messages on newspapers, TV, and social media and mental health.

	Depression[a]		NSSI[b]		Suicidal ideation[b]		Suicide attempt[b]	
	Bivariate (β)	Multivariate (β)	Bivariate (OR)	Multivariate (OR)	Bivariate (OR)	Multivariate (OR)	Bivariate (OR)	Multivariate (OR)
Newspapers[c]	0.18 (0.11, 0.26)***	0.15 (0.08, 0.23)***	1.39 (1.13, 1.71)**	1.32 (1.06, 1.65)*	1.35 (1.14, 1.59)***	1.28 (1.07, 1.52)**	1.23 (0.89, 1.70)	1.18 (0.85, 1.65)
TV[c]	0.25 (0.18, 0.33)***	0.22 (0.14, 0.29)***	1.54 (1.25, 1.88)***	1.40 (1.13, 1.74)**	1.36 (1.16, 1.59)***	1.25 (1.06, 1.48)**	1.41 (1.02, 1.94)*	1.31 (0.94, 1.83)
Social media[d]	0.27 (0.20, 0.34)***	0.16 (0.09, 0.24)***	1.56 (1.21, 2.01)***	1.25 (0.95, 1.65)	1.64 (1.34, 2.01)***	1.33 (1.07, 1.66)**	1.65 (1.07, 2.53)*	1.37 (0.87, 2.17)

[a]Linear regression.
[b]Logistic regression.
[c]Multivariate models adjusted for gender groups.
[d]Multivariate models adjusted for age (continuous), sexual orientation, gender groups, and ethnic groups.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$.
β = standardized estimate; OR = odds ratio.

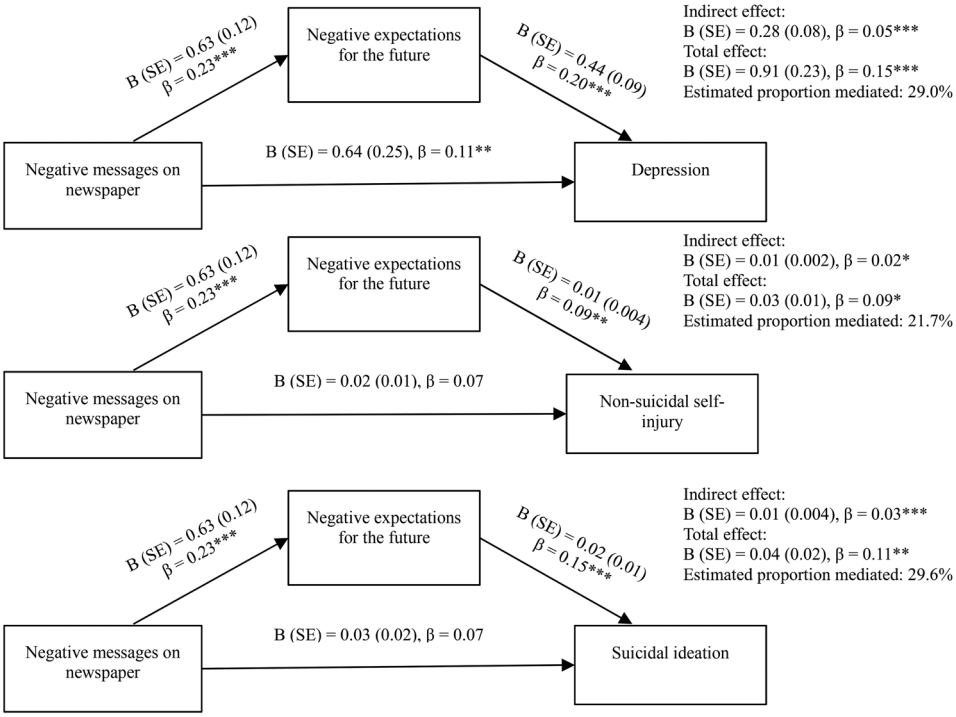

Figure 1. Mediation path of negative future expectations on the relationship between negative messages on newspapers and mental health.

