

Clicking with Caution: Taking a Closer Look at the Digital Harassment of LGBTI+ People

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About Kaleidoscope Trust

Kaleidoscope Trust is a UK-based international charity fighting for a future where LGBTI+ people everywhere can live free, safe and equal lives. We are building a global movement to create this world for LGBTI+ people everywhere.

We work with political leaders in the UK and beyond to ensure global LGBTI+ issues are a priority. We ensure that activists have the resources, skills, and training they need to learn from one another in order to create an enabling environment and change hearts and minds. We bring together grassroots organisations with those in power to create that change.

Kaleidoscope Trust is a founding member of The Commonwealth Equality Network

(TCEN) and provides the operational and financial base for the network's Secretariat as its host. We have engaged in Commonwealth processes and with Commonwealth institutions, as a priority, for over a decade in support of our shared objectives with TCEN's other members.

We also host the Secretariat to the UK All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Global LGBT+ Rights, which emerged from the Parliamentary Friends of Kaleidoscope Trust, established in 2013. Kaleidoscope Trust was also a civil society co-chair of the Equal Rights Coalition from 2019-2022 and is a founding member and former co-chair of the UK Alliance for Global Equality.

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The Current Situation

What is Online Harm?

Online harm refers to behaviours that publish or spread content electronically which may negatively affect a person either physically or emotionally. Common forms of online harm include hate speech, misinformation, and the activities of extremist groups.¹ These issues are particularly relevant to discourse surrounding lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, and intersex (LGBTI+) rights, as individuals within the community are often more likely to be targeted by hate speech; misinformation

is frequently used to undermine LGBTI+ organisations and the movement as a whole; and extremist groups organise to dismantle the work being done to progress LGBTI+ rights around the world. By examining the methods and effects of online harms, this briefing aims to highlight the importance of regulation and the implementation of organisational online safety practices.

Online hate speech is a widespread problem with incidents being reported on

nearly every continent.² As defined by the United Nations, hate speech refers to offensive discourse targeting a group or individual based on inherent characteristics, such as race, religion, gender, or sexual orientation.³ This type of hate speech is particularly concerning because, unlike traditional media or face-to-face interactions, it can be easily created and shared online at a low cost and, often, anonymously. As a result, it has the potential to reach a global and diverse audience in real time.⁴ The risks associated with online hate speech increase further due to the limited resources available to address the problem.

Social media platforms rely on a combination of artificial intelligence, user reporting, and staff – known as content moderators – to enforce their rules regarding appropriate content. Moderators, however, are burdened by the sheer volume of content and social media companies do not evenly devote resources across the many markets they serve.⁵ Additionally, an investigation from ProPublica

found that some social media platforms, such as Meta, inconsistently apply their rules of regulation favouring elites and governments in order to maintain access to national markets or to protect themselves from legal liability. As a result of these processes, activists and grassroots organisations find themselves censored and unable to combat hate speech directly when it is posted.⁶ The situation is becoming even more precarious as Meta has removed fact checkers due to these processes being “too politically biased” and wanting to “dramatically reduce the amount of censorship” on the platform.⁷

Hate Speech against LGBTI+

The prolific presence of hate speech online is particularly significant for LGBTI+ people and communities, who often use the internet to explore their gender and sexuality as well as build authentic peer connections.⁸ In contexts where it is frowned upon – or even illegal – to be LGBTI+, the internet provides a space for queer people to build community. As a

1 Department for Digital, Culture, Media & Sport and Home Office. “A Summary - Online Harms White Paper”. UK Govt. Published 8 April 2019. Accessed 5 February 2025. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/605e60da8fa8f5249ee7024f/EASY_READ_Online_Harms_White_Paper_V2.pdf

2 Laub, Zachary. “Hate Speech on Social Media: Global Comparisons”. Council on Foreign Relations. Published 7 June 2019. Accessed 5 February 2025. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/hate-speech-social-media-global-comparisons>

