Navigating Algorithms: The Case of Structurally Silenced Communities in Uganda

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Executive Summary

At a time when social media has become the backbone of a large part of the digital society, it is important to understand the glue that holds it together. While the different social media platforms offer a range of spaces for networking, research, knowledge generation, kinship, and entertainment, each also offers a distinct value that meet the needs of a diversity of users.

However, many users report a shift in social media from a fun and carefree space to one that is "polluted" and "restrictive" alongside concerns on increasing censorship, harassment, stalking, and discrimination. Often, the violators hide behind keyboards, vague policies and in some cases, vague policies that shield perpetrators more than protect victims.

While social media has become an open house for many, it remains exclusive for some. In Uganda, the cost of data continues to serve an exclusionary function for a population that is yet to meet the affordability target[1] - where 5GB of mobile broadband data is priced at 2 percent or less of average monthly income as envisioned by the Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI) and endorsed by the United Nations Broadband Commission.

Meanwhile, the weaponisation of social media by the state including through shutdowns[2] (Ugandan users currently do not have access to Facebook following its shutdown in February 2021) and through the use of restrictive policies still hinder the full utilisation of online spaces. However, the scrapping of Section 25 of the Computer Misuse Act which defined offensive communication as the "willful and repeated use of electronic communication to disturb or attempt to disturb the peace, quiet or right of privacy of any person with no purpose of legitimate communication" offered some relief to users in the country to regain some level of trust in the use of platforms.

However, this trust is not enjoyed by all in the country. For the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, and Queer (LGBTQ+) community, concerns remain rife due to continued and rising levels of homo-phobic rhetoric and bias online. This most especially in the wake of the resurfaced Anti-Homosexuality Amendment Act (2023).

Public discourse online is characterised by misinformation and disinformation, virality tactics and clickbaiting which have detrimental consequences that only further subjugate the LGBTQ+ community. Meanwhile, concerns that social media algorithms play into reinforcing this narrative is also high. Algorithms fueled by user behaviours and interactions with content serve to create even deeper channels for narratives to sink into popular culture online and offline.

As HER Internet, it is in recognising these concerns that we seek the investigation into these interactions – of platforms, laws, and users - a necessity, especially as platforms reduce the levels of access to data and as civic spaces online and offline shrink for marginalised communities.

The goal of this report is to offer insight into what is informing LGBTQ+ organising and community building in Uganda and the extent to which algorithms influence these actions. The report gives a background

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[1] Alliance for Affordable Internet (A4AI), Affordable Internet – Journey from 1 to 5, https://a4ai.org/affordable-internet-is-1-for-2/
[2] Ugandan users currently do not have access to Facebook following its shutdown in February 2021. Access is possible through the use of a Virtual Network (VPN)

into the general social media landscape in the country, and reviews global trends in algorithmic studies. This report will serve as an entry point for further studies into this arena at a time when social media companies are tightening their grip on data which would otherwise help address the concerns held by marginalised communities. Concurrently, growing concerns on content moderation practices, the increased pace at which online communications travels, and the absence of adequate safeguards - both online and offline - all further reinforce the need to build an evidence base upon which progressive policy interventions can be established and pursued by platforms and policy makers.

We appreciate the support of the Mozilla Africa Innovation Mradi: In Real Life (IRL) Fund through which we have been able to tackle these questions across Uganda. In doing so, we have developed a set of recommendations that we hope will influence change and an appreciation of the role that live human experiences play in informing how platforms can work better – especially for marginalised and vulnerable communities often relegated to the sidelines both offline and online.

An Overview of The Digital Society: The Case of Social Media

In today's interconnected world, social media has become an integral part of our lives, transcending geographical boundaries, lived experiences, and perceptions of the world. Social media, once the arena of basic social commentary, has evolved into a space where accountability is demanded, and transparency is sought. It has become also a place where data is exchanged not only through visuals, text, and audio but also through patterns layered deep within platforms.

Social media involves using Information and Communication Technologies (ICT), through platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (now known as X), and LinkedIn, among others, as tools to achieve better communication.

With its diverse cultures and expanding digital landscape, Africa is experiencing a significant shift in social media usage. Africa's digital landscape has transformed rapidly over the last two decades, with social media becoming an integral part of daily life for millions. For many, social media remains their gateway to the wider internet, some however, never make it past social media platforms. Nonetheless, social media has revolutionised the way Africans communicate and socialise, as people now create, share, exchange, and modify their ideas in virtual communities while also building movements and communities.

The advent and advancement of ICTs has not only led to the advancement of technology but has also re-shaped narratives. One of the widely used technologies that has reshaped the ways people communicate among themselves in our digital age is social media platforms and for much of Africa, this has been through Facebook and X, with Tik Tok surging ahead in recent years.. Today, social media network sites are known to be playing significant roles in communication and other services-oriented areas of life. That is the reason why the usage and impacts of social media cannot be overemphasised.

As of the latest data from Statistics (2022), Africa's social media users have risen consistently to over 384 million. Social media penetration is considerably higher in Northern and Southern Africa than in other regions.

Facebook stands tall as Africa's undisputed king of social media, with a staggering 170 million users. This platform's ubiquity spans cultures and languages, making it a bridge for connecting people across diverse backgrounds. From the survey, Facebook leads in active user engagement, closely followed by TikTok - indicating its growing popularity, while Instagram and Twitter rank lower at almost similar levels. LinkedIn remains a straddler for users in Africa but continues to build an active user base.[3]

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[3] Social media Usage Trends in Africa: GeoPoll Report, Newton Adika, September 06, 2023
https://www.geopoll.com/blog/social-media-usage-trends-in-africa-geopoll-report/

Social Media Use in Uganda

In Uganda, experience shows that all categories of persons, regardless of economic, financial, and educational status, use social media for one purpose or another, particularly peer interactions, in social groups and academic institutions, cooperative organisations, agro-industries, and government often with the goal of sharing information relating to life experiences, civic concerns, news reports, research findings, products, prices, policies, amongst a myriad of various topics.

These platforms have embedded themselves for most online users who have evolved to juggle multiple online personas for different reasons and scenarios. Social media has instigated new tools of engagement that ordinary people in Uganda have employed to achieve different endeavours like business and trade, advocacy, and raising awareness among others. Another social media attribute that is observed is the power it gives individual users to post and consume information in their own spaces but to also challenge people in positions of power and state authorities. Uganda's spate of "online exhibitions" Between 2023 and 2024 is one such topical example.

There are several types of social media used in Uganda but the commonly used ones include can be classified as below:

Social Networking sites	Facebook	LinkedIn	Twitter, X	WhatsApp	Grindr	Facebook
Discussion forums	Quora	Reddit	Digg			
Blogging and publishing sites	WordPress	Tumblr	Medium			
Presentation sharing networks	Scribd	SlideShare	Slide Rocket			
Video & Audio sharing	YouTube	Instagram	TikTok	Flickr		
Research, writing & collaboration sites	PB Works	Wiki Spaces	Wikipedia			
Meeting and project management sites	BigBlue Button	Skype	Zoom	Google Meet	Teams	

There are different groups of users and their purpose of usage differs from one group to another. In Africa, most users were confirmed using social media to keep in touch with friends or to measure the impact of services, build an audience, monitor trends, and stay informed. Others used them to read and watch online news, interact with colleagues, teach and learn, and do business. Social media is further used for online participation where users share, contribute and communicate knowledge and content on the Internet. This extends as far as use of social media for academic purposes, for which students use social media for learning, personal growth and assignments.

