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Su-Hie Ting

Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Sarawak, Malaysia, shting@unimas.my

Collin Jerome

Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Sarawak, Malaysia

Jiin-Yih Yeo

Universiti Teknologi MARA, Sarawak, Malaysia

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Deviants or “Normal” Citizens?: Framing of LGBTQ in Malaysian Newspapers

Su-Hie Ting^{1*}, Collin Jerome¹, and Jiin-Yih Yeo²

¹Universiti Malaysia Sarawak, Sarawak, Malaysia

²Universiti Teknologi MARA, Sarawak, Malaysia

*shting@unimas.my

Abstract: The study examined the framing of LGBTQ in four newspapers in Malaysia. The search uncovered 60 articles on LGBTQ published from January 1 to December 31, 2019 in four online newspapers, namely, *MalaysiaKini*, *The Star Online*, *Free Malaysia Today*, and *Astro Awani Online*. *MalaysiaKini* attributed the greatest salience to LGBTQ both in article number and length. LGBTQ was mostly covered using episodic framing (72.73%–91.67%). There were significant differences among the four newspapers on the dominant frames used for representing LGBTQ. The most-used frame was morality in the articles published by the alternative newspapers, but the constitution and jurisprudence frame dominated in the mainstream newspaper, *The Star*. The four newspapers were similar in their reliance on human rights groups and politicians as information sources. The voices of LGBTQ are muted, implying that they have been sidelined as members of society who cannot assert their rights to speak. Some articles were written in a positive tone in *The Star*, *Free Malaysia Today*, and *MalaysiaKini*, but there were no articles with positive valence in *Astro Awani*. Negative valence dominated in LGBTQ coverage, reflecting the disapproval of LGBTQ in Malaysia where Islam is the official religion and homosexuality is banned. The findings suggest that dominant frames and valence are constructed through a selective choice of information sources in the context of cultural factors that are at play.

Keywords: LGBTQ, framing, episodic framing, morality, valence, information sources

LGBTQ is an acronym for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer. The Q generally stands for queer when LGBTQ organizations, leaders, and media use the acronym, but in settings offering support for youth, Q can also stand for questioning (GLADD Media Reference Guide, 2022). LGBTQ is a controversial issue in regions where civil law discriminates against LGBTQ-related activities. On September 26, 2013, countries attending the United Nations ministerial meeting on the rights of LGBTQ individuals reaffirmed their commitment to work

together to combat discrimination and protect the rights of all human beings regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Asian countries have different legal positions on LGBTQ. Malaysia, like Singapore, Hong Kong, and Indonesia, has anti-sodomy laws, but Japan does not (Lee, 2016). In comparison, Taiwan has made faster progress toward the legalization of same-sex marriage in 2017 because of women’s rights movements. Lee (2016, p. 980) noted that in Taiwan, LGBTQ rights have been introduced in school textbooks since

2011, but same-sex couples are not eligible for the legal protections given to heterosexual couples. In Indonesia, although “homosexuality is not punishable by Indonesia’s national law,” provinces can have their own laws against homosexuality and cross-dressing, such as Aceh, which has a Syariah-based anti-homosexuality law that imposes a punishment of 100 lashes on individuals caught having gay sex (The ASEAN Post Team, 2021, para. 5).

In Malaysia, “cisheterosexism/cisheteronormativity” is the pervasive norm that expects all Malaysians to conform to cisgender and heterosexual manners. The official sanction against LGBTQ identity and expression grew after Malaysia achieved independence from Britain in 1957, and Islam became the official religion in 1963. Subsequently, religious (Syariah) laws were implemented for Muslims. “In Islam, only *khunsa*, or hermaphrodites, are allowed to undergo sex-change operations ... Islam does not recognize the western category of transsexual, therefore, transsexuals are regarded as nonentities” (Teh, 2008, p. 85). By and large, the public is not clear on the religious and civil laws on LGBTQ-linked activities. It is the media that transmits the religious ideology and views of homosexuality as either *halal* or *haram* (Shah, 2017), that is, permissible or not permissible for Muslims. Malaysian states have their respective laws that criminalize gender identity and expression (see Justice for Sisters, n.d.), but the laws of Negeri Sembilan seem to receive more media attention. For example, cross-dressing is punishable under Section 66 of the Syariah Criminal Enactment of the Negeri Sembilan state and the Minor Offences Act 1955 (Percetakan Nasional Malaysia Berhad-LawNet, n.d.). Same-sex relations are punishable under Syariah Criminal Offences (Federal Territories) Act 1997 (Section 25 and Section 26) (Percetakan Nasional Malaysia Berhad-LawNet, n.d.), and Malaysian Penal Code, Section 377A, 377B, and 377C (International Labour Organization, n.d.).

