An examination of social media as a platform for cyber-violence against the LGBT+ population

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Abstract

The popularity of social media raises concerns related to cyber-violence and the security of marginalised individuals and groups, including the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT+) population. Developing worthy interventions requires exploration of the LGBT+ population's experiences of cyber-violence in relation to gender discrimination, which was the aim of this study. A qualitative approach sourced data between 2017 and 2019 from LGBT+ Facebook groups and pages and semi-structured interviews with participants who identified themselves as among the LGBT+ population. Keywords such as LGBT+, homosexuals, and isiZulu terms such as 'izitabane' and 'inkonkoni' were used to search for content. It was found that Facebook is used as a platform by heterosexuals to make violent and hateful comments against the LBGT+ population. Comments displayed to the public (including, for example, "gays are dogs, they can never transform to being women") reflected heteronormative behaviour. A significant finding was the infiltration of heterosexual individuals into the space created by the LGBT+ population, suggesting an increased risk of cyber-violence, and that the right to privacy and security is often compromised. Addressing cyberbullying of the LGBT+ population through education on gender diversity is recommended.

Keywords: cyber-violence, cyberbullying, Facebook; homosexual, heterosexual, LGBT+, social media

Introduction

LGBT+ rights are entrenched in the South African Constitution and affirmed under resolutions 32/2 of 2016, 27/32 of 2014 and 17/19 of 2011 by the United Nations Human Rights Council. However, the LGBT+ population continues to experience several challenges, including discrimination based on gender and sexual orientation (Network of African National Human Rights Institutions, 2017:9). Despite the progressive legal position of LGBT+ in South Africa, gender discrimination is often prevalent in schools, employment and society (Francis, 2017:1; Tebele and Odeku, 2014:615; Van Vollenhoven and Els, 2013:268). The increased use of and reliance on the internet offer a fertile platform for discrimination against and bullying of the LGBT+ population. Cyber-violence, "a modern form of bullying" (Ferrara *et al*, 2018:1), has emerged to increase the vulnerability of the LGBT+ population (McNeal *et al*, 2018:25; Tommey and Russell, 2016:176). Existing and developing online communication platforms, specifically social media, make cyber-violence a growing phenomenon requiring attention. Cyber-violence is recognised to be underreported, which makes determining the extent difficult; more important, however, is the lack of remedial intervention, which may affect the quality of life of victims and the continued gendered discrimination (Du Preez and Prinsloo, 2017:118).

Social media platforms such as Facebook see users log onto the site more than once a day and spend on average 20 minutes per day on the site (Smith, 2019). Studies show that lesbian, gay and bisexual persons are more socially active on social media compared to heterosexuals (Escbar-Viera *et al*, 2018), and are three times more likely to experience cyberbullying compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Tommey & Russell, 2016:176). A study on online experiences of LGBT youth showed that they spent 5 hours online each day on average, approximately 45 minutes more than non-LGBT youth, via a variety of different electronic devices (Palmer *et al*, 2013:5). The time spent on social media increases the probability of cyber-violence, as the online context provides a platform for continuous victimisation that may occur in more environments where cyberspace is active, and may persist from adolescence to adulthood (Johnson *et al*, 2016: 2). Between 10.5% and 71.3% of LGBT+ youth experience cyberbullying (Abreu and Kenny, 2017:81).

Despite the high prevalence of cyber-violence and its association with depression and suicidality (Kann *et al*, 2018:24; Escobar-Viera *et al*, 2018), little is known on the experiences of cyber-violence against the LGBT+ population for intervention purposes. This study therefore aimed to explore experiences of cyber-violence with regard to the LGBT+ population in relation to gender discrimination, informed by the concept 'heteronormative hegemony'.

Cyber-violence and the LGBT+ population

Kunnapu *et al (* 2018) define cyber-violence as

> the use of computer systems to cause, facilitate, or threaten violence against individuals that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, psychological or economic harm or suffering and may include the exploitation of the individual's circumstances, characteristics or vulnerabilities.