In the wake of Covid-19, Ugandans effectively use social media sites like X to engage and keep their online audience abreast about the dangers, prevention measures, and containment of the coronavirus pandemic. Furthermore, the majority of rural-based youth who are active users of Twitter are always engaged and well-informed about breaking news stories. The social media platform has become a site for producing and consuming breaking news stories and for interaction between citizens, journalists and politicians. In Uganda, it is on X that public discourse has flourished most, this is evidenced by the popularity of a series of "online exhibitions"[4] that have focussed on public service delivery and parliamentary spending.

As of January 2024, Uganda had about 2.60 million social media users in January, equating to 5.3 percent of the total population.[5] Social media users have increased by 40.5% from 2023. For purposes of this research, the discussion will be limited to only four social media platforms that are widely used in the country; Meta's Facebook and Instagram, then TikTok and X.

Facebook: As of January 2024, Facebook emerges as the leader in active user engagement, boasting 19.2% of internet users actively using the platform.[6] Several uses for this platform include marketing products, keeping in touch with friends and family, discovering news and current events.[7] Despite the Ugandan government blocking Facebook in 2021 during the country's general election, it is the most popular and convenient social media for many Ugandans despite availability of other networking sites.[8]

TikTok: TikTok is becoming a commonly used platform in Uganda but statistics of users in the country are scanty. Nonetheless, TikTok is a versatile platform, with a number of people using it primarily for watching and sharing short-form videos, for entertainment and humour, finding it a source of endless amusement. Others rely on TikTok to acquire new skills and discover ingenious life hacks, showcasing the platform's educational and informative potential.

Instagram: Instagram has become a popular go-to social media platform in Uganda, attracting users of the platform to engage with friends, family, and businesses through visual content. Instagram users at the start of 2024 comprised 5.3% of the internet user base in Uganda.[9] Users on this platform leverage it to explore creative content and remain abreast of emerging trends, while others predominantly utilise Instagram to follow influencers and celebrities, while others engage with the platform by sharing their own photos and preserving visual memories.

Twitter: About 2.4% of Uganda's internet users use X to follow news sources and get updates on current issues, while others use the platform to connect with like-minded individuals and participate in thought-provoking discussions and debates as well as share updates and personal thoughts

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[4] 'Humour is powerful': Cartoons take on Uganda's repressive government, Al Jazeera Media Network, https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2024/3/31/humour-is-powerful-a-ugandan-cartoonist-takes-on-a-repressive-government

[5] Data Portal 2024, https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-uganda#:~:text=Uganda%20was%20home%20to%202.60,percent%20of%20the%20total%20population.

[6] Ibid

[7] https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/news/national/open-facebook-to-allow-us-market-products-pwds-ask-govt-4460154

[8] Ibid

[9] Data Portal 2024, https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2024-uganda#:~:text=Uganda%20was%20home%20to%202.60,percent%20of%20the%20total%20population

The Conundrum of Algorithms and the LGBTQ+ Digital Space

Defining Algorithms: Algorithms determine what content users see on their feeds based on various factors, including engagement, relevance, and user behaviour. However, for LGBTQ+ individuals in Uganda, the impact of these algorithms extends beyond content curation; it influences their visibility, safety, civic participation, movement building, and access to supportive communities.

There remains much contest about the extent to which platform algorithms truly accommodate the interests of users in the global south. A 2016 study noted the presence of "algorithmic colonialism"[10] by platforms highlighting the case of then Facebook (now Meta) assuming authority over legitimate knowledge of the continent's population as part of population density map it pursued Africa through the use of computer vision techniques, population data, and high-resolution satellite imagery. The platform accompanied the exercise with statements such as "creating knowledge about Africa's population distribution", "connecting the unconnected", and "providing humanitarian aid", which many perceived as old colonial rhetoric.

Indeed, colonial rhetoric remains pervasive in Africa where colonial-era laws which criminalised and marginalised diverse sexual orientations and gender identities remain in use to this day. To date, over 30 African countries still criminalise consensual same-sex sexual activity, leading to widespread discrimination, persecution, and violations of human rights.[11] Consequently, these long standing social positions remain present and alive online and inform what is learnt by machines as part of the algorithmic processes.

However, across the globe, understanding and appreciation of algorithms and their impact on social media users - and in particular the LGBTQ+ communities remain scant. This is especially true for Africa and more so for Uganda.

Uganda, a country caught in a morality conundrum fuelled by political interests, has seen the exploitation of anti-homosexuality narratives, which have manifested online and offline. The 2023, Anti-Homosexuality Amendment Act[12] is one of the world's harshest anti-LGBTQ+ laws and includes the death penalty for "serial offenders'' or for anyone having same-sex relations with a person with a disability, a child, or of advanced age, among others, under the offence of "aggravated homosexuality." The Act added its voice to a flurry of longstanding laws that stifle movement building including through infringing upon data privacy, access to information, and freedom of expression including the Regulation of Interception of Communications Act, 2010, the Electronic Signatures Act, 2011, and the Electronic Transactions Act, 2011.

The law also criminalises[13] the vaguely worded "promotion of homosexuality." That means anyone advocating for the rights of LGBTQ+ people, including representatives of human rights organisations or those providing financial support to organisations that do so, now face up to 20 years' imprisonment.

Indeed, its re-introduction into public discourse was met with a diversity of opinions and debates, which naturally would skew narratives. More importantly, the perceived risk of being aligned with pro-LGBTQ+ expressions fuelled a culture of self-censorship not only on matters pertaining to the LGBTQ+ community but also to matters beyond as illustrated by this study.

This likely skewed and influenced what informed the algorithms that feed content to users, potentially creating an information tunnel for some, and diluting information for others, while also creating the breeding ground for misinformation and disinformation.

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[10] Algorithmic Colonization of Africa, https://script-ed.org/article/algorithmic-colonization-of-africa/

[11] Ongoing Impact of Colonial Laws on LGBT Human Rights: A Global Perspective with a Focus on the African Context, OHCHR, https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/cfi-subm/2308/subm-colonialism-sexual-orientation-oth-mofokeng.pdf

[12] The Anti-Homosexuality Amendment Act, 2023, Parliament of Uganda, https://www.parliament.go.ug/sites/default/files/The%20Anti-Homosexuality%20Act%2C%202023.pdf

[13] Ugandans Challenge Anti-Homosexuality Act, Human Righst Watch https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/12/11/ugandans-challenge-anti-homosexuality-act

Indeed, while social media platforms have played a role in providing avenues for community and kinship, with the manner in which algorithms have evolved[14] to behave, social media platforms have also become a key channel of oppression. Studies show that LGBTQ+ individuals, like people of colour, and womxn, are more likely to experience violence online than their cisheterosexual, white, and male counterparts.[15]

Algorithms by design have evolved into systems that curate, exploit, and predict user practices and identities. In doing so, they have reinforced bias that disproportionately affects marginalised communities.

