

The Influence of Real-Life Proximity and Parasocial Interactions on Attitudes towards the LGBTQIA+ Community in Mauritius

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ABSTRACT

Although Mauritius has made constitutional advancements, including the Supreme Court's landmark ruling that decriminalized gay sex by amending Section 250 of the Criminal Code Act, societal acceptance of queer individuals remains inconsistent and a matter of debate due to its fragile social fabric distinguished by its poly-ethnic and poly-religious composition. This study investigated the influence of having direct contact with the LGBTQIA+ community (real-life proximity), and parasocial interactions through media representation of LGBTQIA+ fictional characters on the attitudes towards sexual and gender-diverse minorities in the country. 118 adults took part in an online survey circulated on social media platforms. Data were collected using the Modern Homonegativity Scale, a modified version of the Bogardus Social Distance Scale, and the Parasocial Interaction (PSI)-Process Scale. Results demonstrated that both real-life proximity and parasocial interactions were strongly associated with positive attitudes, and both significantly predicted attitudes towards the LGBTQIA+ community. Interestingly, it was also observed that parasocial interactions had a relatively stronger influence compared to real-life proximity. Since both real-life proximity and parasocial interactions exert an influence on heterosexist attitudes in Mauritius, media representation can be a strong alternative for reducing stigma and sexual prejudice without risking the backlash that direct interventions may provoke. This adds to our understanding of the effects of representation and visibility in developing positive attitudes towards the LGBTQIA+ population and may guide future interventions, advocacy strategies and policies to build a more inclusive Mauritian society.

1. Introduction

Attitudes are developed and maintained by an intricate interplay of cognitive, affective, and behavioural aspects (Albarracin & Shavitt, 2018). According to Srivastava and Rojhe (2021),

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one's own experiences, interactions with others, and exposure to societal standards have an impact on attitudes. The Causal Attitude Network model, presented by Dalege et al. (2016) explains how attitudes interact with diverse beliefs and perspectives, building an environment that can influence behaviour and decision-making processes. The general attitudes and behaviour towards LGBTQIA+ individuals in Mauritius is diverse and multifaceted (Hill et al., 2021). While this multicultural country is known for its inclusiveness and tolerance pertaining to its poly-ethnic and multi-faith societal composition, the same tolerance is often not extended to Sexual and Gender Minorities (SGMs). For instance, community and country reports show that the local LGBTQIA+ community is still facing discrimination and prejudices (Young Queer Alliance, 2021; 2023). Despite the slow legal progressive developments, such as the decriminalisation of the colonial sodomy law (Section 250 of the Criminal Code Act) following the Mauritian Supreme Court's judgment in October 2023, societal acceptance remains inconsistent. The current study aims to determine if representation and visibility via real-life proximity and parasocial interaction factors influence attitudes towards the LGBTQIA+ community in Mauritius. Understanding these attitudes is essential since they may have a major impact on social norms and the prevalence of discriminatory behaviour (Worthen, 2013).

Several theoretical frameworks can explain these attitudes. Social Identity Theory (SIT), established by Henri Tajfel and John Turner (2003), holds that individuals categorise themselves and others into different social groups, resulting in in-group favouritism and out-group prejudice (Turner 1979; Islam, 2014). When traditional gender norms are challenged, defensive responses might reinforce discrimination against queer individuals (Bosson et al. 2013; Iacoviello et al. 2020). In contrast, according to Gordon W. Allport's (1954) Contact Theory, direct interactions between individuals belonging to distinct groups can lessen prejudice and enhance intergroup relations (Schiappa, 2005). In extension of this theory, the theory of Imagined Contact has been proposed, in which even mentally simulating positive contacts with outgroup members can help to change attitudes and lessen bias, extending the ideas of real-life and parasocial contact to cognitive experiences (Schuhl et al., 2019).

1.1 Real Life Proximity

Real-life proximity refers to the physical closeness and interactions between individuals, which influences their social interactions and relationships (Schmidt et al., 2018). In that regard, Marks et al. (2020) studied the experiences and obstacles that LGBTQIA+ individuals with intellectual disabilities have when exploring their sexuality and developing healthy relationships. Using a qualitative study approach with semi-structured interviews, 22 participants shared contextual knowledge of their experiences. These interviews focused on their sexual lives, relationships, and societal attitudes they may face and participants emphasised the necessity of being visible and represented in the LGBTQIA+ community and society as a whole. This visibility was associated with greater acceptance and positive attitudes from others. Furthermore, in-person interactions with supportive individuals, both within their social circles and in the larger population, proved to significantly enhance participants' experiences and perceptions of acceptance. Despite these, participants still encountered significant challenges such as stigma, a lack of understanding, and restricted possibilities for engagement within society (Marks et al., 2020). These findings support SIT and Contact Theory, suggesting that direct, personal interactions can diminish prejudice and create positive attitudes towards out-group individuals (Allport, 1954; Tajfel et al., 1986). However, multiple disadvantages can be noted, as its qualitative approach, which, while giving valuable insights, may not apply to a larger population (Rahman, 2016). Moreover, the focus on individuals with intellectual disabilities may generate unique intersectional dynamics that differ from the overall LGBTQIA+ community (Nielsen et al., 2017). By focusing on a larger sample and adopting a