News coverage on LGBTQ shapes the level of acceptance towards LGBTQ, depending on the dominant frames in the news articles (Zawawi et al., 2020). Research shows that newspapers tend to portray

LGBTQ negatively. For example, Brown et al. (2018) found that a majority of newspapers in the United States are negative in their coverage of the House 1523 Bill of Mississippi State, which is seen as discriminating against LGBTQ individuals. The findings also showed that conflict is the most-used news frame, and anger is the main emotional appeal. Indonesia is the country with the largest Muslim population, and most printed and online newspapers frame LGBTQ events and issues negatively, regardless of whether they are mainstream or alternative newspapers. In Indonesia, the reporting of LGBTQ is governed by the 1999 Press Law No. 44. LGBTQ has been framed as a “sexual orientation deviation” (Maulina & Bowo, 2016), a wild culture (Zuhra, 2013), and as a social disease and an offense (Utaminingsy, 2017). A select number of Indonesian newspapers are sympathetic to the LGBTQ community, namely, *Media Detik*, which adopts the humanism ideology extolling readers not to judge LGBTQ individuals (Wahid & Yakut, 2018), and *The Jakarta Post* which reports the voice of activists (Sari, 2019).

Studies on LGBTQ in Malaysia have shown the difficulties and rejections encountered in their coming out experiences (Cheah & Singaravelu, 2017; Felix, 2014, 2017; Goh & Kananatu, 2019; Jerome, 2019, 2020; Jerome et al., 2021; Lim, 2015; Mokhtar et al., 2019; Singaravelu & Cheah, 2020) and the advocacy for LGBTQ rights (J. Lee, 2012; P. Lee, 2016; Pang, 2014). The focus of research in Malaysia on LGBTQ in the past decade has expanded beyond activism to include health, healthcare access, and family (see Tan et al., 2021). For example, Jerome et al. (2021) interviewed 29 Malaysians (14 heterosexuals and 15 LGBT individuals), and found that religion, gender roles, cultural practices, and values of ethnic groups influenced their acceptance or rejection of LGBT individuals. Little is known about how LGBTQ is represented in Malaysian newspapers because of the sensitivity of the issue, with the exception of Ramli et al. (2017), who found that LGBTQ is framed more negatively in *Utusan Malaysia* (published in Malay) than in *MalaysiaKini*, an alternative newspaper that publishes articles in Malay, English, and Chinese. Lee (2012, p. 178) noted that “the conservative Malay-language media would react negatively” to engaging in “discussions about homosexuality in Islamic terms.” In another framing study, Ting et al. (2021) focused on the top 30 words in articles on LGBT to identify the aspects

of LGBT highlighted in the four Malaysian online newspapers, and they found negative undertones in the reporting. Recognizing the inadequacy of framing research on LGBTQ compared to political issues, Zawawi et al. (2020) called for more studies on how far news articles on LGBTQ influence individuals' thinking. Currently, LGBTQ is still too controversial and sensitive an issue to be highly visible in newspaper coverage, and because of this, it is vital to examine how LGBTQ is represented in newspapers in Malaysia.

The study examined the framing of LGBTQ in selected online newspapers in Malaysia. The specific objectives of the study are: (a) compare the intensity of coverage of LGBTQ across newspapers; (b) determine the proportion of episodic and thematic framing of articles on LGBTQ; (c) analyze the news frames used for representing LGBTQ in newspapers; (d) identify news sources for articles on LGBTQ across newspapers; and (e) evaluate the valence of news articles on LGBTQ.

In this paper, the acronym LGBTQ is used, except where the original articles refer to the community using other terms.

Literature Review

The theoretical framework of this study is the framing theory. The essential processes in framing are selection and salience. When some features of reality are highlighted in newspapers, they make readers notice and remember them. Newspapers attribute salience to selected information "by placement or repetition, or by associating them with culturally familiar symbols" (Entman, 1993, p. 53). Entman (1993, pp. 52–53) explained that the processes of selection and salience takes place in four locations in the communication process, beginning with the communicator and proceeding to the text, receiver, and culture. In his view, communicators decide what to say, but they are influenced by the culture. Entman (1993) used the word "culture" as a broad term. For example, in the conservative Malaysian setting, communicators are more likely to represent LGBTQ individuals negatively rather than positively, but their communicative manner could be influenced by their positionality as a member of the LGBTQ or cisheterosexual community.

Communicators then formulate the text by selecting language (keywords, stock phrases, and sentences),

stereotyped images, and sources of information to emphasize "clusters of facts or judgments." Journalists, their framing practices, and institutional policies also influence their selection and shaping of news reporting. For example, the Indonesian feminist magazine *Magdalene* emphasizes intersectionality and expresses the rights of oppressed groups (e.g., LGBTQ communities) because of the American educational and open family background of the production team (Indari & Novianti, 2018). However, Iskandar and Isnaini (2018) found that the religious knowledge of editorial employees of three Indonesian newspapers (*Republika*, *Koran Sindo*, and *Suara Pembaruan*) did not influence their writing of news on LGBTQ.

Framing shapes the audience's interpretations through priming because "frames introduce or raise the salience or apparent importance of certain ideas, activating schemas that encourage target audiences to think, feel, and decide in a particular way" (Entman, 2007, p. 164). Nevertheless, when the text is processed by the receiver, the frames that influence the receiver's thoughts may not reflect the frames in the text of the communicator's intention if they do not match the receiver's schema. In other words, the processes of selection and salience are applied by receivers to construct their own argument about causes and solutions to a problem, how they evaluate the problem, and act upon it.