Navigating the LGBTQ+ Online Experience in Uganda

Visibility is a crucial aspect of the online experience for LGBTQ+ users in Uganda, where societal stigma and discrimination often force them to conceal their identities offline. Social media algorithms, by prioritising content that conforms to mainstream norms and values, may inadvertently suppress the visibility of LGBTQ+ individuals and their narratives and this perpetuate the marginalisation and isolation, as LGBTQ+ users struggle to find representation and support within online spaces.

Offline, the LGBTQ+ community has faced threats to their well being. Threats have come from within the community, from family and friends who are homophobic, and to a lesser extent from the state until the recent adaptation of the law. Typical threats have ranged from the physical – such as torture, arrest, and "corrective" rape – to the emotional and psychosocial, including blackmail, termination of employment, eviction from home, loss of opportunity and even family banishment.[15]

By extension, the safety of LGBTQ+ users on social media platforms is inherently linked to algorithmic mechanisms. Meanwhile, where anti-LGBTQ+ sentiments are prevalent and legislation criminalises same-sex relationships, online platforms can serve as lifelines for community building and support.

However, algorithmic bias and content moderation practices may inadvertently amplify harmful rhetoric or facilitate harassment against LGBTQ+ individuals, jeopardising their safety and well-being in digital spaces. This is further aggravated by the withdrawal of access to platform information (API)[17] which would otherwise enable the sufficient study of the extent to which the bias is informed by algorithmic structures or by public narrative.

Indeed, everyday, users leave behind digital traces of behaviour as by-products of interactions with other users and entities in online paces. Consequently,[18] these digital traces hold tremendous value which can enable the investigation, among other things, of misinformation and disinformation, hate speech, polarisation, and the effects of particular interaction patterns on user's mental health and well-being. Thus, lack of such key information in particular to help address the online concerns of vulnerable communities leaves many exposed to the shortcomings of social media platforms.

As a result, the intersection of social media algorithms and LGBTQ+ users in Uganda highlights broader issues of digital rights and freedom of expression. The algorithmic filtering of LGBTQ+ content can reinforce societal prejudices and hinder the dissemination of vital information, including sexual health resources or active civic participation. This underscores the importance of advocating for algorithmic transparency and accountability to ensure that online platforms prioritise the rights and safety of all users, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

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[14] Mapping the social implications of platform algorithms for LGBTQ+ communities,
https://www.researchgate.net/publication/373780097_Mapping_the_social_implications_of_platform_algorithms_for_LGBTQ_communities
[15] Ibid
[16] Understanding Internet Freedom: Uganda's LGBT Human Rights Defenders, SecondMuse,
https://speakerdeck.com/secondmuse/understanding-internet-freedom-ugandas-lgbt-human-rights-defenders
[17] Without access to social media platform data, we risk being left in the dark, South African Journal of Science, https://sajs.co.za/article/view/17008/21174
[18] Ibid

Indeed, as far back as 2017, concerns had been raised about the role that nascent technologies play in affecting the rights of the LGBTIQ+ community. Among the controversial studies was one that highlighted the use of artificial intelligence (AI) as a tool to guess the sexual identity of people. The study[19] conducted by Stanford University also served to highlight the exclusionary nature of artificial intelligence as it excluded people of colour, bisexual and transgender people in addition to making overly broad and inaccurate assumptions about gender and sexuality.[20] Further, concerns were raised about the capacity to "out" an individual's sexual identities without their knowledge or consent.

> @Mageba_Zulu "So an algorithm can workout if someone is gay or not from a photograph, I worry, and since everyone is now moving towards using face ID, I worry. Imagine this tech in the hands of Uganda's government, where being gay is against the law …"
>
> 8:31 PM | Jan 21, 2019

Indeed, the digital landscape has greatly evolved since 2017 as have the methods through which data is collected, analysed and interpreted. As such, the increased reliance on algorithms by platforms has seen the removal of the human interface from decision-making - leaving this to machines and, consequently, leaving humans at the mercy of decisions made by machines.

A publication by the Human Rights Watch noted that Social media platforms' insufficient investment in human content moderators and their over-reliance on automation undermine their ability to address content on their platforms. Content targeting LGBTQ+ people is not always removed in an expeditious manner even where it violates platform policies, whereas content intended by LGBTQ+ people to be empowering can be improperly censored, compounding the serious restrictions LGBTQ+ people already face.[21]

As such, platforms fail to adequately address the nuanced concerns of marginalised communities as evidenced by the various platform's inability to effectively moderate content related to anti-LGBTQ+ speech in Uganda.

> @eetaemin "u can tell twitters algorithm favours extremist right wing views yesterday i searched Uganda to see what ppl are saying and nearly every tweet was celebrating that homosexuality is now punishable by death how are u even allowed to tweet that let alone get 17000 rats agreeing"
>
> 4:42 PM | Mar 23, 2023

Indeed in the month after the announcement of the Anti-Homosexuality Amendment Act, 2023, the 20th April 2023, the Human Rights Awareness and Promotion Forum (HRAPF) reported that they;

> received and handled 59 cases involving LGBTQ or suspected LGBTQ persons. Of these, 40 cases (67.8 percent) involved violence and violations targeting the victims purely on the basis of their presumed sexuality, and affected a total of 85 persons. 11 cases were cases of arrests of people based on their sexual orientation and gender identity, 14 were crimes against persons on the basis of their sexuality, and 15 were cases of evictions from rented property.[22]

[19] Deep neural networks are more accurate than humans at detecting sexual orientation from facial images, Stanford University, https://osf.io/zn79k/

[20] LGBT groups denounce 'dangerous' AI that uses your face to guess sexualityThe Guardian, https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/sep/08/ai-gay-gaydar-algorithm-facial-recognition-criticism-stanford

[21] Human Rights Watch, 2024:Questions and Answers: Facebook, Instagram, and Digital Targeting of LGBT People in MENA, https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/01/23/questions-and-answers-facebook-instagram-and-digital-targeting-lgbt-people-mena#_Toc156238253

[22] Arrests, evictions and violence: Report of violations against LGBTQ persons for the first month following the passing or Uganda's anti-homosexuality bill, HRAPF, 2023,https://t.co/2Gre5T01Uh

In response to the announcement of these findings by HRAPF on X[23], reactions included,

> **"** Kindly give evidence. Instead of assuming things.

another commented,

> **"** You should go to hell. In Uganda, we shall never discuss with Homosexuals, never. We shall crush them whether the law supports us or not. It's never proper for same sex to involve in any sexual affairs.

In another thread, reactions to a CIVICUS post[24] calling for the respect of human rights included commentary such as,

> **"** That's not a right we'll rightly grant. It's out of our order We'll protect them in our prisons.

while another wrote,

> **"** The problem is you unGodly crap chose to associate with an innocent, beautiful and natural phenomenon, the rainbow. Now merely seeing it even when it's about to or finished raining (sic rain) brings uncomfortable thoughts to most of us. Yours is human wrongs not rights.