cross-sectional, quantitative approach, this research intends to provide more generalizable data and investigate the intricacies of these relationships in a postcolonial cultural setting.

Visibility and real-life proximity do not necessarily influence attitudes in a positive manner. For instance, Skeldon and Jenkins (2022) examined the LGBTQ+ community's experiences and attitudes in care/nursing homes, with a focus on how proximity to carers and other residents affected their sense of security, acceptance, and psychological well-being. The study used a mixed-methods approach, with both quantitative and qualitative methodologies where surveys were provided to 200 queer individuals who had been in care/nursing homes, with follow-up interviews which were held with 30 participants to learn more about their experiences and perspectives. Researchers found that participants' proximity to carers and other residents frequently negatively affected their attitudes and well-being. Many reported discrimination, intolerance, and feelings of isolation because of their sexuality or gender. This negative real-life proximity caused higher anxiety and unwillingness to seek necessary care, emphasising the persistence of heterosexist attitudes in these settings (Skeldon & Jenkins, 2022). This is also consistent with Allport's Contact Theory, as negative experiences can raise prejudice and anxiety among marginalised groups, despite the theory's focus on positive contact reducing bias (McKeown & Dixon, 2017).

Furthermore, it connects to SIT, as adverse experiences reinforce in-group favouritism and out-group prejudice, emphasising the importance of positive intergroup encounters in mitigating heterosexist attitudes (Beelman & Lutterbach, 2020). Skeldon and Jenkins' (2022) findings highlight some of the precarities that still exist in structured environments (service provision for elder LGBTQIA+ persons), and how disclosure, and by extension being in proximity, can further rifts and discomforts which may in turn negatively affect attitudes towards certain groups. In parallel, further research explored to what extent proximity outcomes could be moderated by intersectionality. Accordingly, Herari and Lee (2021) found that LGBTQIA+ individuals of colour usually perceive proximity in a different way than their white peers, with more susceptibility to stereotypes and micro aggressions. This overall implies that realistically, that same "closeness" can either minimise stigma in certain circumstances while reinforcing exclusion in others. Furthermore, Morrison (2019) highlights how social and economic standing can determine whether proximity encourages solidarity or fuels resentment, as closeness between divergent social groups may worsen rather than bridge gaps. In essence, the overall impact of real-life proximity should not necessarily be considered to be positive in all contexts and situations; in fact, it relies on the larger cultural, economic, and identity-based conditions in which it takes place. This is particularly relevant for present local focus, since contact happens in a multicultural but nonetheless heteronormative setting (Morrison, 2019).

1.2 Parasocial Interactions

In the last couple of decades, we have witnessed the boom of social media platforms and the rise of online content creation as a successful form of entrepreneurial business. The youth are referred to as 'digital natives' and are believed to possess unique cognitive traits such as a preference for fast-paced information, nonlinear thinking, multitasking, and social learning as a result of their immersion in digital technologies from a young age. These characteristics are even more pronounced in among Gen Z (born after, 1995) and are thought to have developed due to their early and extensive exposure to digital media and technology during childhood and adolescence, a time when the brain is highly adaptable (Thompson, 2013). However, this digital connectivity is not only influencing cognitive traits, but also the ways in which we relate to each other and acquire information, which can potentially influence our attitudes and values. It can be argued that parasocial engagements is becoming a common feature of the rapidly

evolving societies undergoing digitalisation. Parasocial interactions refer to one-sided relationships in which individuals interact with media characters as if they were in reciprocal social interaction, producing a sense of intimacy and familiarity despite the absence of genuine interpersonal contact (Steuer, 2017). Accordingly, Lissitsa and Kushnirovich (2021) investigated the association between parasocial interactions on digital media and social contact with LGBT individuals. Through a cross-sectional survey approach, data was gathered from 500 individuals of various ages, genders, and socioeconomic backgrounds. Participants filled up questionnaires analysing their parasocial contacts with LGBT media personalities, their actual social contact with LGBT individuals and their attitudes towards the community. Key findings demonstrated that both parasocial interactions through online platforms and in-person social contacts were highly connected with positive attitudes (Lissitsa & Kushnirovich, 2021). This is consistent with SIT, as acquiring familiarity and positive ties with out-group individuals might reduce prejudice while increasing in-group favouritism (Beelmann & Lutterbach, 2020).