Holt (2012:339) recognises cyber-violence as a category of cybercrime that "represents the distribution of injurious, hurtful, or dangerous materials online". It includes cyberbullying, cyber dating violence, cyber harassment, online sexual exploitation and sexual abuse of children (Kunnapu *et al*, 2018:39; Peterson and Densley, 2017:194). Cyber-violence can occur on many online platforms, such as social media, dating websites, blogs and chat rooms. Social media is regarded as the most common platform for cyberbullying worldwide (Newall, 2018:6). According to Du Preez and Prinsloo (2017:104-105), cyberbullying occurs due to an imbalance of power between the offender and the victim, which can be related to physical features, psychological impairments and emotional deprivation.

Victims of cyberbullying can be anyone who uses cyberspace, but are more likely to involve vulnerable populations such as children and sexual minorities (McNeal *et al*, 2018: 25). Sexual minorities include lesbian women, gay men, bisexual men and women, transgender men and women, and questioning or queer individuals, which refers to those who are uncertain about their sexual orientation and are still exploring their sexual identity (McNeal *et al*, 2018:27). It also includes intersex people, who are persons born with sex characteristics that do not fit the typical binary notes of male and female bodies (Maquba and Sehoole, 2018:8).

In South Africa, reports of cyberbullying fall under harassment and are dealt with by criminal law and/or civil law. However, the LGBT+ population is less likely to report gender

discrimination. The Love Not Hate campaign (2016:9,13) found over 50% of the LGBT+ population experience some form of gender discrimination in South Africa; however, more than 77% of the LGBT+ population do not report incidents of discrimination to the police. Research also shows that half of the young people who experience cyberbullying do not report the incident to anyone (Popovac and Leoschut, 2012). This makes determining the prevalence of cyberbullying of the LGBT+ population difficult to ascertain. However, studies show that the youth experience greater victimisation (Kann *et al*, 2018:19; Kosciw *et al*, 2012:26).

While determining the rate of cyberbullying of the LGBT+ population proves difficult, the consequences are prevalent. The characteristics of cyberbullying differ from those of traditional bullying. For example: cyberbullying has a potentially larger audience, as items displayed on the internet cut across geographical boundaries; in most cases it involves the anonymous spreading of messages; the inability of victims to get away from the victimisation as it is a 24-hour occurrence; and it has lasting effects, even though items may be removed from the internet (Hinduja and Patchin, 2014:3; Dooley *et al*, 2009:183-184). The results are severe psychological consequences, and cyberbullying has been designated a serious public health threat (Ferrara *et al*, 2018:1).

The most common negative effects of cyberbullying of LGBT+ youth include depression and anxiety, self-harm, academic problems, substance abuse, and suicide (Abreu and Kenny, 2017; Hinduja and Patchin, 2014). The cases of the death of a primary school pupil in Gauteng, South Africa, who committed suicide after being subjected to cyberbullying (Jordaan, 2019), and the suicide of 13-year-old Ryan Patrick Halligan in 2003 in New York, subjected to cyberbullying for allegedly being gay (Kowalski *et al*, 2012:vii), portray the devastating impact that cyberbullying has on victims.

In spite of incidences of cyberbullying in the United States, not all states have updated their laws to include cyberbullying; only 22 states specifically address cyberbullying (McNeal *et al*, 2016:69). Cyberbullying is more likely to fall under harassment or bullying (Sacco *et al*, 2012:5), as in the case of South Africa. LGBT+ persons are protected under section 9 of the South African Constitution (Act 108 of 1996), which states that no person should be unfairly discriminated against based on gender, sex and sexual orientation, amongst others. The Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act 4 of 2000 states factors that are prohibited on the grounds of discrimination, including sexual orientation. Cyberbullying, recognised as a form of bullying, is established as harassment under the Protection from Harassment Act 17 of 2011, which defines harassment in relation to electronic use as

> sending, delivering or causing the delivery of letters, telegrams, packages, facsimiles, electronic mail or other objects to the complainant or a related person or leaving them where they will be found by, given to or brought to the attention of, the complainant or a related person.

However, cyberbullying policies are lacking in places of learning and employment, which contributes to the lack of reporting.