Despite platforms highlighting their efforts on content moderation, they seem to have fallen victim to their own devices as platforms do not adequately pick up anti-LGBTQ+ content that is hidden in visual messages, non-English languages (a lot of rhetoric is shared in Luganda), as well as veiled in political and religious narratives which are popular online.

Instead, platforms appear to add to the censorship concerns that have long followed the LGBTQ+ community and affected their organising, advocacy and community efforts.

> ✕ *@Phyllees "Pepe Sexual Minorities Uganda PD says , "2021 is time for us to coin a new word to mean LGBTIQ in Uganda because social media algorithms tend to censure words like #Homosexuality #LGBTQ #Musiyazi #Kuchu making it hard to put our information across because it gets deleted."*

Platforms, despite various attempts, still fall short of ensuring the safety of LGBTQ+ users. While navigating state-imposed censorship, the community has also had to deal with platform-enforced censorship.

Despite these challenges, social media platforms also serve as powerful tools for activism and advocacy within the LGBTQ+ community in Uganda. Users leverage these platforms to share personal stories, raise awareness about LGBTQ+ rights issues, and mobilise support for social change. For some, secret online support groups are where members of the trans community have created spaces[25] to uplift one another, share stories, free advice, and help relocate members who have been evicted from their homes.

Ultimately, the link between social media algorithms and LGBTQ+ users in Uganda underscores the complex interplay between technology, identity, and human rights.

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[23] https://twitter.com/hrapf_uganda/status/1650379377622827009
[24] https://twitter.com/CIVICUSalliance/status/1641140561418518568
[25] How LGBTQ+ people in Uganda are fighting a draconian new law, Christian Science Monitor, https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Africa/2023/0830/How-LGBTQ-people-in-Uganda-are-fighting-a-draconian-new-law

Methodology
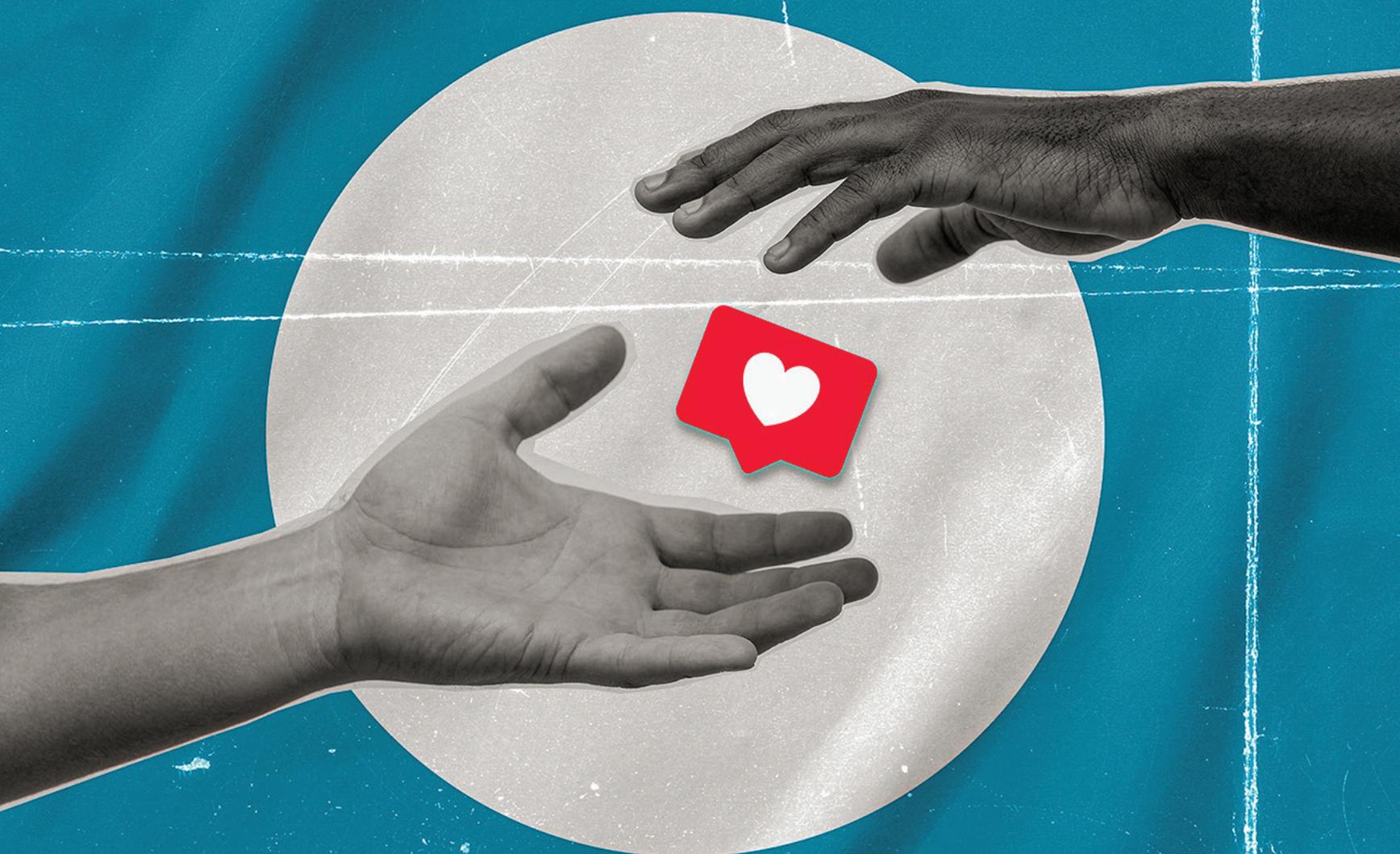
Study Design and Study Sample and Data Collection Methods

This was an exploratory qualitative research study where face-to-face interviews in the form of key informant interviews and focus group discussions were conducted. Ten people were interviewed as key informants from all the four regions alongside 4 focus group discussions in all. The participating participants came from districts of Gulu in Northern Uganda, Mbale in the Eastern region, Mbarara in the West and Kampala in the Central region.

Key informant interviews and focus group discussions were used as qualitative methods to collect data in face-to-face interviews. A total of 65 respondents were interviewed, 8 of which were key informant interviews.

This was complemented with desk research and an analysis of social media platforms.

Study Limitations

Many respondents did not fully understand the word algorithm. Their understanding was largely confined to their direct interactions with social media platforms and their perceived effects of algorithms on their online experiences.

Findings

Characteristics of the study population

Study participants were drawn from the LGBTQ+ community in the four regions of Uganda: Central, Northern, Eastern, and Western Uganda. These are people who mainly use social media platforms for various activities, including for work, organising, social interactions, knowledge building and news. Participants were asked to voluntarily participate in this study and informed consent was sought ahead of administering the 8 key informant interviews (KII) and 4 focus group discussions (FGD).

A total of 65 respondents participated in the research with an average age of 26 years old. The diversity of gender identities was as follows: 33 participants identified as female, 15 identified as male. Transgender men and women were also represented by 5 and 4 participants, respectively.
Of the remaining 8 participants, 4 participants did not conform to any gender while one participant preferred not to mention their gender and 3 others identified as non-binary people.