However, current evidence demonstrates that these benefits are not equally distributed. Social media algorithms often display content that promotes the viewers pre-existing ideologies (Fischer & Schulz, 2021). In other words, individuals who previously engaged in supportive LGBTQIA+ content have a higher chance to be exposed to more positive content, whereas those with unfavourable attitudes may filter it out or just come across hostile depictions. As a result, selective exposure reduces parasocial contact's "broad scope" of effect (Fischer & Schulz, 2021).

Media exposure to LGBT characters can help in humanising them to those unfamiliar while decreasing stereotypes, similar to the effects of direct social contact. While Lissitsa and Kushnirovich (2021) explored this in an Israeli context, Chen and Zhang (2022) also studied the effect of direct and parasocial context on decreasing intergroup prejudice against the Chinese LGBT population, in an East Asian setting. Their results also revealed that both direct interactions and parasocial connections with LGBT media figures were positively correlated with reduced prejudices and intergroup anxiety, with participants who had greater direct exposure and higher engagement in parasocial relationships having more positive attitudes towards the community (Chen & Zhang, 2022). These findings support Allport's Contact Theory by demonstrating that both real-life and parasocial experiences can reduce prejudice, emphasising the significance of positive media depictions of LGBTQIA+ individuals in building acceptance and reducing bias (Birchmore & Kettrey, 2021). While these past studies provide some insights into the influence of parasocial contacts, they are limited to the mainly mono-ethnic settings, which may differ culturally and socially from Mauritius (Annamoradnejad et al., 2019). The current study sought to investigate the impact of parasocial interactions in the local, multi-ethnic context, where public acceptance of the LGBTQIA+ population still fluctuates despite legal progress (Young Queer Alliance, 2021).

In contrast, Birchmore and Kettrey (2021) investigated the bounds of the parasocial contact hypothesis, focusing on the impact of the "*bury your gays*" media cliché on homophobic and sexist attitudes. They used an experimental approach to investigate the impact of media portrayals on the audience attitudes. Participants were shown different media representations, including the "*bury your gays*" trope. Surveys assessed the changes in homophobic and sexist attitudes before and after exposure to these media portrayals and the findings suggests that negative media representation can significantly promote homophobic and sexist attitudes amongst viewers. This implies that parasocial interactions with LGBTQIA+ characters who are negatively portrayed can negatively affect the audience attitudes, strengthening prejudices instead of lessening them (Birchmore & Kettrey, 2021). These findings are consistent with the framework of Contact Theory, highlighting the importance of the quality of encounters in influencing attitudes (Banas et al., 2020). The study emphasises the complexities of media

influences and concludes that not all parasocial contacts result in beneficial outcomes, challenging the idea that all parasocial contacts are advantageous while emphasising the importance of favourable media portrayals in avoiding bias. This remains an issue of high relevance with the rise in anti-gender and anti-rights movement we are currently witnessing at a global level.

Moreover, Shabahang et al. (2023) examined the impact of perceived media support on the negative experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals. More precisely, they looked at how media depictions and perceived support through media channels influence the well-being and attitudes towards queer individuals. A mixed-methods approach involving quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews included 450 queer individuals from various backgrounds. Participants were asked about their opinions of media support and how these perceptions influenced their personal experiences. According to the results, favourable media depictions and perceived media support do have a considerable impact on LGBTQ+ individuals' mental health (Shabahang et al., 2023). However, it also emphasised the potential harmful influence of parasocial interactions when the media portrays them negatively or stereotypically. These media depictions were linked to higher rates of discrimination and internalised homophobia in the community. Participants who reported a lack of or negative media support reported higher degrees of poor mental health and social isolation (Shabahang et al., 2023). These findings contribute to the Contact Theory by demonstrating how imagined contact through media can alter attitudes and experiences (Wojcieszak et al., 2020). It also supports SIT, revealing how media representations influence group dynamics and self-perception among LGBTQIA+ individuals (Saleem & Ramasubramanian, 2019).

Lastly, cross-cultural research indicates that parasocial influences may not be uniformly applicable. According to Hanel et al. (2018), in collectivist cultures where cohesiveness and societal norms are dominant, parasocial interaction with gay characters may not necessarily transfer into real-world acceptance since community and familial expectations have priority over personal opinions. Conversely, in more individualistic settings, parasocial contact better predicts attitude changes (Hanel et al., 2018). This contradiction is especially important when determining whether parasocial interactions support or minimise societal acceptance in Mauritius, which combines collectivist practices with the growing consumption of globalised media.