Analysis of newspaper framing of events usually involves analysis of episodic versus thematic framing (Iyengar, 1990) at a general level, as in whether the purpose is to report details of an incident (episodic) or to provide a commentary on an incident or issue (thematic). Thematically framed articles allow journalists to play a more active role in making selected aspects of a perceived reality more salient compared to episodically framed articles. For example, after the announcement of the same-sex marriage of Ariff Alfian Rosli, a Malaysian student, and Jonathan, his partner from Dublin, Ireland, in 2011, the mainstream newspaper *Utusan Malaysia* published more interpretive (thematic) articles citing the voices of government agencies (particularly the police) and NGOs (Ramli et al., 2017). They found that the alternative newspaper *MalaysiaKini* published more informative (episodic) articles, and the main information sources were the police, lawyers, religious bodies, and Bernama (a Malaysian national news agency) in order to be seen as objective.

As for the content of the news articles, this is usually analyzed as frames in framing research such as crime and justice, constitution and jurisprudence, economics, morality, and politics (Boydston et al., 2014). Researchers using other codebooks analyzed other news frames. Ramli et al. (2017) analyzed articles on a high-profile marriage of a Malaysian gay couple in the United Kingdom: the main news frames in the mainstream newspaper *Utusan Malaysia* were religion and social disease, whereas *MalaysiaKini* linked it to jurisprudence, censorship in movies, and political ideology.

The sources of information selected are linked to the valence or tone of the article, analyzed as positive, negative, and neutral. The valence of articles manifests the moral evaluation function of framing, where journalists may make moral judgments on causal agents of events and their effects. It is important to analyze the valence of issues such as LGBTQ because mainstream newspapers may be inclined towards negative valence, whereas alternative newspapers may have more neutral news (Ramli et al., 2017).

Method of Study

The media landscape in Malaysia is characterized by multi-language media targeting different ethnic groups, but this study focussed on online newspapers in English and Malay. To examine the framing of LGBTQ, content analysis of articles in four online newspapers was conducted. Next, background information is provided on the rank for readership.

Three newspapers were among the top 10 online news for readership, namely, *MalaysiaKini*, *The Star Online*, and *Free Malaysia Today* ("Top 30 Malaysian newspapers online," n.d.). Statistics on the exact number of readers are not accessible to the public. However, according to the Digital News Report 2019 published by the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, *MalaysiaKini* was the most popular news source, whereas *The Star Online*, *Astro Awani*, and *Free Malaysia Today* ranked second, third, and eighth, respectively (Nain, 2022). *MalaysiaKini* and *Free Malaysia Today* are alternative newspapers, whereas *The Star Online* is a mainstream newspaper. *Astro Awani Online* was an online news media of the top paid television news channel in Malaysia. *Astro Awani Online* will be referred to as *Astro Awani*.

The newspapers do not have a clear social/political/religious orientation. Their main difference is in how they report political news, particularly how mainstream news media provide positive coverage of the ruling political party while alternative news media provide favorable coverage of opposition political parties (Wong, 2017).

LGBTQ-related articles from January 1 to December 31, 2019, were selected for the content analysis because of a spike in interest in "LGBT in Malaysia" in that year (Google Trends, 2019). The search terms used were "LGBT," "LGBTQ," "queer," "gay," "lesbian," and "mak nyah" (a Malay term referring to a trans woman). Altogether 60 articles were collected from the archive of the four newspapers (*MalaysiaKini*, 22; *The Star Online*, 14; *Free Malaysia Today*, 12; *Astro Awani*, 12). The articles were mostly news reports, but *MalaysiaKini* had an opinion piece. This is the same dataset as that analyzed by Ting et al. (2021) but with a totally different focus in the analysis (that is, on topics covered in news articles on LGBT from local and foreign sources).

In the present study, the unit of analysis was the article. Three instruments of analysis were employed by two researchers to code the articles to ensure the reliability of the coding process. The intensity of coverage was measured by the number of articles published on LGBTQ and word length, following past research (Devès et al., 2019; Yan & Bissell, 2018).

Secondly, the analysis of episodic and thematic framing (Table 1) was based on Iyengar (1990, 1991). Episodic news articles are event-oriented (Iyengar, 1990) and usually have a time stamp (e.g., "X said on Monday"). Episodic news may contain some background information on the event, but the focus is on reporting an event. In contrast, thematic news articles focus on issues and problems in a broader context (Iyengar, 1991).

Next, the news frames used for representing LGBTQ across newspapers were coded based on five frames from Boydston et al.'s (2014) codebook (Table 2). The unit of analysis was the news article, and major and minor frames were identified based on the amount of content dedicated to the frame in the article. Boydston et al. (2014) considered this appropriate because of the representation of LGBTQ activities as a crime under civil and religious laws, and the moral and religious reasonings used by religious authorities and political figures.