65
Participants

33 | Female

15 | Male

05 | Transgender men

04 | Transgender women

04 | Gender non conforming

03 | Non-binary

01 | Prefer not to mention
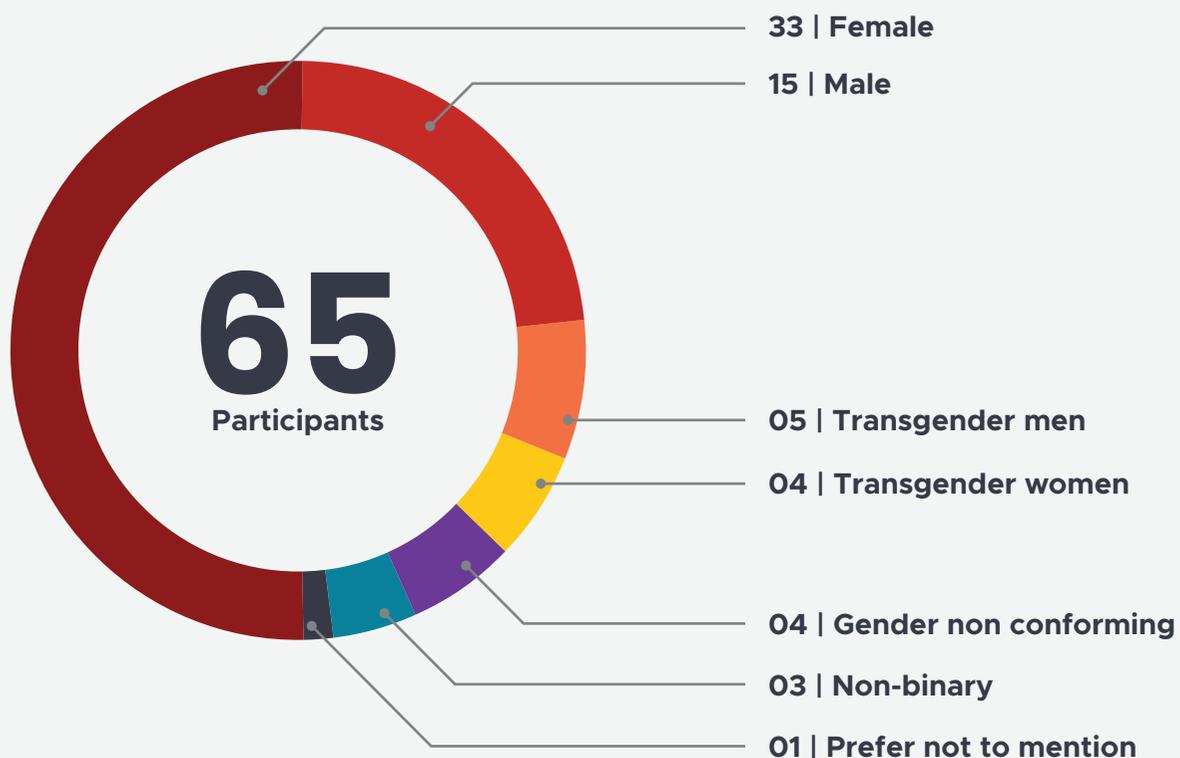
Use of social media platforms

Commonly used social media platforms that were mentioned by participants in both key informants and focus group discussions include: TikTok (most popular), Instagram, WhatsApp, Youtube, X (formerly Twitter). Facebook was not commonly used since it was blocked in Uganda in 2021, and one has to use a Virtual Private Network (VPN) to access it which is tedious for some people. Some respondents noted that VPNs consume more data and battery. This is a divergence from mainstream use in the country where Facebook remains the primary social media tool.

Platform	Popularity rank amongst respondents	Respondent Detail
TikTok	1	Surged in popularity during the Covid-19. This was in tandem with the global surge in popularity of the platform. Used as a tool for information sourcing, escapism,[26] community and growing advocacy
Instagram	2	Popular as a platform for escapism
WhatsApp	3	Popular for its instant messaging and perceived security by some.
YouTube	4	Popular due to its visual and audio capabilities. Used as a tool for information sourcing, news, global affairs, advocacy
X	5	Source of news, debate, and current concerns
Facebook	6	Affected by 2021 block on social media - limited use. When utilised, it serves as an advocacy tool, information sourcing, news, community.
Other platforms mentioned	▪ Signal and Telegram mentioned as messaging tools ▪ Grindr mentioned as a dating tool - but now blocked in the country	

Mental well-being: Respondents noted that social media served to relieve stress and enhance mental health and psychological well-being, with memes, funny videos and status updates being key avenues for these. Many respondents noted these served as "distractions from stress".

Advocacy and awareness raising: For many respondents, social media channels served as their primary tools for efforts aimed at enhancing advocacy and awareness of their work. Further to this, it is through social media that support and promotion of other organisations working in the LGBTQ+ ecosystem is most easily pursued[27].

Community building and Organizing: Respondents highlighted that Facebook has previously served as one of the primary avenues for community building and organising, especially with the earlier use of Facebook groups and secret groups.

Learning and Knowledge sharing: Youtube was mentioned as a key platform used for learning due to the ease through which information is provided when compared to long text formats.

Diversification of Tools: However it was noted that with the wide selection of tools available to users, many respondents are selective on which platform is used for what. Consideration is given to the nature of the online environment and users ie "how toxic the platform may be" as one key informant explained:

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[26] *Distraction from reality
[27] Gulu KII, Percy

> **"** I frequently utilise TikTok, Instagram, Facebook Threads and YouTube daily for personal engagements and work. I rarely use X specifically for work because it's a toxic space and Facebook because of the restrictions that require use of VPNs which is a hassle. - KII_Central Region

Impact of Social Media algorithms on LGBTQ+

Social media algorithms have had both positive and negative impacts on the LGBTQ+ community in Uganda. Below are insights shared by respondents who noted the pro and cons of social media on their online experiences and interactions:

Positive Impact

Access to Information and Resources: Algorithms have surfaced valuable information and resources related to LGBTQ+ rights, health, and support services, helping users access important resources and connect with relevant organisations and initiatives.[28] Respondents noted that LGBTQ+ individuals and organisations have benefited from social media algorithms through increased access to authentic stories and viewpoints on their realities.[29] This accessibility (in this instance, the curation of specific content through algorithms) can be especially beneficial for individuals who may be exploring their identities or seeking support in navigating LGBTQ+-related challenges as one key informant elaborated:

> **"** Algorithms can help you be able to identify who you are as a queer person. You know those times at the beginning when you have just realised you are different from how you were born sexually and you need to understand and learn more about your identity, there are organisations you can go to for support but social media becomes more helpful. Because as you look for content on queer people more social feeds on that area will come into your account, and you would love to see how other queer people behave. - KII_Northern Region

Thus, in this instance, algorithms appear to support the ease of information access through the feeds that ease the type of information a user may be interested in, "they bring in the type of information one would love to see and use".[30]