3 The United Nations. “What is Hate Speech?”. Accessed 5 February 2025. <https://www.un.org/en/hate-speech/understanding-hate-speech/what-is-hate-speech>

4 Ibid.

5 Laub, Zachary. “Hate Speech on Social Media: Global Comparisons”. Council on Foreign Relations. Published 7 June 2019. Accessed 5 February 2025. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/hate-speech-social-media-global-comparisons>

6 Ibid.

7 Booth, Robert. “Meta to get rid of factcheckers and recommend more political content”. The Guardian. Published 7 Jan 2025. Accessed 5 February 2025. <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2025/jan/07/meta-facebook-instagram-threads-mark-zuckerberg-remove-fact-checkers-recommend-political-content>

8 Keighley, Rachel. “Hate Hurts: Exploring the Impact of Online Hate on LGBTQ+ Young People”. Taylor & Francis Online. Published 17 October 2021. Accessed 5 February 2025. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08974454.2021.1988034>

result, it is especially concerning that LGBTI+ youth are more than twice as likely to experience hate speech online compared with those who identify as heterosexual.⁹ Consequently, individuals in marginalised groups like LGBTI+ are 38% more likely to state that social media has a negative impact on people like them.¹⁰

These negative impacts frequently include increased feelings of depression, shame, and paranoia. These feelings can result in LGBTI+ individuals withdrawing in real life and losing any sense of belonging or faith in humanity.

“My friends would try to contact me, but I would decline their calls or ignore their messages. I wouldn’t come downstairs for days at a time.”¹¹

13-15 year old, questioning

“It honestly proves the view that we have not progressed in any way as a civilization or as people[;] people are horrible.”¹²

22-25 year old, gay male

LGBTI+ individuals are also uniquely impacted by online harms due to the

way that it can increase internalised homophobia and perception of self-worth as it relates to sexuality and gender identity. Additionally, LGBTI+ youth are less likely to seek help if they are not out.

“It has somewhat reinforced some of the initial feelings I had [about my sexuality]...thinking that I am broken.”¹³

22-25 year old, asexual trans male

Misinformation about LGBTI+

In addition to hate speech, social media has become a platform for disseminating damaging conspiracy theories and misinformation surrounding the LGBTI+ community. For example, LGBTI+ people are frequently and baselessly labelled as ‘groomers’ who are sexualising and indoctrinating children.¹⁴ Not only have platforms such as Meta, TikTok, and Reddit been failing to regulate this violation of their own policies – all three platforms issued public statements in 2022 stating that the use of ‘groomer’ as an anti-LGBTI+ slur violated their hate speech policies – they have been profiting from such discourse.¹⁵ Advertising is the primary source of revenue for so-

cial media companies, and they rely on high engagement content that generates click-throughs, shares, likes, and ad impressions. Therefore, the use of politically and emotionally charged content, such as anti-LGBTI+ hate speech, increases income for these companies. In the past year, Meta has profited from over 200 ads using the anti-LGBTI+ ‘groomer’ slur, profited millions off of Matt Walsh’s transphobic documentary, and made millions in ad

revenue from The Daily Wire’s anti-trans campaign.¹⁶ Similarly, prominent anti-LGBTI+ accounts – as well as far-right media outlets – portray gender-affirming care for trans youth as child abuse and mutilation. This narrative has resulted in threats and acts of violence towards healthcare providers, as well as legislative attacks retracting the basic rights of transgender people across the US.¹⁷ These discourses have devastat-

16 Ibid.

17 Squirrel, Tim and Davey, Jacob. “A Year of Hate: Understanding Threats and Harassment Targeting Drag Shows and the LGBTQ+ Community”. Institute for Strategic Dialogue. Published 2023. Accessed 5 February 2025. <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Understanding-Threats-and-Harassment-Targeting-Drag-Shows-and-the-LGBTQ-Community.pdf>