Table 1*Analysis Framework for Episodic and Thematic Framing (Iyengar, 1990)*

Type of framing	Definition	Example
Episodic	Articles focussing on specific individuals or events (Iyengar, 1990).	The British government and European Union politicians called on Brunei on Friday to abandon plans to impose the death penalty for gay sex or adultery ... (“UK, George Clooney lead calls for Brunei to drop LGBT+ death penalty”, Astro Awani, March 30, 2019)*
Thematic	Articles focussing on problems or issues set in a wider context, such as showing trends over time (Iyengar, 1991).	In July 2016, Jakim launched a five-year action plan meant to “curb” LGBT behaviour ... In Malaysia’s healthcare system, the pathologisation of LGBT persons is evident from a et of guidelines released by the health ministry in 2017 ... (“LGBT, diversity not disease”, Free Malaysia Today, 5 March 2019)**

Notes:*Astro Awani cited a Reuters news article, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-brunei-lgbt-laws-idUSKCN1RA1N2>)**<https://www.freemalaysiatoday.com/category/opinion/2019/03/05/lgbt-diversity-not-disease/>

Content analysis of news sources was conducted. The individuals and organizations cited as sources of information were first identified and later categorized. For example, the prime minister, the president, ministers, and politicians from the ruling party were categorized as politicians from the ruling party, and categorized as the political frame. The police and legal personnel (high court judge, lawyers, attorney general) were categorized under government agencies and categorized as the crime and justice frame. The “human rights group” was diverse and included activists, global organizations, individuals, and advocacy groups supportive of LGBTQ. Foreign news sources included news agencies such as Reuters. Religious leader was another news source.

Finally, for the analysis of the valence of the LGBTQ articles, content supportive of LGBTQ was coded as positive valence, whereas content criticizing or condemning LGBTQ was coded as negative valence (for examples, see the Results section). Articles with both positive and negative valence and articles that do not show any slant for or against LGBTQ were coded as neutral and mixed.

In addition to the content analysis, chi-square tests of independence were conducted to determine the significance of the relationship between the newspapers and the variables analyzed (episodic/thematic framing, frames, news sources, and valence).

Results

In this section, the excerpts from the newspapers are cited with the name of the newspaper and the date for ease of reference.

Intensity of Coverage on LGBTQ Across Newspapers

Table 3 shows that LGBTQ was not intensively covered in the four Malaysian online newspapers because only 60 articles were found in the search. The alternative newspaper *MalaysiaKini* attributed the greatest salience to LGBTQ-related topics both in the number of articles and article length (Table 3). *MalaysiaKini* published 36.7% of the articles found in the search, far more than the other three newspapers (*The Star*, 23.3%; *Free Malaysia Today*, 20%; *Astro Awani*, 20%). In terms of average word length, the *MalaysiaKini* articles were also the longest, 521 words, and *Astro Awani* had the shortest articles of about 217 words.

Based on the intensity of coverage, *MalaysiaKini* readers would be more sensitized to LGBTQ than *Astro Awani* readers. This finding contradicted Ramli et al.’s (2017) analysis of the 2011–2012 coverage of the same-sex marriage of a Malaysian student in the United Kingdom because they found that *MalaysiaKini* gave less coverage to LGBTQ than *Utusan Malaysia*,

Table 2*Analysis Framework for Frames in News Articles (Boydston et al., 2014)*

Frame	Defining questions
Crime and justice	Does the article focus on specific policies in practice and their enforcement, incentives, and implications; the interpretation of laws by individuals and their enforcement; lawbreaking, loopholes, fines, sentencing, and punishment and also on the increase or reduction in crime?
Constitution and jurisprudence	Does the article focus on the constraints imposed on freedoms granted to individuals, governments, and corporations via the Constitution, Bill of Rights and other amendments, or judicial interpretation, specifically with the authority of individuals/corporations to regulate and act independently of government?
Economic	Does the article focus on the costs, benefits, or monetary/financial implications of the issue (to an individual, family, community, or to the economy as a whole)?
Morality	Does the article focus on any perspective, policy objective, or action (including proposed action) that is compelled by religious doctrine or interpretation, duty, honor, righteousness, or any other sense of ethics or social responsibility?
Political	Does the article focus on any political considerations surrounding an issue? Highlights actions or efforts or stances that are political, such as partisan filibusters, involvement of lobbyist, bipartisan efforts, deal-making and vote trading, appealing to one's base, mentions of political maneuvering or explicit statements that a policy issue is good or bad for a particular political party?

Table 3*Number and Percentage of LGBTQ Articles in Four Online Newspapers (N=60)*

Newspaper	Number of articles	Percentage	Number of words	Average Article length
MalaysiaKini	22	36.7	11,470	521
The Star	14	23.3	6,600	471
Free Malaysia Today	12	20	5,300	442
Astro Awani	12	20	2,600	217
Total	60	100	25,970	433

a Malay mainstream newspaper. In 2019, there were no particular sensational incidents related to LGBTQ apart from a Women's Day March in Kuala Lumpur and voting on the ratification of the International Labour Organisation global treaty, but *MalaysiaKini* kept the LGBTQ issue alive by getting different sources to comment on the news.