Advocacy, Activism and Knowledge Sharing: Social media algorithms were said to be powerful tools for LGBTQ+ advocacy and activism by amplifying LGBTQ+ rights campaigns, awareness-raising initiatives, and grassroots movements as LGBTQ+ people share information which in turn individual activists and organisations can collectively take action for "real world impact".[31] Some respondents argued that algorithms may prioritise content related to LGBTQ+ activism, knowledge sharing facilitating broader reach and impact for advocacy efforts and promoting social change and community building and strengthening[32]:

> **"** It is through social media platforms that I gained knowledge on how to be safe online, how to counter backlash as you know abuse online is common for us LGBTQ+ people. - FGD_Central Region

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[28] Focus group discussion_Mbale
[29] Focus group discussion_Gulu
[30] Key Informant Interview_Gulu
[31] Focus Group Discussion #2_Central
[32] Key Informant Interview_Mbarara

Visibility and Representation: Due to the amount of information on social media platforms, LGBTQ+ content shared faces a visibility struggle in some cases. Some respondents noted that while algorithms may play an oppressive role, in some instances, they also serve to increase the visibility and representation of LGBTQ+ individuals and issues by promoting content created by LGBTQ+ creators, organisations, and allies.[33] This increased visibility can foster a sense of belonging and validation for LGBTQ+ individuals who may see themselves reflected positively in social media content as one focus group discussion participant explained:

> **"** Back then we were not visible as LGBTQ+ people even our organisations were not known but now when you go online let's say Facebook you will find you get connected to our [LGBTQ+] community not only in Uganda but across the world. - FGD #2_Central.

In a separate FGD, a similar sentiment was shared about social media algorithms, increase the visibility of the existence of LGBTQ+ people in Uganda while also serving as an avenue to connect both locally and globally with various stakeholders like funders and other activists in the global ecosystem[34].

Community Building: It was established from the findings that social media algorithms can facilitate the formation and growth of LGBTQ+ communities by connecting individuals with shared interests, identities, and experiences[35]. Algorithms may prioritise LGBTQ+ content and groups, making it easier for LGBTQ+ individuals to find supportive communities and resources, especially for those in areas where LGBTQ+ physical communities may be limited. One participant has this to say in this regard:

> **"** We have been able as LGBTQ+ to build community and know that we are not the only ones who are queer people. Back then when we used not to interact with the internet, most of us thought oh, maybe I am the only one who is like this[queer]. But now I am confident that even a young queer person can find the community online. - FGD #2_Central

Fostering Allyship: Social media algorithms can facilitate the dissemination of educational content, personal stories, and advocacy initiatives that promote, empathy, and allyship within the LGBTQ+ individuals and community as a whole[36]. Exposure to diverse perspectives and experiences through algorithmically curated content can help challenge stereotypes, reduce stigma, and foster greater acceptance and support for the LGBTQ+ community[37]. A focus group discussion participant mentioned that she did not know before that their community[LGBTQ+] had allies until she began using social media and she could see content about other activists who support LGBTQ+ community both locally and across the world[38].

Amplifying LGBTQ+ Voices in Mainstream Discourse: Algorithms can amplify LGBTQ+ voices and perspectives in mainstream discourse by promoting LGBTQ+ content, news stories, and cultural representations to broader audiences. This increased visibility has contributed to greater social acceptance, representation, and normalisation of LGBTQ+ identities and experiences as one participant explained:

> **"** Facebook amplifies our voices and opinions as LGBTQ+ people. You find that it is a platform that rallies people[LGBTQ+] out there and you get to find out who is where and who is doing that. TikTok also does that, like here we upload queer content on TikTok and this has brought us together as a community. - KII Gulu

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[33] Focus group discussion #2_Central

[34] Ibid

[35] Focus group discussion #1_Central

[36] Key Informant Interview_Gulu

[37] Nazanin Andalibi, Cassidy Pyle, Kristen Barta, Lu Xian, Abigail Z. Jacobs, and Mark S. Ackerman. 2023. Conceptualizing Algorithmic Stigmatization. In Proceedings of the 2023 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems (CHI '23), April 23–28, 2023, Hamburg, Germany. ACM, New York, NY, USA 18 Pages. https://-doi.org/10.1145/3544548.3580970

[38] Focus Group Discussion#2_Central

Overall, social media algorithms can play a positive role in empowering LGBTQ+ individuals, fostering community connections, increasing visibility and representation, and promoting understanding and acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities and issues. However, it is important to recognize that these positive impacts may vary depending on factors such as algorithmic biases, content moderation policies, and the broader socio-political context in which social media operates. Efforts to address algorithmic bias, promote inclusivity, and protect LGBTQ+ users from harm are essential for maximising the positive impact of social media on the LGBTQ+ community.

Negative Impact

Targeted online harassment: Participants acknowledged that social media algorithms have been exploited to target and harass LGBTQ+ individuals through hate speech, discriminatory content, and harmful stereotypes.

A Key informant noted that there have been more evident and visible trends of online violence on social media platforms; hence, social media platforms are no longer as safe as they used to be. Hate speech targeting LGBTQ+ persons has been promoted by social media algorithms as social media platforms appear to have become less restrictive on what people can say[39]. LGBTQ+ people are targeted based on their online activity on social media and dating applications, further, they are subjected to online extortion, online harassment, doxxing, and outing[40]. A key informant mentioned heightened cases of online harassment, which took place predominantly during the time when the Anti-homosexuality bill (AHB) was passed and narrated:

> The most disturbing times that I have witnessed on social media was during the initial stages in the passing of the AHB early last year 2023 when several people shared a lot of hate speech content just to get likes and attention online. These included those who were popularly known to be liberal and LGBTQ+ community members themselves spreading the same misinformation and hate speech which was given a boost by social media algorithms. This was disheartening to me.

Meanwhile, there remained the perceived threat that content one engaged with would result in one being targeted online. Thus, some respondents opted to not engage with content due to the fear of being associated with it.

Fueling Fear: While targeted online hate speech may not be constant, it resurfaces opportunistically at times when there are heightened political tensions in the country[41]. The LGBTQ+ community and narratives around it are used as a decoy to distract from public concerns pertaining to the state.[42] Similar tactics were documented during the 2021 elections which featured online mudslinging between the ruling party and opposition actors at the cost of the LGBTQ+ community.

Mental Health: For many respondents, self perseverance was highlighted with many noting the toll that online harassment and cyberbullying can have. It was noting that for many, it is already a struggle to deal with Online harassment and cyberbullying can have significant negative effects on the mental health and well-being of LGBTQ+ individuals, contributing to feelings of isolation, anxiety, and depression[43], these were only amplified by the negative and accusatory rhetoric found in public social media spaces.

[39] Key Informant Interview_Central region

[40] Key Informant Interview_Gulu

[41] Ibid

[42] Champions of Uganda's anti-gay law blame 'homosexuals' for corruption scandal, Open Democracy, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/uganda-parliament-anita-among-corruption-scandal-politics/

[43] Fosch Villaronga, Eduard & Poulsen, Adam & Søraa, Roger & Custers, Bart. (2021). Gendering algorithms in social media. ACM SIGKDD Explorations Newsletter. 23. 24-31. 10.1145/3468507.3468512.