9 Nominet Social Impact. “Digital Youth Index Report 2023”. Accessed 5 February 2025. <https://digitalyouthindex.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/Digital-Youth-Index-2023-report.pdf>

10 Ibid.

11 Keighley, Rachel. “Hate Hurts: Exploring the Impact of Online Hate on LGBTQ+ Young People”. Taylor & Francis Online. Published 17 October 2021. Accessed 5 February 2025. <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/08974454.2021.1988034>

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 GLAAD. “Social Media Safety Index 2023”. Accessed. 5 February 2025. <https://assets.glaad.org/m/7adb1180448da194/original/Social-Media-Safety-Index-2023.pdf>

15 Ibid.



ing real-world impacts on individual lives as experienced by a UK drag performer who was portrayed as a ‘groomer’ online, leading him to lose work, receive death threats, and being targeted by individuals wishing to make “citizens’ arrests.”¹⁸

Social media platforms are currently doing an inadequate job enforcing policies to protect users, resulting in discussion that is directly harmful to marginalised communities, such as LGBTI+ people. For instance, while Meta’s hate speech policy prohibits attacks based on a person’s protected characteristics – such as gender identity – a report from the Institute for Strategic Dialogue in 2022 found that transphobic content was present in 80% of top posts discussing Lia Thomas, a transgender swimmer.¹⁹ Meta’s 2025 policy update loosened protections further by removing fact checkers and hate speech regulators from the platform as well as shifting priority towards “violent and high severity violations” rather than “harmless political content” such as hate speech and misinformation. Additionally, X’s Hateful Conduct Policy states that users: “may not directly attack other people on the basis of race, sexual orientation, gender, [or] gender identity.” However, the Center

for Countering Digital Hate found that daily-use gay and transphobic slurs rose by 58% and 62%, respectively, on X after Elon Musk took over.²⁰ Furthermore, in 2024, X removed their policy prohibiting intentional “misgendering or deadnaming of transgender individuals.”²¹

Real-world Impacts

These online discussions are essential to offline attacks. In research conducted by the Institute of Strategic Dialogue in 2023, it was discovered that every offline mobilisation – whether it be a protest or coordinated bomb threat – had been accompanied by online discussion and coordination, such as direction from high-profile influences to attend and protest an event.²²

Here, we can see how there are very real resulting harms to LGBTI+ people online, not only limited to the traumatic psychological impact of being relentlessly exposed to slurs and hateful conduct, but also violence. Researchers have been documenting this phenomenon for years in relation to other forms of online hateful rhetoric targeting other communities.²³

There is ample evidence of violence being prompted by anti-LGBTI+ social media content. In August 2023, for instance, Chaya Raichik, founder of several far-right and anti-LGBTI+ social media accounts, tweeted over a dozen times about Boston Children’s Hospital and its gender-affirming care facilities, falsely claiming that they were providing gender-affirming hysterectomies to minors. As a result, doctors and nurses received death threats and the hospital received a bomb threat.²⁴

The prevalence and impact of online harms against LGBTI+ people is growing to such an extent that it is even being adopted by state actors. State actors and private individuals across the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region have entrapped LGBTI+ people on social media and dating applications and subjected them to online extortion, online harassment, as well as outing.²⁵ This is done by the creation of fake social media profiles – particularly on same-sex dating apps such as Grindr – and then using discovered profiles as grounds for searching an individual’s devices on suspicion of homosexuality or gender variance, which is illegal in these contexts.²⁶ Across the MENA region, security forces have searched LGBTI+ people’s phones by forcing them

to unlock their devices under duress and/or by threatening them with violence.²⁷ These actors have also relied on illegitimately obtained digital photos, chats, and similar information in prosecutions.²⁸ In a 2023 report, Human Rights Watch documented 29 arrests and prosecutions using these tactics in Egypt alone.²⁹