Episodic and Thematic Framing of Articles on LGBTQ Across Newspapers

Table 4 shows that episodic framing was used to cover LGBTQ in 72.73% (*MalaysiaKini*) to 91.67% (*Astro Awani*) of articles in the four online newspapers. Chi-square tests of independence results showed no significant differences among newspaper and episodic/thematic framing, $X^2(3, N = 60) = 2.15, p = .75$.

Table 4

Frequency and Percentage of Episodic and Thematic Framing in LGBTQ Articles in Four Online Newspapers (N=60)

Newspaper	Episodic framing		Thematic framing	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Astro Awani</i> (n=12)	11	91.67	1	8.33
<i>The Star</i> (n=14)	12	85.71	2	14.29
<i>Free Malaysia Today</i> (n=12)	10	83.33	2	16.67
<i>MalaysiaKini</i> (n=22)	16	72.73	6	27.27
Total	49	81.67	11	18.33

News Frames Used for Representing LGBTQ Across Newspapers

Table 5 shows that the most-used frame in LGBTQ articles is morality (56.67%), followed by constitution and jurisprudence (38.33%), and crime and justice (28.33%). The political and economic consequences frames were less used in LGBTQ news (18.33% and 10%, respectively). Five articles did not have the frames in Boydstun's (2014) framework (*MalaysiaKini*, 3; *Free Malaysia Today*, 1; *Astro Awani*, 1).

A chi-square test revealed significant differences across the four newspapers on the frames used for representing LGBTQ in news articles, $X^2 (12, N=60) = 50.49, p=.001$. *The Star* was the only newspaper where the constitution and jurisprudence frame dominated (21.67%, Table 5). *The Star* is a mainstream newspaper and also carries more foreign news which highlights legality and human rights issues. In contrast, the constitution and jurisprudence frame was absent in *Astro Awani* and accounted for less than 10% of articles in *MalaysiaKini* and *Free Malaysia Today*.

Morality is the dominant news frame for three of the newspapers, except for *The Star*, which is a mainstream newspaper. It is interesting that the alternative newspapers (including the news channel-based *Astro Awani*) carried a stronger morality slant in their articles. The different positions of the morality dimension can be seen in the two excerpts. *The Star* merely reported the bylaw on LGBTQ expression, but *MalaysiaKini* quoted the then prime minister talking about the erosion of values:

An Indonesian city in West Sumatra also approved a bylaw recently to fine gay and transgender people up to

1 million rupiah (\$70) for behaviour that could "disturb public order" or be considered immoral. ("Indonesia attorney general's office condemned for barring LGBT recruits", *The Star*, 25 November 2019)

... We find many Muslims who are attracted to this new culture, who do not respect the values we have been taught to respect," Mahathir (above) said at the Perdana Leadership Foundation in Putrajaya today. ("PM slams West for erosion of values, same-sex marriage," *MalaysiaKini*, 21 November 2019)

Instead of espousing socially conservative attitudes towards LGBTQ or outrightly criticizing the LGBTQ community, *The Star* highlighted different moral issues related to LGBTQ through their international coverage. For example, homosexuality is considered an illness by some segments in Germany and the health minister is trying to change societal views so that relatives, life coaches, therapists, or religious counsellors do not compel young people to go through conversion therapies to change their LGBTQ identities (Nienaber, 2019). Churches have also campaigned against the expansion of gay rights (Marsh, 2019).

The most frequently-used frame in *The Star* LGBTQ news articles was constitution and jurisprudence. The Syariah law that applies to Muslims treats LGBTQ as an offence. Malaysian government officials with the help of homophobic Malay-dominated community-based vigilante groups arrested 7,000 people between 1994 and 1995 because of their involvement in "immoral" and "unIslamic" activities (Peletz, 1996,

Table 5*Frequency and Percentage of Types of Frames in LGBTQ Articles in Four Online Newspapers (N=60)*

	<i>The Star</i> (n=14)	<i>Malaysia-Kini</i> (n=22)	<i>Free Malaysia Today</i> (n=12)	<i>Astro Awani</i> (n=12)	Total
Morality	7 (11.67%)	13 (21.67%)	8 (13.33%)	6 (10%)	34 (56.67%)
Constitution & Jurisprudence	13 (21.67%)	6 (10%)	4 (6.67%)	0 (0%)	23 (38.33%)
Crime & Justice	4 (6.67%)	4 (6.67%)	3 (5%)	6 (10%)	17 (28.33%)
Politics	5 (8.33%)	4 (6.67%)	2 (3.33%)	0 (0%)	11 (18.33%)
Economic consequences	0 (0%)	5 (8.33%)	1 (1.67%)	0 (0%)	6 (10%)
Total	29	32	18	12	91

Note: Five articles had no identifiable frame (*MalaysiaKini*, 3; *Free Malaysia Today*, 1; *Astro Awani*, 1)

p. 220). A *Free Malaysia Today* article drew attention to the effort of the British government and European Union politicians to persuade Brunei to drop the proposal for a law imposing death penalty for gay sex and adultery (Reuters, 2019).