In relation to the present area of focus, there is an ongoing issue of limited representation of queer Mauritian people in the media and queer people still experience rejection and discrimination. In Mauritius, People's understanding of LGBTQIA+ identities and local experiences is quite limited. For example, in a recent study commissioned by Gender Links (2025), 63% of respondents claimed that they learned about the queer community in media while 21% learned from personal interactions with friends, family and colleagues. This lack of visibility and positive representation is concerning and raises a fundamental question: *How does personal contact and other means of visibility influence social attitudes towards LGBTQIA+ people in Mauritius?*

1.3 Purpose of this research

The present investigation seeks to determine the influence of these two factors, real-life proximity and parasocial interactions, on attitudes towards the LGBTQIA+ population through the context of Mauritius. Specifically, it investigates whether knowing LGBTQIA+ persons in real life and learning about them through media and fictional exposure relate to more positive attitudes towards LGBTQIA+ individuals. It was hypothesized that:

- 1.1 Higher degrees of real-life proximity would be positively correlated with favourable attitudes towards the LGBTQIA+ community.
- 1.2 Higher degrees of parasocial interactions would be positively correlated with favourable attitudes towards the LGBTQIA+ community.
2. Real-life proximity and parasocial interactions would both predict attitudes towards the LGBTQIA+ community.

2. Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The study used a cross-sectional, quantitative approach. A non-experimental (correlational) design was first used to investigate the relationship among three variables, namely attitudes towards the LGBTQIA+ community, real-life proximity and parasocial interactions. A quasi-experimental design was adopted for the second part of the study, with the attitudes towards LGBTQIA+ community as the outcome variable and the two types of proximity measures (real-life and parasocial) as predictor variables.

2.2 Participants

118 individuals took part in the study through convenience sampling. The sample size is consistent with sample sizes utilised in prior studies (Siman et al., 2021; Tukachinsky, 2010). Furthermore, in social science research, a medium effect size (0.5) typically requires 85 to 100 participants for correlational and regression analyses (Faul et al., 2007), indicating that the present sample size is satisfactory. Participants were familiar with the LGBTQIA+ terminology. Eligibility criteria for the study were for participants to be 18 years old and above and residing in Mauritius. Participation in this study was voluntary and anonymous. Age ranged from 18 to 73 years old ($M = 23.48$, $SD = 8.303$). 86 participants identified as female, 23 as male and 9 as transgender/gender non-conforming. 85 respondents stated being heterosexual while 33 were LGBTQIA+. 80% of participants were students, constituting the majority of the sample, while 18% were employed and 2% were retired/unemployed.

2.3 Materials

Data was collected through Momentive, an online survey platform and analysed using SPSS. Three standardised measures were adapted and used in the study to evaluate participants' attitudes, real-life proximity, and parasocial interactions towards the LGBTQIA+ community. Before the administration of the standardised measures, questions about the demographics of respondents were included in the survey.

Modern Homonegativity Scale (Morrison & Morrison, 2013)

The Modern Homonegativity Scale was used to measure indirect and implicit negative attitudes that reflect modern forms of discrimination against homosexuality and homosexuals. The original questionnaire consists of 22 items, divided into two subscales: one for gays (11 items) and one for lesbians (11 items) that assesses attitudes on a 5-point Likert scale (Morrison & Morrison, 2013). For this investigation, only the gay subscale was used and altered to ensure that the items assessed attitudes towards the LGBTQIA+ community in general rather than attitudes towards gay men only. For example, the phrase "Gay men have all the rights they need" was changed to "The LGBTQIA+ community have all the rights they need". These modifications were essential to avoid any particular biases against gay men only when

measuring attitudes towards the LGBTQIA+ community as a whole. For this questionnaire, evidence from the psychometric scale development study shows a high Cronbach Alpha coefficient ranging from .81 to .95, indicating its reliability and validity (Morrison & Morrison, 2013).

Bogardus Social Distance Scale (Bogardus, 1933)