Regardless of the great emphasis on promoting gender equality in South Africa, most members of the South African population (7 out of 10) feel strongly that homosexual sex and breaking gender dressing norms is simply "wrong" and "disgusting" (Brouard *et al*, 2016:37),

indicating that gender discrimination is a psychosocial process informed by heteronormative hegemony. Heteronormative hegemony constitutes the binary division of sex to constitute femininity and masculinity (Varela *et al*, 2016:53). Doody (2019) states that heteronormativity is the repression of queerness, the idea that there are only two genders: male and female, each with distinct traits; this, according to Butler (1990:24), is a product of performativity of gender. Butler (1990:17, 33) contends that gender is a cultural and social construction that manifests through the repetition of performative acts.

Butler (1990:6) explains gender to be socially constructed, while sex has a biological connotation. Firstly, gender is seen to be produced by pre-existing notions of the enactment of acts which are gendered and associated with their biological makeup; for example, females display 'motherly' affection, while men are prone to physical strength. Secondly, it is viewed through symbolic interaction informed by social agents via language, gesture and symbolic social signs (Jagger, 2008:22); for example, being 'butch' has strong connotations to masculinity and men. For Butler the body itself is not a source of meaning and identity, but the subjective notions produced by society (Jagger, 2008:23). It is the rejection of the pre-constructed notion of gender that leads to discrimination and violence, which can be linked to "a process connected to the larger gender system" (Bobbitt-Zeher, 2011:765). Any diversion from those distinct traits leads to maltreatment.

Piantato (2016:5) recognised that cyberbullying directed towards the LGBT+ population is more likely to be a result of being different from the binary gender order, which is largely linked with heteronormativity. Varela *et al* (2016:57) adds that heteronormative hegemony is a non-judicial formation of power rooted in civil society. The norms of civil society, which operates through conduct of everyday practices, articulate the way in which government will formulate laws (Varela *et al*, 2016:57), as seen in the criminalisation as well as the decriminalisation of non-heteronormative behaviour. The social construction of gender legitimises the various forms of discrimination faced by those who do fit into heterosexual discourse (Tilsen and Nylund, 2010:4). Queer theorists challenge the notion that gender is fixed (i.e. to being a woman), and argue that in order to break away from traditional notions of male and female, rejection of the fixed labels is necessary (Piantato, 2016:10). Understanding heteronormativity is necessary for addressing cyberbullying of LGBT+ persons. The study therefore aims to bring attention to the experiences of cyberbullying among the LGBT+ population.

Research design and data collection

We aimed to explore the experiences of cyber-violence with regard to the LGBT+ population in relation to gender discrimination, and the research aim required the use of cyber-space, an unobtrusive method (Bachman and Schutt, 2018:75). Facebook, a social media platform, was used to study social behaviour. Ranked second after Pinterest (by just 0.63%), Facebook is the leading social media platform in South Africa, with over 43.27% of the population using the site (StatCounter, 2019). The popularity of Facebook and its extensive use in South Africa made it the ideal platform for exploring cyberbullying of the LGBT+ population. To strengthen and make sense of the social behaviour observed on Facebook, a second method was employed, that of semi-structured interviews with participants who identified themselves within the LGBT+ population. The triangulation of data collection methods within a qualitative research design ensured that meaningful data were collected, analysed and reported.

Eighty-two Facebook posts and comments were taken from groups, pages and personal timelines. This included memes, written comments and pictures. Table 1 offers a detailed description of the type of posts found on Facebook. Facebook posts consist of various attributes, including the content of the message, the author of the message, and the date and time. Given that the aim of the study was to explore experiences of cyber-violence with regard to the LGBT+ population, focus was solely on the message content as informed by the date.

Table 1. Location of data sourced from Facebook between 2017 and 2019.