The crime and justice frame appears in news articles reporting police action, either in detaining individuals suspected of engaging in gay sex or in connection with LGBTQ presence in parades and marches. For example, an *Astro Awani* article reported that five men from Indonesia were detained by the Penang Immigration Department for further investigation because they committed offences under The Immigration Peraturan/Act 1966 and Immigration Act 1959/63 for misusing their visit pass. The men entered Malaysia legally to “*menawarkan aktiviti tidak bermoral kepada golongan lelaki homoseksual*” [to offer immoral activities to homosexual men] (Alias, 2019). In a much-covered incident, the Women’s Day March in Kuala Lumpur on March 9, 2019, the presence of LGBTQ individuals in the march led to the organizers being called up to have their statements recorded and the march was connoted as being an illegal assembly (“Surendran: Pakatan acting like BN,” 2019).

Some content of the news articles was categorized as the political frame because of the involvement

of politicians who made statements on the LGBTQ issue, particularly on the Women’s Day March in Kuala Lumpur. The event was politicized by The Lawyers for Liberty advisor, and their spokesperson, Surendran, was quoted as saying that the Pakatan Harapan government was no different from the Barisan Nasional government.

Finally, the economic consequences frames appeared only several times. The articles with the economic consequences frame were mostly reports of foreign companies supporting LGBTQ. For example, a *MalaysiaKini* article reported an UMNO politician questioning “purported links between Swedish fashion retailer H&M’s Malaysian stores and a UN campaign supporting the LGBTQ community” (“IGP says Jho Low arrest rumours inaccurate,” 2019). This report implicated that those who were against LGBTQ may need to reconsider their purchase of H&M items. In another incident, actor George Clooney and filmmaker Dustin Lance Black were reported as urging a boycott of hotels owned by Brunei Investment Agency to protest the proposed death penalty for gay sex in Brunei (Reuters, 2019). In this report, the economic consequences of Brunei’s anti-LGBTQ stance are used to pressure the country to drop the proposed law to punish gay sex by death.

News Sources for Articles on LGBTQ Across Newspapers

A chi-square test of independence showed that there were no significant differences among the four newspapers on the news sources for their LGBTQ news articles, $X^2 (12, N=60) = 20.11, p=.10$. Table 6 shows that the four newspapers relied on rights groups (38.83%) and politicians (37.86%) as information sources. In comparison, the less cited news sources were government agencies (10.70%), religious bodies (7.77%), and other news sources (4.85%).

The inclusion of the voices of the rights group that are sympathetic to LGBTQ balances the generally negative tone of the articles. The rights group encompasses advocacy groups, activists, global bodies, companies, analysts, actors, LGBTQ individuals, and members of the public. For example, a *Free Malaysia Today* article reported the high-profile support of the Former Cuban president Raul Castro's daughter Mariela for a May 2018 gay pride parade in Havana, Cuba, and cited the voice of the LGBTQ activists to remind readers of the objection to LGBTQ rights (Marsh, 2019).

Table 6

Frequency of News Sources in LGBTQ Articles in Four Online Newspapers (N=60)

		<i>The Star</i> (n=14)	<i>Malaysia-Kini</i> (n=22)	<i>Free Malaysia Today</i> (n=12)	<i>Astro Awani</i> (n=12)	Total
Rights group	Advocacy groups	3	4	2	1	10
	Activists	2	1	3	0	6
	Global bodies	1	3	2	0	6
	Companies	0	3	2	0	5
	Analysts	3	1	0	0	4
	Public	0	4	0	0	4
	Actors	0	1	1	1	3
	LGBTQ	1	0	1	0	2
	Sub-total	10	17	11	2	40 (38.83%)
Politicians	Ruling party	5	11	3	6	25
	Opposition party	2	5	1	0	8
	Politician (no party affiliation)	1	2	2	1	6
	Sub-total	8	18	6	7	39 (37.86%)
Government agencies	Police	0	1	1	4	6
	Legal personnel	3	0	1	1	5
	Sub-total	3	1	2	5	11 (10.70%)
Foreign news sources		0	1	3	1	5 (4.85%)
Religious bodies		1	4	1	2	8 (7.77%)
Total		22	41	23	17	103

Note: Percentages do not add up to 100% due to rounding off

Religious leaders were also quoted. For example, an Islamic religious leader (*mufti*) of Perlis said that the Women's Day March would even surprise animals (Azman, 2019).

The second most-used news source is politicians, and mostly those from the ruling party (including ministers). Sometimes the politicians were identified based on their constituency. An example is *Astro Awani*'s article published on March 20, 2019, which is headlined "*Perhimpunan 9 Mac bukan perhimpunan LGBT – Kasthuri*" (Abdullah, 2019). The *Pakatan Harapan* Member of Parliament for Batu Kawan, Kasthuri Patto, explained that the assembly in the capital, in conjunction with World Women's Day on March 9, was not an assembly to support LGBTQ but one held to create awareness of women's rights. She was responding to queries that came from *Barisan Nasional* politicians, reflective of the usual behavior of politicians from opposing camps who are always at odds with each other.