The Bogardus Social Distance Scale was used and adapted to measure the willingness of individuals to engage in social interactions with members of various social groups to different levels of closeness. The original measure relies on 7 items through a variation of the Guttman scale and a 7-point scale to measure social distance, with a lower scores indicating the high degrees of distance (Bogardus, 1933). For this study, 6 out of the 7 items were retained and modified to measure real-life proximity instead of just the willingness to engage with the outgroup. 1 item from the original questionnaire had to be removed as it was measuring the willingness to be married to an LGBTQIA+ person. This item could not be modified as same-sex marriage is still not recognised in the local context. Participants were first asked to indicate whether they knew someone from the LGBTQIA+ community in each of the following categories: family members, close friends, neighbours, work colleagues, citizens and visitors to their country. For example, the item “Would you be willing to have a member of this group as your close personal friend?” was modified to “Do you have a member of the LGBTQIA+ community as your close personal friend?”. For each modified item, a follow-up question was added to ask participants an estimate of the number of people they knew/were aware of from each category if they answered “yes”. This adaptation offers a numerical representation of real-life proximity for this analysis. The numbers collected from participants regarding the people that they knew in each category were later weighted and processed for quantitative data analysis. Research indicates that this measure demonstrates both validity and reliability, with a high Cronbach Alpha coefficient of .86, (Mather et al., 2017; Steiger et al., 2022).

PSI-Process Scale (Schramm & Hartmann, 2008)

The PSI-Process Scale, quantifies the one-sided relationships individuals have with personalities in the media, describing the type and degree of proximity using a 5-point Likert scale. This measure includes three subscales with 12 items: cognitive (6 items), affective (3 items), and behavioural (3 items) (Rubin et al., 1985; Schramm & Hartmann, 2008). In this study, only the cognitive and affective subscales were used, resulting in a total of 9 items. The behavioural subscale was excluded because it measured observable behaviours rather than the interior psychological and emotional processes that are more characteristic of parasocial interactions we aimed to investigate on. Slight changes were applied to each item for this study to measure parasocial interactions with LGBTQIA characters specifically rather than a persona. For instance, “I carefully followed the behaviour of PERSONA” was modified to “I carefully followed the behaviour of LGBTQIA+ characters.” to sufficiently cover the influence of parasocial contact on participants' thoughts and feelings towards the representation of LGBTQIA+ characters in media content specifically. Based on a social psychology and intergroup relations study, this questionnaire's Cronbach Alpha coefficient of .72 supports its reliability and validity (Abrams et al., 2018).

2.4 Procedures

Ethical approval was granted from the Middlesex Mauritius Campus Psychology Research Ethics Committee. An online survey was created on Momentive and distributed. Recruitment was conducted out via digital posters shared through several social media platforms of the research investigators, which included a link and QR code that directed participants to the survey. Completing the survey took an average of ten minutes. When participants accessed the

survey link, they were presented with an Information Sheet explaining the study's objective, risks, benefits, withdrawal procedures and ethical considerations followed by the consent statement. Once participants gave their informed consent, they were directed to the demographic information page which collected information on their age, gender identity, sexual orientation, occupation, and ethnicity. Participants were then presented with the three adapted questionnaires. After completing the survey, participants were debriefed on the last page, ensuring that they were well-informed about the study and provided with information of wellbeing services in case they experienced distress while taking the survey.

3. Results

The raw data from the sample of 118 participants was processed to prepare for Pearson's correlation analyses and a standard regression analysis. Attitudes were scored using the original criteria from the Modern Homonegativity Scale scoring system (Morrison & Morrison, 2013). The scores from all items were added for each participant, with low scores indicating negative attitudes towards LGBTQIA+ persons and higher scores reflecting positive attitudes (score range: 11 to 55). For real-life proximity, the Bogardus Social Distance Scale scoring system was modified to reflect the level of closeness: the numerical scores for two categories (close friends and family members) were multiplied by 1, indicating the most intimate relationships; the numerical estimate reported for neighbours and colleagues were multiplied by 0.5, indicating a moderate level of interaction; and the numbers reported for citizens and visitors were multiplied by 0.2, representing more casual or distant relationships. This weighted scoring system establishes greater emphasis on close and personal relationships than on casual ones when measuring real-life proximity, reflecting the strength and influence that close, personal connections can have in one's life. Present observed scores ranged from 0 to 28, with low scores reflecting low real-life proximity and high scores indicating high real-life proximity. Parasocial interactions was scored using the original PSI-Process Scale criteria, with the scores from all items added for each participant (score range: 9 to 45) and higher scores indicating more parasocial proximity.

Descriptive statistics for the 118 participants were generated (Table 1), providing the means and standard deviations for all measured variables. The data show that real-life proximity to the LGBTQIA+ community appears to be relatively much lower, with a wide range of scores reflecting considerable disparities in participants' real-world proximity. In contrast, a moderate average score for both attitudes and parasocial interactions was observed, with attitudes being more varied among participants.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of the variables measured

Variables	Mean	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
Attitudes	33.59	12.01	13.00	55.00
Real-Life Proximity	5.37	6.25	0.00	27.90
Parasocial Interactions	28.57	6.77	14.00	45.00

Correlation Analyses

Pearson's correlation coefficients were generated to examine the relationships between attitudes towards the LGBTQIA+ community, real-life proximity, and parasocial interactions. (Table 2).