of depression, NSSI, and suicidal ideation) with an intermediary variable (negative expectations for the future). Only statistically significant regression paths were further examined in mediation models. Figures 1, 2, and 3 depict mediation paths for negative messages in newspapers, TV, and social media, respectively. The analyses confirmed: (a) participants with more frequent exposure to negative messages across all sources were more likely to anticipate rejection related to their LGBT+ identity; (b) higher ratings of negative expectations for the future predicted increased risks of depression, NSSI, and suicidal ideation; (c) negative expectations partially mediated the relationship between exposure to negative LGBT-related messages and mental health outcomes. Mediation models adjusted for covariates considered in respective regression analyses. In some instances, negative expectations fully mediated the effect of negative messages from specific sources (e.g., newspapers) on NSSI and suicidal ideation. Proportion of the effect mediated suggests negative expectations for the future account for 22–30% of the total effect of negative media exposures in newspapers, 17–30% for TV, and 27–29% for social media across assessed mental health variables.

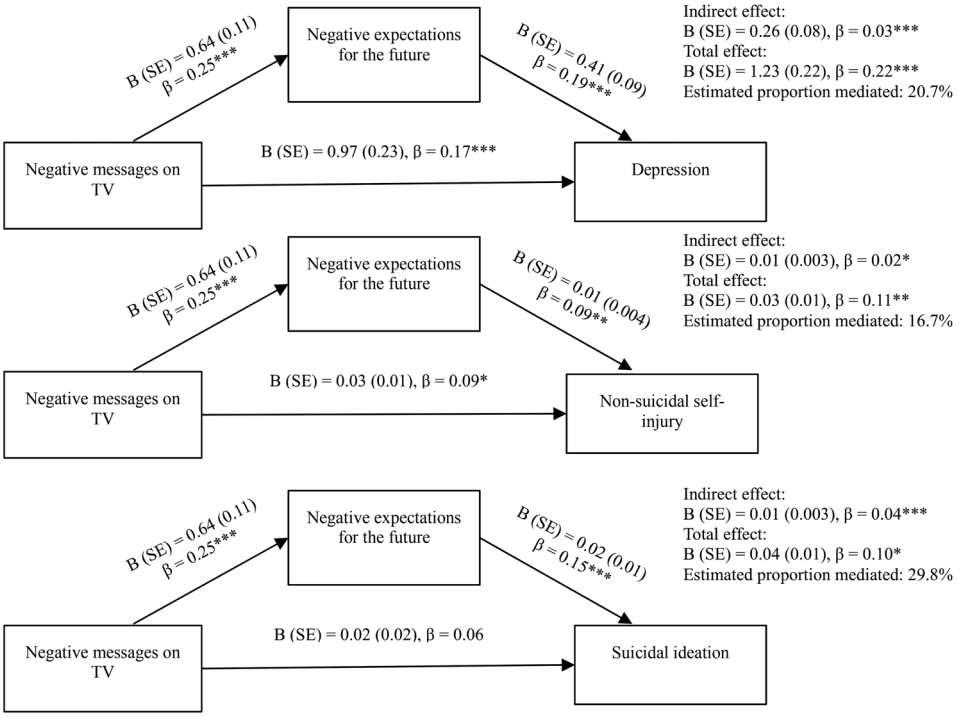

Figure 2. Mediation path of negative future expectations on the relationship between negative messages on TV and mental health.