Data location	• Number	• Percentage
Memes	• 5	• 6
Pictures	• 3	• 4
Written comments on personal timelines	• 1	• 1
Written comments in groups ad on pages	• 37	• 45
Replies under comment sections	• 36	• 44
	• 82	• 100

The researchers examined data from August 2017 to August 2019 in order to gather current content on Facebook pertaining to cyberbullying of LGBT+ persons. On social media content is openly displayed to the public, and the use of such information does not constitute any violations of ethical principles (Laher *et al*, 2019:402). However, to avoid possible conflict or discrimination, the names and groups used in the study were concealed. To collect data relevant to the study from Facebook posts and pages, terms such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, LGBT, LGBTI, homosexual, homophobic, and 'homophobia', as well as some isiZulu terms, including *izitabane*, and *izinkonkoni,* were typed into the search option on Facebook. In addition, LGBT+ groups were searched to locate data. The researchers visited LGBT+ groups with similar key words in the search option for posts directed to the LGBT+ population. The majority of discriminatory posts against the LGBT+ population were found to be written comments in groups and on pages (45%), and in replies under comment sections (44%).

Table 2 presents biographical information on the 7 participants who were interviewed through the use of Facebook messenger. In South Africa, race groups are classified under four major groups: African, White, Coloured and Indian. The study did not aim to be a representative sample of all race groups, but to explore the experiences of cyber-bullying of the LGBT+ population. Although all participants were African, this did not limit the data that were collected. Participants' ages ranged between 20 and 31 years, and they included persons who identify themselves as gay, lesbian and transgender.

Table 2. Biographical details of participants.

Participant	Age (years)	Race	Sexual orientation
Participant 1	31	African	Lesbian
Participant 2	20	African	Transgender
Participant 3	25	African	Gay
Participant 4	24	African	Gay
Participant 5	26	African	Lesbian
Participant 6	29	African	Gay
Participant 7	27	African	Lesbian

Participants were identified and selected. The first participant was identified purposively, which was done through posting a message with the study aim followed by a request for interested persons who identify themselves within the LGBT+ population to participate in the study. Participants were requested to send the researcher a private message through Facebook messenger, stating their agreement to part take in the study. Within a few hours one person volunteered to be interviewed, and thereafter the snowballing technique was used to find other participants. The first participant suggested particular individuals to the researcher who may be willing to participate in the study, and other participants suggested those that they knew to the researchers.

A semi-structured interview schedule informed the online interviews. Ethical protocols were followed to ensure participants felt safe, and that their confidentiality was maintained and anonymity guaranteed. All participation was voluntary, with withdrawal from the study an option if participants decided they no longer wanted to be a part of it. However, all participants continued with the semi-structured interviews. It was important that no harm befell participants, as the study dealt with a sensitive topic; therefore, participants were informed of support services.

The semi-structured interview schedule was informed by the following questions:

1. What are your experiences of cyberbullying on Facebook due to your sexual orientation?
2. How do you experience cyberbullying on Facebook (i.e. insulting comments, private messages, account hacked, insults on groups)?
3. How do you define your experience of cyberbullying through Facebook (i.e. personal attack, hate, gender discrimination)?
4. What are your suggestions on tackling cyberbullying against the LGBT+ population in South Africa?

The content of posts was analysed through latent and manifest coding (Hsieh and Shannon, 2005:1283), allowing for in-depth analyses of the data. The process allowed for surface content as well as the underlying meaning of the posts to be assessed. Coding was informed by the literature and research questions. Each image was carefully analysed and those that shared similar sentiments were grouped together into one theme. The aim of the study was to explore the experiences of cyberbullying of the LGBT+ population in relation to gender discrimination. The study was informed by three main research questions:

1. Is the experience of cyberbullying on Facebook of the LGBT+ population based on gender and/or sexual orientation?
2. What methods of cyberbullying are used towards the LGBT+ population on Facebook?
3. What are possible intervention strategies to address LGBT+ cyberbullying?

The next section discusses the findings of the study.

Findings and discussion

In attempting to explore the experiences of cyber-violence with regard to the LGBT+ population in relation to gender discrimination, using content analysis, five themes were

generated: gender discrimination, invasion of privacy (infiltration of groups), threats, prejudice, and hatred of the LGBT+ population. These themes were identified from both Facebook posts and responses from participants. Each theme is discussed in relation to the research questions outlined above.