The government agencies frequently cited in LGBTQ news were legal personnel such as the attorney-general, judges, and lawyers. This is why the constitution and jurisprudence frame was the second most dominant frame in LGBTQ articles (results reported earlier). In addition to legal personnel, the involvement of the police may imply wrongful activities. A *MalaysiaKini* article dated July 1, 2019, reported the presence of police protection at an LGBTQ parade march to commemorate the 50th

anniversary of the Stonewall uprising that led to the present-day LGBTQ movement (Caspani et al., 2019). In the Women's Day March incident in Malaysia, the mention of police questioning the organizers suggested wrongful activities, although, in other reports, the police were there to ensure peace and order.

Valence of News Articles on LGBTQ Across Newspapers

Table 7 shows that LGBTQ articles were predominantly negative (60%). The chi-square test of independence results indicated significant differences among newspapers and valence of LGBTQ news articles, $X^2(6, N=60) = 116.48, p=.001$. The biggest difference between the observed and expected values is the negative valence for *Astro Awani*, indicating that this is where the four newspapers are the most different from one another.

All four newspapers had more negative articles than positive or neutral articles. However, *Astro Awani* had the greatest proportion of negative articles on LGBTQ (10 out of 12). *Astro Awani* had two articles with neutral valence but none with positive valence. *Astro Awani*'s articles that had negative valence were also those that cited politicians and government agencies. Because most of the politicians cited are Malay Muslim, they are expected to hesitate to condone LGBTQ in public, although personally, they may be open to exploring knowledge on diverse genders and sexualities. The negative valence of the *Astro Awani* articles also

Table 7

Frequency and Percentage of Positive, Negative, and Neutral Valence in LGBTQ Articles in Four Online Newspapers (N=60)

Newspaper	Positive		Negative		Neutral	
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
<i>The Star</i> (n =14)	5	8.33	8	13.33	1	1.67
<i>MalaysiaKini</i> (n = 22)	3	5.00	12	20.0	7	11.67
<i>Free Malaysia Today</i> (n = 12)	4	6.67	6	10.0	2	3.33
<i>Astro Awani</i> (n =12)	0	0	10	16.67	2	3.33
Total	12	20.00	36	60.00	12	20.00

came from the frame dimensions, that is, crime and justice, and morality frames. Whether it is the police action or statements of religious leaders, LGBTQ is negatively portrayed. The overwhelming negative portrayal of LGBTQ in *Astro Awani* is also because of its focus on local news, such as the Women's Day March in Kuala Lumpur, vote against ratification of the International Labour Organization global treaty, censoring of LGBTQ elements in Netflix firms, gay men caught by immigration, companies supporting LGBTQ, and views on LGBTQ by religious leaders, activists, and politicians. Examples of articles with a negative tone portrayed LGBTQ as transgressing god and an honorable way of life.

One-fifth of the 60 articles analyzed had a neutral valence, mainly because the article reported both positive and negative information about LGBTQ. For example, the article may cite the views of the rights group along with the views of religious leaders. *MalaysiaKini* had more neutral articles than positive or negative articles.

Although *The Star* and *Free Malaysia Today* had some positively valenced articles that were sympathetic towards LGBTQ, none of the articles explicitly affirmed LGBTQ identities, reflective of the sensitivity of the issue. The positive tone of the articles revolved around "respecting minority rights" and equal treatment for LGBTQ (e.g., "*LGBT harus diperlakukan sama rata*" [LGBT should be treated equally], "celebrate the movement toward LGBT equality"). The call "to close the diversity gap" with respect to LGBTQ usually came from activists and advocacy groups and tended to appear in foreign news on LGBTQ. The coverage of foreign news on LGBTQ spanned 12 countries. The topics included the death penalty, jail and caning of LGBTQ individuals, and CEOs apologizing for their company's response to homophobic and racist jokes in videos put up on their company website.

Discussion

The analysis showed that the framing of LGBTQ as deviant in news articles is mainly due to the coverage of the morality dimension, which is interconnected with the valence, sources of information, and episodic versus thematic framing. The most highlighted frame dimension is morality in the three alternative

newspapers: *MalaysiaKini*, *Free Malaysia Today*, and the television-affiliated newspaper *Astro Awani* but it came in second, after constitution and jurisprudence in the mainstream newspaper, *The Star*. Because of the highlight on morality, LGBTQ was depicted as a religious issue, giving the articles a negative valence. Mohamad (2015) stated that LGBTQ violates religious principles (p. 12, para. 4). Along with religion, Mohamad (2015) also stated that LGBTQ is not the lifestyle of Eastern society, and goes against human nature (p.12, para. 4). According to Lee (2016), Confucian ideologies that influence Chinese values do not make clear statements on same-sex relationships, and the stance against LGBTQ arises more from Judeo-Christian beliefs than Confucian teachings. The latter is not a religion, but it is a Chinese philosophy, which guides the way of life.