*“[The police] took me to the ‘morality ward’ and kept me until 4am in a tiny room with no food or water. They took my phone and belongings. When they came back with a police report, I was surprised to see the guy I met on Grindr is one of the officers. They beat me and cursed me until I signed papers that said I was ‘practicing debauchery’ and publicly announcing it to fulfil my ‘unnatural sexual desires.’”*³⁰

Yazid, 27-year-old gay man from Egypt, July 17, 2021

The research surrounding the scope and impact of online harms tells a story of a widespread, global problem. In a report by Ofcom – the UK’s regulatory and competition authority for the broadcasting, internet, telecommunications, and postal industries – 32% of people have witnessed, or been subjected to, online hate

18 Ibid.

19 Issue One. “Big Tech’s Broken Promises”. Last Updated November 2024. Accessed 5 February 2025. <https://issueone.org/projects/big-techs-broken-promises/>

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Squirrel, Tim and Davey, Jacob. “A Year of Hate: Understanding Threats and Harassment Targeting Drag Shows and the LGBTQ+ Community. Institute for Strategic Dialogue. Published 2023. Accessed 5 February 2025. <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Understanding-Threats-and-Harassment-Targeting-Drag-Shows-and-the-LGBTQ-Community.pdf>

23 GLAAD. “Social Media Safety Index 2023”. Accessed. 5 February 2025.<https://assets.glaad.org/m/7adb1180448da194/original/Social-Media-Safety-Index-2023.pdf>

24 Ibid.

25 Atik, Christina. “All This Terror Because of a Photo: Digital Targeting and Its Offline Consequences for LGBT People in the Middle East and North Africa”. Human Rights Watch. Published 21 February 2023. Accessed 5 February 2025. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/02/21/all-terror-because-photo/digital-targeting-and-its-offline-consequences-lgbt>

26 Ibid.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

speech.³¹ Of that number, 25% of hate crimes witnessed were directed towards transgender people and 23% against a specific sexual orientation.³² Similarly, 73% of Bulgarians have experienced hate crime or hate speech online.³³ Of that 73%, only 3% reported to the police, with 47% stating they did not because they did not want to disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity to the authorities.³⁴ Furthermore, in Spain, 48% of people reported experiencing hate crime or hate speech online, with 24% receiving threat of outing and another 24% being outed.³⁵ Of the 10% that reported their instances to the police in Spain, 46% were dissatisfied due to the police having little knowledge around LGBTI+ issues.³⁶

The risk of the internet being used to spread hate speech or harmful misinformation rises during times of conflict. In times of crisis, finding legitimate information and avoiding false information can be extremely challenging.³⁷ Social media algorithms accelerate the spread of false in-

formation. These algorithms are designed to show content that engages users, which means sensational and emotionally charged posts can get more visibility.³⁸ Consequently, online harms contribute to making LGBTI+ rights increasingly vulnerable to the many attempts to roll them back.

Digital Self-harm

Combatting the damaging impact of on-line harm on LGBTI+ individuals is difficult due to the scope of the problem; however, the challenge is complicated when LGBTI+ individuals seek out, or even contribute to, online hate speech as a form of digital self-harm. There are three types of digital self-harm used by LGBTI+ people:

1. Self-cyberbullying: when someone sends hateful and abusive messages to their own social media account or phone number, often to make it look like other people are sending them.³⁹

2. Conflict seeking: when someone looks for people online who hold views that are strongly against their values and beliefs to get into debates or arguments with people who will fight back with equal passion.⁴⁰

3. LGBTI-phobic content checking: when someone keeps checking websites, hashtags, and accounts on social media where they know they will find LGBTI-phobic content.⁴¹

Digital-self harm is growing to be increasingly serious: according to the LGBT Foundation, 22.5% of young adults report suicide and self-harm-related internet use, 70% of young adults with suicidal intent report related internet use, and approximately a quarter of children who present-

ed to hospitals following self-harm, as well as those who died of suicide, reported suicide-related internet use.⁴²