Table 2: Pearson's correlations among the variables measured

Variables	1	2	3
Attitudes (1)	-	-	-
Real-Life Proximity (2)	.568**	-	-
Parasocial Interactions (3)	.679**	.417**	-

Note. $N = 118$. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

A significant positive relationship was observed among all variables. Specifically, a strong positive relationship was found for both attitudes and real-life proximity, $r(116) = .568$, $p < .001$, 95% CIs [.432, .679] (Graph 1) and attitudes and parasocial interactions, $r(116) = .679$, $p < .001$, 95% CIs [.568, .765] (Graph 2). Additionally, a moderate positive relationship was observed real-life proximity and parasocial interaction, $r(116) = .417$, $p < .001$, 95% CIs [.255, .556].

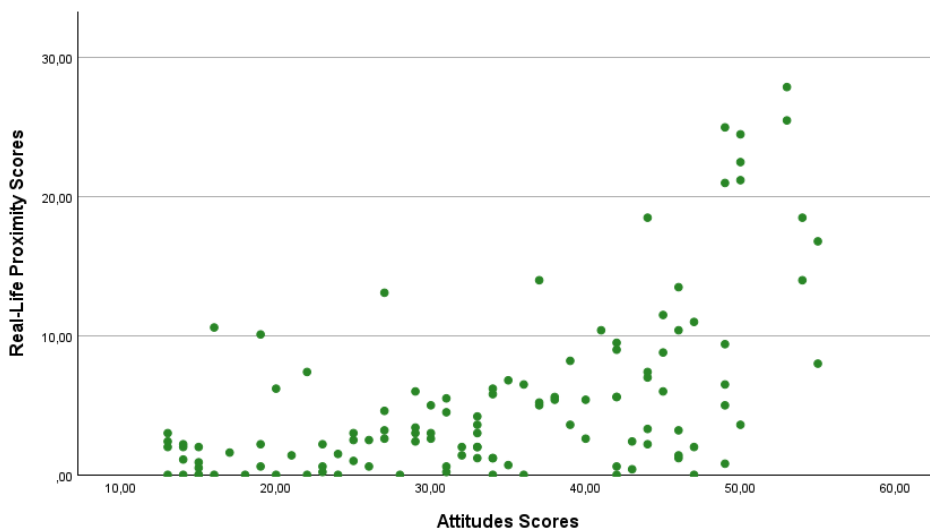


Figure 1: Scatterplot of real-life proximity scores by attitudes scores

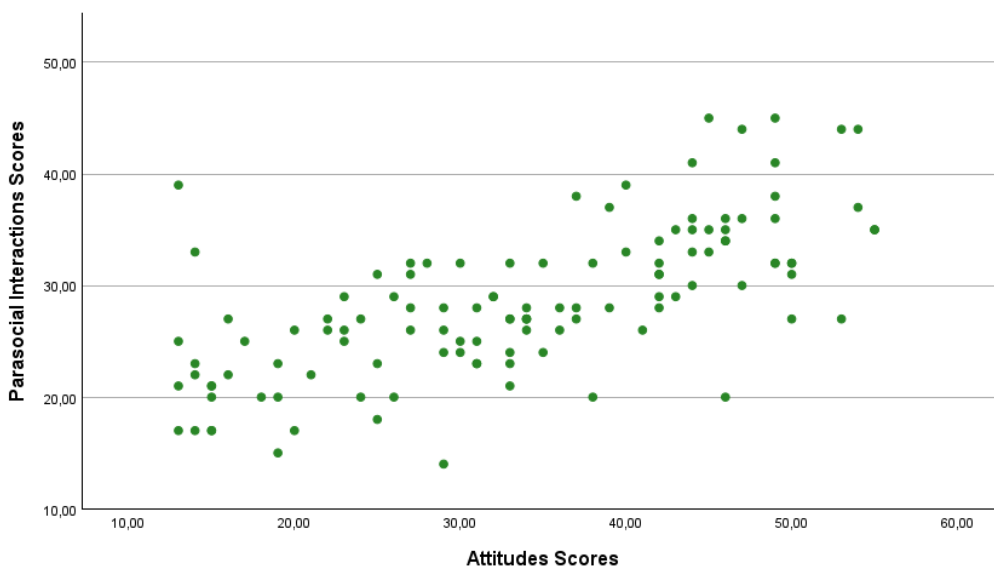


Figure 2: Scatterplot of parasocial interactions scores by attitudes score

Predictors of Attitudes towards the LGBTQIA+ community

Following the Pearson’s correlational analysis, a standard regression analysis was carried out since it is suitable for investigating the multiple linear relationships between real-life proximity and parasocial interactions, and the extent of their influences on the social attitude measured (Marrie et al., 2009).