Gender discrimination

With the belief of gender being binary, authors such as Piantato (2016:5) argue that cyberbullying directed towards the LGBT+ population is more likely to be the result of being different from the binary gender order, which is largely linked with heteronormativity. It was observed that the perpetrators of cyber-violence use groups created on Facebook to insult and discriminate against LGBT+ people. They use different methods such as posting comments on heterosexual groups to show hatred of homosexual people, creation of fake accounts to get into LGBT+ groups in order to post insults and threats, and comments sent to insult homosexuals on their own profiles. LGBT+ people face discrimination on Facebook and other social media platforms due to discrimination based on gender. The interviewed participants expressed experiences of discrimination based on gender. Heterosexual people comment on the LGBT+ individual posts or photos, showing discrimination. Furthermore, posts and comments that have been shared on Facebook, including private messages sent to some of the participants, show that there is a strong belief in discrimination based on gender in South Africa. This correlates with the argument by Brouard *et al* (2016) that 7 out of 10 people feel strongly that homosexual sex and breaking gender dressing norms is simply 'wrong' and 'disgusting'. Facebook as a social media platform provides easy access for people who believe in gender discrimination to share such sentiments to discriminate against the LGBT+ population.

Invasion of privacy (infiltration of groups)

We further noted that some heterosexual people have used groups which were created specifically for homosexuals (in order to share their experiences, meet, and socialise), to perpetrate hate. Certain groups are strictly for lesbian or gay or LGBT+ people. However, heterosexuals create fake accounts (an account with no history, no profile picture or one image, and no details of that person) to insult and threaten homosexuals. This was found particularly on a lesbian and gay group where heterosexual people shared posts that discriminated against lesbians and gays (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Examples of actual posts placed on a lesbian and gay group by heterosexual people.

Such posts were shared by heterosexual people in these groups, that are specifically for homosexual people. One participant mentioned that his account was hacked and the perpetrator used his account to share posts about him and his sexuality on Facebook. This invasion of privacy could do harm to the victim. The participant mentioned the following:

There were times where I could not get out of my room people asking if I was the one posting on Facebook, and I was called a moffie that is posting things on Facebook, I was miserable, feeling lonely.

This experience correlates with sentiments from various authors (Abreu and Kenny, 2017; Hinduja and Patchin, 2014) who assert that depression and anxiety, self-harm, academic problems, substance abuse, and suicide, can result from such invasions. Furthermore, the participants expressed that even though Facebook is one of the platforms frequently used to meet and connect with others, they often feel unsafe as Facebook also opens up an additional platform where they experience various types of prejudice, discrimination and threats.

Our study found that social media, especially Facebook, makes it easier for heterosexuals to perpetrate hate and homophobia, their identity hidden by using fake accounts to post anonymously. We also observed that the continuation of cyber-violence could mean that there is less security on this platform to prevent such posts or deal with the perpetrators.

Threats

One of the most common experiences observed during data collection was threats that LGBT+ persons experience in various ways on Facebook. The key words that were used in search of these posts helped the authors to find words used against the LGBT+ population which showed discrimination, threats, prejudice, and hatred, for example, '*stabane*', '*nkonkoni*' (derogatory terms used to refer to homosexual people in isiZulu), 'abomination', 'ugly', 'disgusting', 'sin', 'demons', 'nasty', 'you belong to hell', and 'kill them'. These were accompanied by threats, which included that homosexuals should be killed and that their behaviour is unnatural and therefore should be punished. Some examples appear in Figure 2.

Figure 2. Examples of Facebook posts making threats against the LGBT+ population.

Such threats include private messages from men, who approach lesbian women even though they are aware that these women are homosexuals:

… but I have experienced once where a guy inboxed me and he was hitting on me in the inbox and I told him that I was lesbian. And that is when he started insulting me telling me that he will rape me because I think I'm clever, and I am disgusting. I then blocked this guy.

Participants who received private messages threatening them are lesbian and they experience that after the men approached them first. Such posts may make the LGBT+ population more vulnerable.