The impact of both hate speech and digital self-harm is particularly concerning considering that research studies show a significantly elevated risk of poor mental health among LGBTI+ individuals compared to cisgender and heterosexual individuals.⁴³ Depression, anxiety, suicidality, and general distress demonstrate the largest mental health disparities by sexual orientation and gender identity.⁴⁴ This disparity is largely due to the unique discrimination and stigma-related stress experiences by LGBTI+ people and results in a greater risk of hate speech and digital self-harm negatively impacting the community.⁴⁵

31 Ofcom. "One in three video-sharing users find hate speech". Published 24 March 2021. Accessed 5 February 2025. <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/online-safety/illegal-and-harmful-content/one-in-three-video-sharing-users-find-hate-speech/>

32 Ibid.

33 Hubbard, Luke. "Speak Out: A Survey of Online Anti-LGBT+ Hate Speech and Hate Crime". European Union. Accessed 5 February 2025. <https://safetobe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Survey-online-hate-crimes-report.pdf>

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Ibid.

37 UNHCR. "Safe Online - A guide to being protected on the internet". Accessed 5 February 2025. <https://help.unhcr.org/czech/safe-online/>

38 Ibid.

39 LGBT Foundation: A Guide for LGBT+ People: Digital Self-Harm. Accessed 5 February 2025. https://lgbt.foundation/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Digital20Harm20Resource_print.pdf

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

43 Branstrom, Richard; Hughes, Tonda; and Pachankis, John. "Global LGBTQ Mental Health". Springer Nature Link. Published 26 January 2024. Accessed 5 February 2025. https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-031-36204-0_3

44 Ibid.

45 Ibid.



What Next?

Social Media as an Advocacy Tool

Some may argue that online harms are an unfortunate side effect of freedom of expression, and that regulating online content would be an act of censorship. However, online harms restrict LGBTI+ individuals' right to freedom of expression. Homophobia and transphobia online deters LGBTI+ people from expressing themselves freely online (particularly about LGBTI+ matters) and from moving through online spaces. This is evidenced in Galop's Online Hate Crime Report 2020

which states that, as a result of online abuse, 38% of LGBTI+ victims of online abuse used their online accounts less.⁴⁶ Additionally, 22% removed LGBTI+ information from their profiles or left social media sites altogether.⁴⁷

This restriction of expression is especially significant when we consider how the internet is used for the progression of social movements. Through real-time communication, community building, and increased fundraising capacity, the internet plays a key role in modern day

⁴⁶ Hubbard, Luke. "Online Hate Crime Report: Challenging online homophobia, biphobia and transphobia". Galop. Published 10 June 2020. Accessed 5 February 2025. <https://galop.org.uk/resource/online-hate-crime-report-2020/>

⁴⁷ Ibid.

activism.⁴⁸ For example, in China, the state rarely publicly discusses LGBTI+ rights and same-sex marriage is not recognised. However, activists use social media to share their discontent. Activists such as Qiu Bai, a Chinese lesbian university student, sued the Ministry of Education of China because she found that the content of her textbooks pathologise homosexuality.⁴⁹ While traditional media did not publish information about this case due to censorship from the government, social media played a key role in publicising the case and generating public interest and debate.⁵⁰ Here, we can see how social media can play a very positive role and therefore infer how censorship can be harmful to the broader movement and how it can hinder overall progress in LGBTI+ rights.

Despite safety concerns, 5.52 billion people worldwide continue to use the internet.⁵¹ This is largely because of the benefits of internet services as well as due to the embedded nature of the internet in our social and work lives without plausible alternatives. As a result, processes to

prevent and mitigate the impact of online harms are essential.