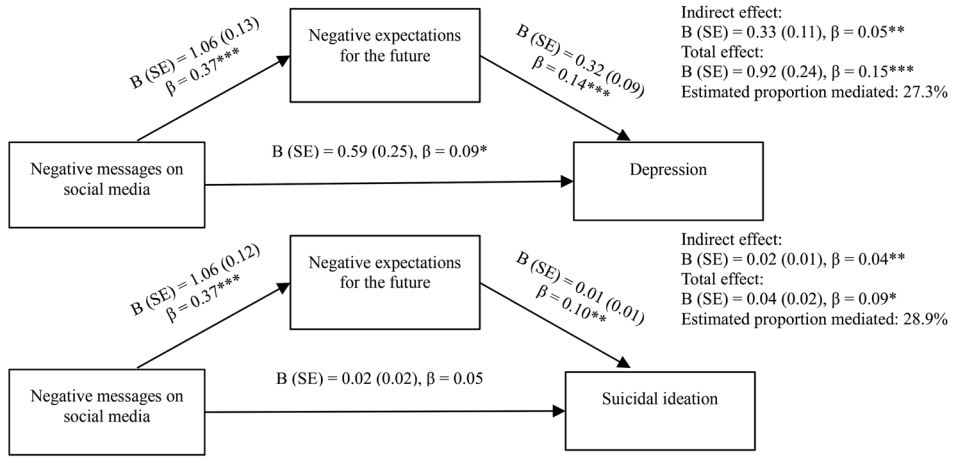

Figure 3. Mediation path of negative future expectations on the relationship between negative messages on social media and mental health.

Discussion

In this study, we contribute to the landscape of research on negative LGBT-related messages by examining their frequency of manifestation,

types, and sources across sociodemographic groups in Malaysia, where the criminalization and pathologization of LGBT+ identities is legally legitimized. More than two-thirds of participants (76%) have seen negative LGBT-related messages regularly on at least one media platform in the past year. Similar to a US study of transgender (including non-binary) adults (Hughto et al., 2021), our study found that almost all (94%) had come across negative media depictions of LGBT+ individuals in newspapers, as well as on TV, in the past year. Our study complemented the US study by examining social media as a platform that perpetuates negative LGBT-related messages, and 98% of our participants reported encountering this. Such finding illustrates the extent of negative messages that LGBT+ people are exposed to, which serves as an indicator of how this group may perceive societal acceptance of their identity.

We found significant differences across gender groups, with non-binary participants more likely, and cis men less likely, to report higher levels of exposure to negative messages in newspapers and on TV. Malay and Indigenous peoples of the Malay Peninsula, younger individuals, and those who identified as bisexual and pansexual reported facing more negative messages on social media. These demographic differences indicate that some groups were particularly susceptible to exposures of negative media messages and require more protection than those shielded from such messages.

Building on previous Malaysian studies that reviewed the cisgenderist and heterosexist discourses in newspapers (Ting et al., 2022, 2023) and academic publications (Tan, 2022) we identified negative LGBT-related messages to center on the legal persecution of LGBT+ individuals and the portrayal of the population as mentally disordered. Perpetrators of these messages extend beyond religious leaders (87%) and politicians (84%), with participants reporting encounters with academicians and researchers (25%) as well as health professionals (20%) spreading anti-LGBT+ sentiments.

The minority stress theory posits that pervasive distal and proximal stressors faced by LGBT individuals can result in mental health inequities compared to their cisgender and heterosexual counterparts (Ibrahim et al., 2022; Meyer, 2003; Testa et al., 2015). Only one published quantitative study to date has examined the role of negative LGBT-related messages as a structural distal stressor that engenders stressful environments for LGBT+ individuals to affirm their identity (Hughto et al., 2021). Echoing previous studies that concluded the role of negative LGBT-related messages as a social determinant of health inequities (Hughto et al., 2021; Indremo et al., 2022), we found increased risks of depression and suicidal ideation among participants with more frequent exposures to such messages across all media platforms, even after adjusting for demographic variables.

Participants reported significantly higher rates of engaging in NSSI upon encountering negative messages on newspapers and TV. Our mediation analyses showed that negative LGBT-related messages on newspaper, TV, and social media (respectively) can trigger fear in the anticipation of societal rejection, police harassment, and being labeled as mentally ill, all of which contribute to heightened risks of depression, NSSI, and suicidal ideation.