Prejudice

In recent years the trend 'Fees Must Fall' was widely used around the country. This may have influenced heterosexual people to perpetrate their prejudice against homosexual people by sharing on Facebook posts such as 'Gays must fall' (Figure 3). These recent posts, among others, indicate hatred towards gays in particular, and were shared among Facebook groups around the country.


Figure 3. Examples of prejudiced Facebook posts shared in groups across the country.

These posts complement the argument by Piantato (2016:5) that cyberbullying directed towards the LGBT+ population is more likely to be the result of being different from the binary gender order, which is largely linked with heteronormativity. The 'Gays must fall' trend on Facebook it rooted in the belief in binary gender and that homosexuality is 'unnatural'.

Hatred towards the LGBT+ population

The hatred and prejudice towards the LGBT+ population are strongly influenced by heteronormativity. The popular belief that "God only created a man and a woman, and therefore being homosexual is a sin" has been widely shared on Facebook to discriminate against and show hate towards this population. The gathered posts showed a strong belief in heternormativity, viewing the LGBT+ people as other due to their sexual orientation. This

collates with the statement by Doody (2019) that heteronormativity is the repression of queerness; the belief is that gender is binary, and being homosexual is thus viewed as unnatural. The comments and posts on Facebook prove Ericsson's (2011) argument that homosexuals are 'othered' in the context of heteronormativity. The posts indicated hatred of homosexuals, particularly gays and lesbians. The belief that there are only two genders is emphasised in the screenshots in Figure 4, where gays and lesbians are called names such as 'disgusting' and '*ngqingili*', which is another term used to insult homosexual people.
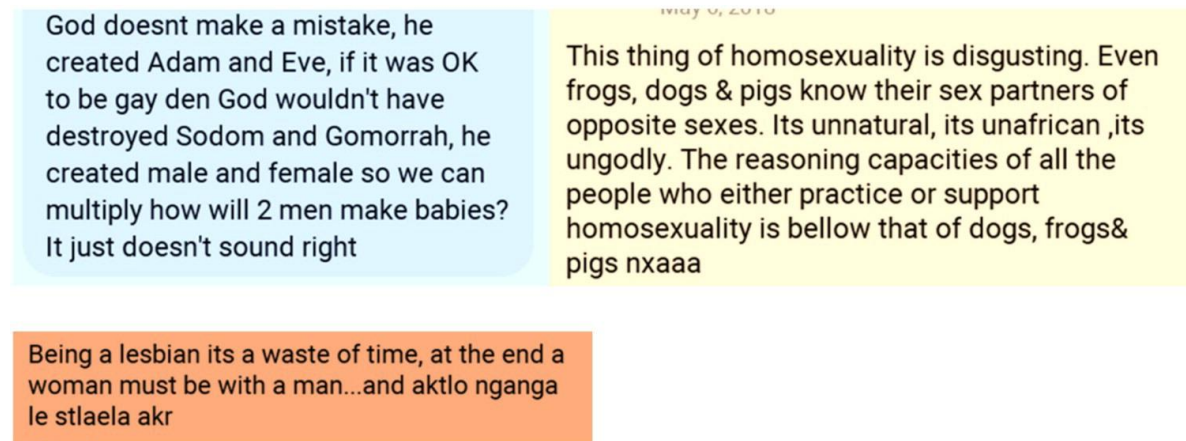
Figure 4. Hateful Facebook posts rooted in the belief that gender is binary, and that being homosexual is thus unnatural.

Conclusion and recommendations

This study attempted to explore cyber-violence against the LGBT+ population through Facebook. Our findings suggest that Facebook, among other social media platforms, has made it easy to perpetrate hate crimes against the LGBT+ population. Based on this research, it is clear that gender discrimination still lingers in South Africa, making the LGBT+ population more vulnerable to discrimination, prejudice and threats due to their sexual orientation.

We call for security regarding the use of Facebook, and for more attention to be paid to cyber-violence as cyber-crime in the country. In this digital era there is still a limited number of research studies focusing on cyber-violence against the LGBT+ population and other minority groups. This study made it clear that this population experiences cyber-violence through Facebook. It is thus recommended that more attention is paid to this population and security on social media in order to deal with perpetrators of any form of cyber-violence.

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