State Action

Unfortunately, we cannot rely on platforms themselves to protect us. As explored above, platforms are ill-equipped to combat online harms due to the sheer volume of the problem, inadequate resourcing, and a prioritisation of protecting themselves from legal liability.⁵²

There is increasing recognition by governments that regulation of online content is necessary, leading to various policy developments worldwide. For instance, the UK Parliament has introduced the Online Safety Bill, which aims to make the internet safer for users by requiring providers to regulate legal but harmful content on their platforms.⁵³ Similarly, the European Parliament is currently considering the proposed Digital Services Act (DSA), which addresses content moderation in the EU. This act would mandate content-reporting and appeal procedures following the removal of content or users, as

well as require large platforms to collaborate with “trusted flaggers” who report harmful content.⁵⁴ However, there are also alarming policy developments occurring, as seen in Brazil and India, where stricter regulations for online content monitoring are being explored. The Brazilian government has issued Provisional Measure 1068, which restricts social media platforms from removing content, allowing removal only in cases of nudity, violence, narcotics, and incitement to crime.⁵⁵ This measure prevents platforms from removing misinformation. Meanwhile, the Indian government is considering an approach that expands regulation to cover a wide range of content, including material that threatens the sovereignty of the state. This could involve using algorithmic systems to monitor and remove harmful content and tracing encrypted messages to limit online anonymity.⁵⁶ Activist groups have claimed that these measures aim to suppress dissent against the government, labelling the situation as “digital authoritarianism.”⁵⁷

Recommendations

While these policy developments are ongoing, in the meantime, organisations should consider the following good practices to help protect their workers. First, appointing a responsible person is essential. Every organisation should have someone who understands the risk to users posed by a service and who is responsible for deciding how you manage the online safety of your users.⁵⁸ Secondly, providing training ensures that everyone in the organisation is aware of how to keep users safe and understands how to identify credible and trustworthy sources in order to stop the spread of misinformation.⁵⁹ Thirdly, raising awareness of online harms throughout the organisation is crucial. All stakeholders need to be aware of the risks and their impact. This knowledge also needs to be considered and integrated into the development of new projects.⁶⁰ Finally, offering mental health resources can help mitigate the effects of online harms as well as prevent issues such as digital self harm, organisations should provide mental health support.⁶¹

48 Chauhan, Aditya. “The Role of Technology in Shaping Social Movements”. Sage Pub. Published 30 September 2024. Accessed 5 February 2025. <https://advance.sagepub.com/users/828898/articles/1227680-the-role-of-technology-in-shaping-social-movements#:~:text=The%20present%20generation%20also%20employs,well%20as%20build%20a%20community>

49 Hu, Liqi. “Analysis of LGBTQ Groups and Movements Based on Social Media”. Atlantis Press. Published in 2020. Accessed 5 February 2025. <https://www.google.com/url?q=https://www.atlantis-press.com/article/125949027.pdf&sa=D&source=docs&ust=1738758653928213&usg=AOvVaw3kGgg0WDET4R-IQ9eVJRC6>

50 Ibid.

51 Statista. “Number of internet and social media users”. Published October 2024. Accessed 5 February 2025. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/617136/digital-population-worldwide/>

52 Laub, Zachary. “Hate Speech on Social Media: Global Comparisons”. Council on Foreign Relations. Published 7 June 2019. Accessed 5 February 2025. <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/hate-speech-social-media-global-comparisons>

53 Trengrov et. al. “A critical review of the Online Safety Bill”. Science Direct. Published 12 August 2022. Accessed 5 February 2025. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S2666389922001477>

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

58 Local Government Association. “Must Know: Online Harms”. Published 12 July 2021. Accessed 5 February 2025. <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/lga-online-harms>

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid.



Conclusion

The rise of online harms, particularly hate speech and misinformation, poses a substantial threat to LGBTI+ individuals and the broader movement. These harms not only contribute to increased mental health struggles of LGBTI+ individuals, but also fuel real-world violence and stunt

activists efforts. Addressing online harms requires a multi-faceted approach with a combination of government policies, stronger platform regulations and accountability, as well as individual protection and education led by organisations.