Limited distribution of LGBTQ+ content: While not evident to all respondents, some noted that algorithms possibly affect how LGBTQ+ content is distributed online with legitimate, well researched and educative about LGBTQ+ community ranking lower than viral information aligned with fuelling misleading narratives aligned with clickbait and the pursuit of virality.

Misinformation and Disinformation: The fear of the role that algorithms play amplifying misinformation and disinformation targeting LGBTQ+ individuals, such as false narratives about LGBTQ+ identities, health, and rights[44] was highlighted by respondents. This can undermine efforts to promote accurate information, raise awareness about LGBTQ+ issues, and combat stigma and discrimination. Algorithms can also translate into misinformation and hate speech that can lead to dangerous real-life situations and misinterpretations.

Censorship and Visibility Challenges: For some respondents, a concern about censorship or reduced visibility due to algorithmic biases was present due to content moderation policies[45]. This can limit the reach and impact of LGBTQ+ voices and content on social media platforms, perpetuating marginalisation and silencing LGBTQ+ perspectives[46]. A key informant respondent mentioned how his X account was taken down without notice. Despite numerous attempts and appeals at recovery, the account remains blocked[47]. Thus, this is perceived as an additional censorship tool in an environment that already imposes unjust restrictions on the freedom of expression and speech of the LGBTQ+ community. Laws against 'materials promoting homosexuality' or the mention of homosexuality or transgender identities in public education or any distribution of LGBTQ+ related material on social media not only isolate queer people from their communities, they shame queerness as indecent behaviour, setting a precedent for further marginalisation and undermining of human rights[48]. Many LGBTQ+ content producers in Uganda and other African nations have argued that their online content is being restricted and removed at the detriment of queer expression and sex positivity.

Algorithmic Gender Bias and Discrimination: It was established from the interviews that algorithms may inadvertently perpetuate gender bias and discrimination against LGBTQ+ individuals by reinforcing gender stereotypes, limiting exposure to diverse perspectives, or privileging content from dominant groups. Algorithmic bias can result in unequal treatment and representation of LGBTQ+ people on social media platforms, exacerbating existing gender inequalities and marginalisation. Social media platforms employ inferential analytics methods to guess user preferences and may include sensitive attributes such as race, gender and sexual orientation. These methods are often opaque, but they can have significant effects such as reinforcing existing biases such as gender stereotyping.[49] Transgender people were said to be significantly affected by algorithmic bias as they are unable to identify themselves by their gender identity online. For example, one respondent mentioned that as transgender person they have limited options when setting up accounts and are forced to either identify as male or female thus being misgendered by the platform. In a research by Fosch et.al on gendering algorithms on social media, Twitter was found to misgender about 20 percent of its users who took part in the research[50]. This shows how the lack of attention to gender in gender classifiers exacerbates existing biases and affects marginalised communities.

[44] Key Informant Interview_Gulu

[45] Focus group discussion_Mbarara

[46] Nenad Tomasev, Kevin R. McKee, Jackie Kay, and Shakir Mohamed. 2021. Fairness for Unobserved Characteristics: Insights from Technological Impacts on Queer Communities. In Proceedings of the 2021 AAAI/ACM Conference on AI, Ethics, and Society (AIES '21), May 19–21, 2021, Virtual Event, USA. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 12 pages. https://doi.org/10.1145/3461702.3462540

[47] Key Informant Interview_Central Region

[48] Ibid

[49] Fosch Villaronga, Eduard & Poulsen, Adam & Søraa, Roger & Custers, Bart. (2021). Gendering algorithms in social media. ACM SIGKDD Explorations Newsletter. 23. 24-31. 10.1145/3468507.3468512.

[50] Fosch Villaronga, Eduard & Poulsen, Adam & Søraa, Roger & Custers, Bart. (2021). Gendering algorithms in social media. ACM SIGKDD Explorations Newsletter. 23. 24-31. 10.1145/3468507.3468512.

Limited platform accountability: Participants noted that it is difficult to hold big tech companies accountable for discriminatory algorithmic practices. "Who do you talk to?" Participants noted that this is a key concern as algorithms affect how platforms treat content shared by users particularly in how content is filtered between users. In addition to this, a key informant respondent noted that there is also a wide technical divide between the creators of the platforms and users (in Uganda) causing an issue when it comes to accountability[51].

Algorithmic Amplification of Harmful Narratives: Algorithms may amplify harmful narratives and rhetoric targeting LGBTQ+ individuals, such as conversion therapy propaganda, anti-LGBTQ+ propaganda, or disinformation campaigns. This can contribute to the normalisation of bigotry, discrimination, and violence against LGBTQ+ people, posing significant threats to their safety and well-being. A key informant participant shared an example related to this challenge:

> Narratives around the AHA resulted in a shift in how algorithms behave in relation LGBTQ+ related Ugandan content as hate speech and content in vernacular or local language following the enactment of the AHA 2023 remain prevalent on social media platforms despite being reported on some like TikTok but have not been regulated. - KII_Central Region

Exclusion and Tokenization: LGBTQ+ individuals may be excluded or tokenized in algorithmically curated content, such as advertising campaigns or trending topics, reinforcing feelings of invisibility, othering, and marginalisation[52]. Tokenistic representation can also contribute to the erasure of diverse LGBTQ+ identities and experiences[53] as one participant mentioned:

> Social media algorithms have exposed LGBTQ+ people to othering, marginalisation and some sort of tokenism not because they lack information about these but because there is a lot of information that people have not had time to sieve and grow with it and therefore it affects how LGBTQ+ people behave online. - KII_Gulu

Overall, social media algorithms can exacerbate existing challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals, including discrimination, harassment, censorship, and misinformation. Efforts to address algorithmic bias, promote inclusivity, and protect LGBTQ+ users from harm are crucial for creating safer and more supportive online environments for the LGBTQ+ community.

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[51] Key Informant Interview_Central region
[52] Key informant Interview_Gulu
[53] Ibid