This study provides novel insights into the mental health ramifications of exposure to negative LGBT-related messages through a mediation path that involves negative expectations for societal unacceptance and police harassment. Clinical attention for the fear and anxiety related to anticipation for distal stressors is warranted, as the construct explains 17% to 30% of the total effect of the impact of negative media messages on the risks of reporting depression, NSSI, and suicidal ideation for LGBT+ participants. Future studies on general emotional, cognitive, and social stressors (Hatzenbuehler, 2009), as well as minority-specific proximal stressors such as internalized LGBT-phobia and concealment of LGBT+ identity (Testa et al., 2015), as intermediary variables predicting the influences of negative messages on mental health, can be useful in painting a comprehensive picture of the mediation path.

Our findings call for a multi-level intervention to mobilize a collective movement where members in government sectors, healthcare settings, and academic institutions can discern and actively challenge disinformation targeting LGBT+ communities. While cognizant of the challenges associated with advocating for mental health equity for LGBT+ communities amidst the backdrop of LGBT+ identity-criminalization in Malaysia, avenues for transformative change exist. These encompass the augmentation of evidence-based research to provide counter-narratives to the negative rhetoric that dominates the media, the formulation and enactment of policies and healthcare guidelines affirming LGBT+ identities within organizational frameworks, and the empowerment of LGBT+ community organizations. A trans-led organization in Malaysia—Justice for Sisters (2022) has published guidelines for media reporters to debunk misconceptions around LGBT+ issues and correct cisgenderist and heterosexist narratives. The responsibility of increasing LGBT+ competency among the general public, however, should not sit solely with LGBT+ community organizations unless there is the provision of adequate funding and platforms to expand their capacity to do so.

Limitations

Our findings should be viewed in light of several limitations. First, the research team employed a nonrandom sampling method that worked

closely with LGBT+ community organizations to recruit participants online. Compared to the demographics of the general population (National Institutes of Health, 2019), our sample had an overrepresentation of Chinese, Indian, younger participants, and those from major cities (i.e., Kuala Lumpur and Selangor). However, in an environment where public expression of LGBT+ identity may lead to criminalization, our recruitment method was chosen for its commitment to ensuring researchers' and participants' confidentiality and safety whilst preventing the research study from being targeted by right-wing and organized anti-LGBT+ groups (Tan & Liow, 2024). Further, only 2.9% of our participants disclosed having an intersex variation, therefore we could not unpack the nuances of exposure of negative LGBT-related messages for this group. Lastly, the cross-sectional design of the study means that our findings should be interpreted as correlational. Although our results align with the propositions of minority stress theory regarding the ramifications of exposure to distal and proximal stressors on health outcomes (Meyer, 2003; Testa et al., 2015), a longitudinal study examining the temporal precedence of the role of negative LGBT-related messages would provide a stronger test of this causation.

Conclusion

Negative LGBT-related messages in Malaysia are composed with the intent to indoctrinate the general public with a harmful ideology and ingrain anti-LGBT+ sentiments among those with limited or misinformed understanding of LGBT+ issues. These messages are often driven by vested interests for political and social status gain, at the expense of the human rights of LGBT+ people (Justice for Sisters, 2022; Justice for Sisters et al., 2021). Our findings reiterated previous studies on the role of negative media messages as a social determinant of mental health inequities (Hughto et al., 2021) that are associated with heightened levels of negative expectations for the future, depression, NSSI, and suicidal ideation among LGBT+ people. This study produces findings with broader relevance that can be extended to other Southeast Asian countries and nations where LGBT+ identities are criminalized or subjected to intense scrutiny by media outlets.

Ethics statement

Ethics approval for the KAMI Survey was granted by TAR University of Management and Technology.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Data availability statement

The data supporting the findings of this study cannot be publicly released due to ethical considerations. However, subsets of the data can be obtained by contacting the corresponding author with a reasonable request.

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