Assumptions were tested to ensure the results' validity. The Durbin-Watson test result was within the appropriate range of 1.5 to 2.5, suggesting that the residuals' independence was met for attitudes’ scores (Durbin-Watson Value = 1.896). Tolerance and variance inflation factor (VIF) values were used to analyse multicollinearity; all tolerance values more than .1 and VIFs less than 10, indicating that there were no multicollinearity issues for the attitudes’ variable (*Tolerance* = .826, *VIF* = 1.210). There were no univariate outliers since Cook's Distance (0.216) did not exceed 1 for attitudes. Visual assessment of histograms, P-P plots, and scatterplots of standardised residuals against standardised predicted values validated the assumptions of normality, homoscedasticity, and linearity. Table 3 illustrates the results from the regression analysis for each predictor.

Table 3: Predictors of Attitudes

Predictor Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>p</i>
Constant	2.932	3.306	-	0.377
Real-Life Proximity	0.664	0.131	0.345	<.001
Parasocial Interactions	0.949	0.121	0.535	<.001

The fitted regression model was statistically significant ($F(2,115)=72.913, p<.001$), showing that the predictors explained a significant amount of the variance in attitudes. Results indicate that the predictor variables account for 55.1% of the variance in attitudes (adjusted $R^2 = .551$). Real-life proximity significantly predicts attitudes ($\beta=.345, t(115)=5.070, p<.001$). Parasocial interaction was also a significant predictor of attitudes towards the LGBTQIA+ community ($\beta=.535, t(115)=7.851, p<.001$).

The regression equation to predict attitudes towards the LGBTQIA+ community is as follows:
 Attitudes towards the LGBTQIA+ community = 2.932 + .664 (Real-life proximity) + .949 (Parasocial interactions).

4. Discussions

The present research aimed to investigate the influence of real-life proximity and parasocial interactions on attitudes towards the LGBTQIA+ community in Mauritius. Results showed that higher levels of real-life proximity were associated with more positive attitudes towards LGBTQIA+ individuals. Similarly, higher degrees of parasocial interactions were associated with more favourable attitudes, supporting our first set of hypotheses. Our second hypothesis was also supported with the new findings from this study, as both real-life proximity and parasocial interactions were strong predictors of attitudes towards LBGTQIA+ individuals and had a positive influence. These findings indicate that both real-life proximity and parasocial interactions have a substantial impact on attitudes towards the LGBTQIA+ community in Mauritius.

The positive connection between real-life proximity and favourable attitudes offers weight to the notion that direct exposure to queer individuals may lessen prejudice and develop acceptance. Similarly, the strong link between parasocial interactions and positive attitudes implies that media depictions and parasocial engagement with LGBTQIA+ media characters play an important role in shaping public perspectives. However, it is worth pointing out that the prevalence of real-life proximity is quite low compared to parasocial engagement. Despite both forms of contact influencing positive attitudes, the current findings suggest that (i) attitudes towards LGBTQIA+ persons in Mauritius is still varied and (ii) many people are not aware or personally familiar with LGBTQIA+ Mauritians in their day-to-day life.

The positive influence that intergroup contact (both real-life and parasocial) had on attitudes remains consistent with prior research (Lissitsa & Kushnirovich, 2021), emphasising the importance of intergroup contact in humanising queer individuals and decreasing stereotypes. Just like it was observed in Chen and Zhang's (2022) study, the current findings also indicate that experiencing more direct contact with LGBTQIA+ individuals and parasocial engagement with queer media personalities can help in lower harmful stereotypes even in a multi-ethnic context. Although Shabahang's (2023) findings highlighted the potential harm of internalising stereotypes and homophobia based on media portrayals of LGBTQIA+ people, our current findings could not contribute more on this specific experience as we did not investigate on the mental health implications of these forms of contact and attitudes.

It can be speculated that challenging harmful stereotypes in the local context through LGBT visibility can have a positive outcome on the mental health of LGBTQIA+ individuals here as it may remove the burden of identity concealment. While Skeldon and Jenkins (2022) found that proximity in care settings can perpetuate prejudice and unfavourable attitudes due to heterosexist beliefs, it was interesting to observe upon closer inspection of our scatterplots that even a low score in direct proximity as seen in our relatively lower range of scores for real life proximity was associated with favourable attitudes in the local context. This can mean two things: (i) identity concealment is still quite prevalent in public and interpersonal spaces (which corroborates with the varied attitudes observed in this study), and (ii) quality of local queer representations and visibility matters more than quantity. There is a message of hope in these findings, as disclosure in real life has been associated with favourable attitudes, at least among the youth. These observations align with Marks et al. (2020), who emphasised that while visibility and representation in media can promote acceptance, the quality and context of real-life encounters are also crucial in determining their influence on attitudes.