The morality dimension was covered by selectively quoting rights group, religious leaders, government agencies, and political figures, depending on the valence that is intended. The rights group can be expected to make a positive stance by citing the rights of LGBTQ individuals to be normalized. The advocacy for LGBTQ rights is also categorized under the constitution and jurisprudence frame because the lawyers and activists use the human rights principles outlined in the Declaration of Human Rights to advocate for the LGBTQ community. The views of the rights group were often cited along with negative information, which resulted in 20% of the articles having a neutral valence. On the other hand, religious leaders often made remarks on LGBTQ identity and expression. Political leaders often talked about LGBTQ activities being unacceptable. Politicians in the ruling government coalition would be obligated to take an anti-LGBTQ stance because of the religious teachings of Islam, the official religion of Malaysia. In addition, political leaders hope to gain majority support by finding consensus from their Muslim-majority voters. "Islam has increasingly become a political tool to gain and sustain power deployed by the ruling party" (Teh, 2008, p. 85). When government agencies are cited (police or legal), the highlighting of the crime and justice dimension inevitably suggests the criminality of LGBTQ activities. According to a United Kingdom Home Office (2020, p. 8) report, some Malaysian ministers stated that "the government does not recognize LGB practices as lawful." Cross-dressing and same-sex relations are not lawful in the

context of Malaysian religious and civil laws pertaining to LGBTQ-related activities.

The analysis showed that if the quotations of information sources are put aside, the articles do not contain judgmental statements about LGBTQ. This is because episodic framing focuses on reporting the details of the latest happenings. Episodic news articles do not require journalists to take a stance on issues. If they take an anti-LGBTQ stance, LGBTQ activists and advocates will react. If they take a pro-LGBTQ stance, they would be criticized by religious leaders and government authorities. Furthermore, reporting details of specific incidents is also easier than writing thematic articles, which require background research, skills in analyzing trends based on facts, expert opinions and statistical data, and versatility in writing to contextualize it. Thematic articles are valuable because they often get quoted by other news articles, and the mainstream newspaper, *The Star*, is moving towards thematic framing for its premium readers who pay for access to articles offering analysis and commentaries on underlying reasons for an event or decision (Samani, 2019).

The negative framing of LGBTQ is not surprising, given similar findings in the United States media (Brown et al., 2018) and particularly those in another large Muslim country, Indonesia (Indari & Novianti, 2018; Iskandar & Isnaini, 2018; Sari, 2019; Wahid & Yakut, 2018). In Indonesia, LGBTQ has been framed as a deviation (Maulina & Bowo, 2016), a wild culture (Zuhra, 2013), and a social disease and a criminal activity (Utaminintyas, 2017). Unlike Indonesian newspapers, such as *Media Detik* and *The Jakarta Post* that are known for their sympathetic stance on LGBTQ, none of the four newspapers analyzed fell into this category. The closest they got to was giving space to voices in support of LGBTQ. Given the largely negative coverage of LGBTQ in the newspapers, it is expected that the readers' acceptance of LGBTQ would be low (Zawawi et al., 2020).

Conclusion

The framing analysis of LGBTQ articles revealed that the LGBTQ community is not highly visible in Malaysian newspapers, and the issue appears to be still simmering beneath the surface, with segments of the society still denying their existence. The small

cumulative number of articles on LGBTQ from four newspapers in one year is a testament to this. The four Malaysian newspapers analyzed in the study are similar in their overwhelming negative and episodic framing of LGBTQ as morally, religiously, and culturally wrong. The newspapers are similar in their information source, that is, relying on the rights group and politicians. However, there were significant differences among the newspapers on the frame dimensions used to portray LGBTQ, in that the three alternative newspapers (*MalaysiaKini*, *Free Malaysia Today*, *Astro Awani*) highlighted the morality dimension, but the mainstream newspaper (*The Star*) highlighted the constitution and jurisprudence dimension. There is a balanced representation of LGBTQ in *MalaysiaKini* in terms of valence. In contrast, *The Star* and *Free Malaysia Today* were more negative than positive, whereas *Astro Awani* articles were largely negative.

The present study has uncovered a strategic way to report a morally and religiously linked issue by manipulating sources of information and news content framing to convey the desired valence. Journalists who seek to do justice for LGBTQ individuals can avoid using pathologizing and disempowering language such as sensitive issue, immoral, and deviant, which may be traumatic for some in the LGBTQ communities.

A limitation of the study is that the findings are based on four newspapers and the small sample size on which the analysis is based, but this was due to social sensitivity in the country. In addition, the rhetoric about the Women's Day March in that year might have skewed the news coverage in some ways. Researchers can extend the time period during which the sample is drawn. Future research can explore the relationship between sourcing and valence, as well as sourcing and dominant frames, particularly how specific cultural factors at play in the country may impact these relationships. Researchers should also investigate cross-media coverage of LGBTQ, including television, radio, or media in different languages. In addition to framing and content analysis which has often been used, other methods of analysis, such as critical discourse analysis, can be used to examine an ideological analysis of "Us" versus "Them" (Heterosexual versus LGBTQ) as well as promulgation of racially-based LGBTQ notions that label certain groups as LGBTQ-prone. These studies will lead to a better understanding of the intersection of religion, moral values, and ideological positions on sexual

orientation in Malaysian society.

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Declaration of Ownership

This report is our original work.

Conflict of Interests

None.

Availability of Data and Materials

The data used to support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon request.

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