Discussion
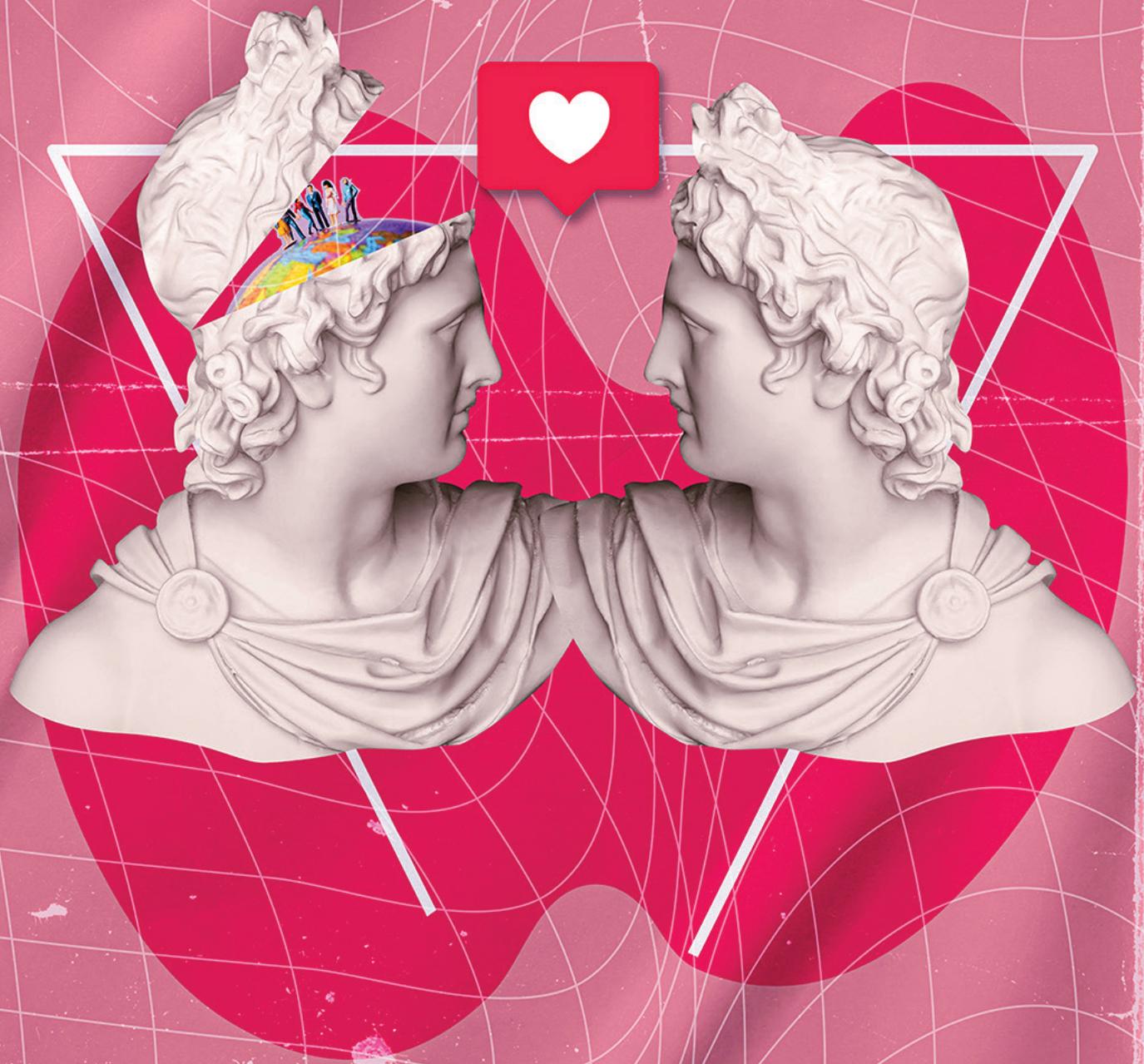
Social media platforms have grown to serve as essential channels for communication, organising at the individual and organisational levels. Despite the numerous positives associated with social media and by extension algorithms, the LGBTQ+ community continues to harbour concerns and rightfully so.

It is online where the community encounters disproportionately high levels of online abuse, a stark reality observed globally and particularly pronounced in Uganda. While digital platforms become lifelines for LGBTQ+ individuals and advocacy groups, offering avenues for empowerment, information access, community building, and networking, these are hindered by an increasingly restrictive government whose narrative appears to dominate online discourse.

The increased reliance on algorithms by platforms has removed the human consciousness from the digital ecosystem and replaced this with a solution that fails to recognise the human nuances such as language, context, bias and has consequently shrunk the online space afforded to the LGBTQ+ community in Uganda.

While these computer systems hold the potential to facilitate positive outcomes such as community and movement building, through knowledge sharing, they also harbour risks of perpetuating harms manifested offline and fed into the digital ecosystem. These harms include hate speech, exclusionary speech, misinformation, disinformation through to the amplification of the omission of sexual orientation and gender identity for LGBTQ+ individuals[54] and the propagation of harmful representations along identity lines.

By prioritising certain content over others, these algorithms may render LGBTQ+ voices and experiences invisible or underrepresented. Consequently, the harmful invisibility imposed by algorithmic biases further compounds the challenges faced by already marginalised groups, exacerbating social inequities and hindering progress towards inclusivity and equality.

Indeed, it has been noted that social media platforms' insufficient investment in human content moderators and their over-reliance on automation undermine their ability to address content on their platforms. Content targeting LGBTQ+ people is not always removed in an expeditious manner even where it violates platform policies, whereas content intended by LGBTQ+ people to be empowering can be improperly censored, compounding the serious restrictions LGBTQ+ people already face[55].

[54] Nenad Tomasev, Kevin R. McKee, Jackie Kay, and Shakir Mohamed. 2021. Fairness for Unobserved Characteristics: Insights from Technological Impacts on Queer Communities. In Proceedings of the 2021 AAAI/ACM Conference on AI, Ethics, and Society (AIES '21), May 19–21, 2021, Virtual Event, USA. ACM, New York, NY, USA, 12 pages. https://doi.org/10.1145/3461702.3462540

[55] Human Rights Watch, 2024:Questions and Answers: Facebook, Instagram, and Digital Targeting of LGBT People in MENA, https://www.hrw.org/news/2024/01/23/questions-and-answers-facebook-instagram-and-digital-targeting-lgbt-people-mena#_Toc156238253

Meanwhile, although respondents acknowledge the influence of algorithms on their daily online interactions, there seems to be a lack of comprehensive understanding regarding the true depth and scope of algorithms. Fundamentally, the term "algorithm" lacks a clear and straightforward interpretation in local languages, hindering efforts to grasp its full meaning and implications.

Therefore, just as the English language adapts to accommodate technological advancements, it is imperative that efforts are made to translate these concepts into local languages. Without such translations, the disparity in understanding between social media platforms and LGBTQ+ communities in countries like Uganda will inevitably widen. This poses a significant risk, as data from LGBTQ+ users in Uganda may continue to be collected and used by platforms to their benefit without adequate safeguards in place for the users, further jeopardising their rights both online and offline.

Recommendations

For Social media platforms
- Platforms need to provide access to data that can enable further research into the dynamics faced by LGBTQ+ users in African countries
- Platforms need to improve their content moderation practices to meet the concerns of the LGBTQ+ communities in African countries - especially when it comes to the diversity of languages presenting online.
- Platforms need to ensure that divisive content aimed at the LGBTQ+ community is swiftly taken down.

For LGBTQ+ community and Organisations
- The LGBTQ+ community needs to continue building the evidence required to push for greater platform accountability.
- The LGBTQ+ community needs to maximise all safe avenues of intervention to highlight the discriminatory practices of algorithms.
- Continued training for community members and organisations need to be conducted. Security assessments should form part of these trainings as a means of identifying any gaps that could be informed by algorithms.
- Pilot other social media platforms that have been developed by people on the African continent so as to improve them as well as use them alongside the multinational social media companies.

For Funders
- Continued funding is required to examine how platforms are reshaping the lives and practices of LGBTQ+ users in restrictive countries like Uganda. This work can extend as far as understanding the impact of self censorship, surveillance through to the tactics employed in disinformation campaigns aligned with shrinking civic space for LGBTQ communities.