

CYBER BULLYING

A POSITION PAPER BY SUCCESS CAPITAL

**A review of young MSM (men who have sex with men) experiences
with online bullying in Botswana.**

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Introduction

Online bullying has increased over the years in line with the increase in public discourse on LGBTIQ+ issues in Botswana. Strategic litigation increases in visibility and even notable social/entertainment personalities have sparked debates in both traditional and online media. The latter being timeous, feedback has often reflected an overall intolerance of LGBTIQ+ issues and exercising of freedoms of expression in society. This position paper was a result of a clear gap in online bullying impacting the lives of LGBTIQ+ youth in Botswana. It provides a glimpse into an under resourced and under served aspect of LGBTIQ+ experiences.

Approach

An anonymous survey was chosen as a tool for data collection. This is to safeguard participants' identity and allow for them to share their experiences without restriction. A snowball recruitment was used, ensuring trust and rapport for potential participants to feel comfortable in the data collection process. All participants identified as MSM by birth and identity. All were under the age of 30. Only in person primary data was used in ensuring that captured experiences are appropriately reflected. Success Capital Organisation is intentional in ensuring the lived experiences can inform better advocacy and policy making.

Findings

80% of participants acknowledged having been bullied online. 62.5% of those who were bullied, managed to get some form of justice, remedy or protection from the bullying. Those who did not, shared how they believed the law did not take online bullying issues seriously. This could be attributed to a difficulty in understanding the legal framework for digital conduct and behavior. One response shared that a perpetrator used a fake social media account, which can further complicate an online bullying situation. Although online bullying is never identified as one of the prominent challenges LGBTIQ+ youth face, it is prevalent and glaring in daily implications.

All participants believed there should be some form of protection from cyber bullying of sexual minorities. Reasons include the vulnerabilities of given the intolerant laws and environment they influence. The overall perceived lack of implementation in laws and policies is cited as another reason why society might be encouraged to bully LGBTIQ+ online. Whether affirmative or discriminatory of sexual minorities, laws and policies remain far off from lived experiences. All forms of bullying, notably physical and digital; are a daily norm for participants. Participants believed that the strengthening of laws can lead to better recourse, including the tracing and arresting of perpetrators. This could pose a risk for other members of the LGBTIQ+ community as in some instances, they can be perpetrators.

Many sexual minority experiences within the LGBTIQ+ community do not feel safe. Although they might find some safety in not having to face perpetrators in person, intolerance and hate speech still cause harm. Online bullying often hurts and aggravates stress for MSM youth, with many feeling helpless when experiencing it. Participants feel disrespected and belittled when subjected to online bullying. Some instances of online bullying invoke suicidal thoughts, given the high levels of intolerance and not being accepted in society. The most notable of experiences was subject to online tabloid fodder; being accused of intergenerational sexual relations and publishing of nude photographs for public consumption.

In all instances of cyber bullying there was no access or seeking for psychosocial support or services. All participants seem to navigate cyber bullying and its impact alone. There seems to be little opportunity for reflecting and working through the harm done. This is a clear gap not exclusive to cyber bullying, but the overall experiences of the LGBTIQ+ community. Social media only reflects or aggravates societal experiences.

Conclusion

Online bullying is a major contributor to how MSM youth can freely access information, express themselves and connect. Given the intolerant and complex social and legal environment in Botswana;

there are limitations to how harm can be prevented or mitigated online. More importantly, mental health is a under served and under resourced aspect of lived experiences impacting the wider LGBTIQ+ community. This position paper highlights some of the experiences that perpetuate the stigma, discrimination and hate experienced by MSM youth. This requires a better understanding and focus in future civil society and state programming.

Recommendations:

- a) Understanding digital experiences of LGBTIQ+ youth in relation to human rights and development for better alignment to policy and law making.**
- b) Social media user policy strengthening to prevent and mitigate online bullying.**
- c) Social media being used to educate society on sexual identity and orientation issues to eliminate the ignorance and misinformation that influences online bullying.**
- d) Stricter repercussions for perpetrators that can embolden the rights of those vulnerable to online bullying.**
- e) Strengthening of sexual minority civil society to safeguard sexual minority rights online, particularly because they are uniquely positioned to response to Botswana's context specific issues.**

Our Position

Success Capital Organisation recognizes the over 160% cellphone penetration in Botswana, along with over 800000 facebook users alone. This reflects a wide demographic that can be influenced or that can influence the experiences of LGBTIQ+ individuals across the country, social divides, economic disposition and other factors. Young people increasingly use social media throughout the day, with interests and preferences being collated in social media algorithms and digital predictive functions. Artificial intelligence, privacy, permissions and regulations are unclear aspects that further compromise and exasperate experiences of LGBTIQ+ youth. These are challenges that cannot be resolved without better understanding and concerted resources in building participatory solutions that can mitigate the risks and better protect the rights of LGBTIQ+ youth online. This position paper was produced with no direct funding but made possible as a result of another research initiative supported by AmplifyChange. Success Capital Organisation strives to make the most of limited resources, respond to emergent issues mid-project/year and where possible, exceed limited M&E parameters. This position paper is evidence of that.