Visibility versus safety – mental health implications

The favourable benefits of real-life proximity demonstrated in this study lend credibility to the Social Identity Theory, demonstrating that direct interaction can challenge in-group biases and diminish heterosexist attitudes (Islam, 2014; Tajfel et al., 1986; Turner, 1979). Furthermore, the benefit of parasocial engagement is consistent with the Imagined Contact Hypothesis which proposes that imagined or one-sided interactions with media characters can be linked with bias reduction (Cameron & Rutland, 2006; Crisp & Turner, 2009). Moreover, these findings posit that both real-life and parasocial interactions can be tools for promoting inclusion and lowering discriminatory attitudes in the local context. They underscore the power of positive and diverse media representations in influencing public perceptions and attitudes towards marginalised groups, supporting Contact Theory's application in this contemporary circumstance (Allport, 1954; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006).

The study's conclusions have several practical implications. The low mean score of real-life proximity indicates that more work needs to be done to improve possibilities for direct contact and safe identity disclosure. For example, while legal provisions have been made to protect

LGBTQ+ people from workplace discrimination and harassment in the Workers' Rights Act 2019 in Mauritius, further training on equality and diversity may be required to create inclusive spaces at work and translate legislations into practise. This emphasizes a gap in service provision that policymakers and administrators are not addressing yet; in Mauritius, training on diversity in inclusion during staff induction processes in the workplace is not mandatory, especially in the public service. This gap can cause additional stress on LGBTQIA+ individuals to strategically conceal to avoid potential victimisation out of the ignorance of others. The induction process of new staff can provide a good opportunity for positive real-life or even parasocial contact to be made to promote an anti-oppressive and tolerant environment in the workplace.

The benefits associated with parasocial engagement also highlights the strong potential of storytelling as a tool for education and advocacy in the local context (Valentine, 2016). As these findings underscore the power of positive and diverse media representations in influencing perceptions towards LGBTQIA+ people, digital storytelling should be considered as a tool of training, public advocacy and education to drive social change. Practically speaking, parasocial exposure through media narratives can be a safer way to shift attitudes in locally without risking the backlash on safety that physical visibility and representation can have given the mixed attitudes observed. In the Mauritian context, where legal progress can now be evidenced, public acceptability remains inconsistent and the necessity for culturally sensitive methodologies and approaches remain vital (Young Queer Alliance, 2021). This highlights the need for careful considerations to be made in the creation of authentic representation of LGBTQIA+ experiences for training programmes and awareness campaigns.

Despite its practical implications, this study is not without limitations. While an appropriate sample size was obtained for the chosen methodology, the characteristics of the sample was not nationally representative; the majority of the respondents were female young adults, leading to an underrepresentation of male and elderly persons in the survey responses. This demographic homogeneity restricts the finding's generalizability (Hanel & Vione, 2016). Furthermore, while the study used established questionnaires to assess attitudes, real-life proximity, and parasocial interactions, the adaptation of these scales and scoring system for may have impacted their validity and reliability (Clausen et al., 2018). Although these questionnaires were effective in yielding the necessary information, the use of self-reports may have introduced a self-selection bias, whereby individuals who hold negative views towards LGBTQIA+ communities or feel uncomfortable expressing their opinions on such topics even anonymously might have opted out of the study altogether. This could have potentially affected the study's findings, causing an overestimation of participants' favourable attitudes towards the LGBTQIA+ community. As a statistical limitation, correlational analyses do not prove causation (Rohrer, 2018; Schober et al., 2018). Although the current study found positive associations between real-life proximity and parasocial interactions, it cannot definitively claim that these factors cause changes in attitudes towards the LGBTQIA+ community. Similarly, while the regression analysis investigated the extent to which real life proximity and parasocial contact can predict social attitudes, it does not fully account for other underlying mechanisms that shape one's attitude towards the LGBTQIA+ (Mayfield & Stouffer, 2017). One last limitation of the methodology adopted is the homogenisation of the LGBTQIA+ community when measuring social attitudes; while this was a deliberate adaptation made for the purpose of this study, disaggregated data could better capture the nuanced societal perceptions of different SOGI subgroups (e.g., queer women, transgender people, intersex individuals) for a deeper understanding.

In conclusion, while this study has some limitations, the findings still contribute to our understanding of how real-life proximity and parasocial interactions shape attitudes towards

the LGBTQIA+ community in Mauritius, setting the foundation for future research and practical applications aimed at creating a more inclusive and accepting society.

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