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Social Studies**

The Erasmus logo is a stylized, cursive script of the word "Erasmus" in a dark grey color.

**THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA ON THE SELF-EXPRESSION OF  
THE LGBTQIA+ COMMUNITY IN UGANDA**

A Research Paper Design

by:

***EFRANCE NABALOGA***

***538563***

MASTER OF ARTS IN DEVELOPMENT STUDIES

Major:

SPD

Proposed Supervisor:

ARUL CHIB

Proposed Second Reader:

KARIN SEIGMANN

The Hague, The Netherlands

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***Inquiries:***

International Institute of Social Studies  
P.O. BOX 29776  
2502 LT The Hague  
The Netherlands

t: +31 70 426 0460  
e: [info@iss.nl](mailto:info@iss.nl)  
w: [www.iss.nl](http://www.iss.nl)  
fb: [http://. facebook.com/iss.nl](http://.facebook.com/iss.nl)  
Twitter: [@issnl](https://twitter.com/issnl)

***Location:***

Kortenaerkade 12  
2518 AX The Hague  
The Netherlands

## **CONTENTS**

Acknowledgement	5
Abstract	6
Relevance to Development Studies	8
<b>Chapter 1</b>	<b>9</b>
1.0 Introduction	9
1.1 Contextual Background to the Study	10
1.2 Research problem	12
1.3 Justification and relevance of this research	14
1.4 Chapter Outline	15
<b>Chapter 2</b>	<b>16</b>
Theoretical and literature review	16
2.1 Role of Social Media on LGBTQIA+ community	16
2.1.1 Non-use of social media	18
2.2 Theoretical approach	21
2.3 Research questions	25
<b>Chapter 3</b>	<b>26</b>
Methodology and Methods	26
3.1 Study Design	26
3.2. Participants	26
3.3 Data collection tools	28
3.4 Data analysis	28
3.5. Ethical choices, political and postionality	29
3.6 Limitations of the study	30
<b>Chapter 4</b>	<b>32</b>

Empowerment of Social Media to Lgbtqia+ Individuals	32
<b>Chapter 5</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Chapter 6</b>	<b>46</b>
Conclusion	46
REFERENCES	49
APPENDICES	53
Appendix I: Interview Guide Protocol for LGBTQIA+ Individuals	53
Appendix II: Consent to participate in a Research Study	55
Appendix III: Highlights of the Homosexuality Bill (2023)	56

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## Abstract

Lesbians, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex, and Asexual (LGBTQIA+) people in Uganda often encounter human rights violations and injustices from stigma and discrimination. Müller et al. (2021) found that 61.3% of sexual and gender minorities have reported experiencing violence during their lifetimes. Moreover, Uganda's Anti-homosexual Act (2023) includes provisions that criminalise same-sex activities as unnatural offenses carrying a potential penalty of life imprisonment. Even in countries where homosexuality is not legally criminalised, gender and sexual minorities frequently encounter discrimination and stigma, with Uganda being no exception to this trend. However, there exists a dearth of data concerning the real-life experiences of LGBTQIA+ individuals after the signing of the Bill in Uganda. This study aims to address this gap by contributing to the expanding body of knowledge on gender and sexual minorities in Uganda with a specific focus on exploring the role of social media in the self-expression of the LGBTQIA+ community. The study was interested in how the self-expression of the LGBTQIA+ community changes after the signing of the Anti-homosexuality bill on the 26<sup>th</sup> March, 2023. The based on qualitative data that was collected from the LGBTQIA+ community who were using social media to express themselves. The study used the mobile non-use theoretical framework to inform the qualitative research design and methodology. The data was collected from ten (10) LGBTQI+ individuals through online interviews. The interview transcripts were analysed to reveal significant the changes in the use of social media by members of the LGBTQI+ communities. The findings unveil the different ways through which social media empowers LGBTQIA+ community in Uganda and in particular their self-expression on social media before the signing of the bill. Three 3 ways including information sharing, coming out and advocacy were identified. In response, the study identified four strategies inductively and they were *distancing*, *deletion*, *blocking*, and *departure*. These strategies were termed as (Non-) use practices as advanced by Chib et al. (2021). While they proposed 8 strategies that vulnerable could respond to online hostile environment, this study found only four of them to

have been adopted by non-binary community in Uganda. These strategies were more absolute as individuals tend to select them in situations where the power imbalances in their relationships to sociostructural enforcers is greater (Chib et al., 2021). Future research can establish a better understanding of how effects actualise by conducting research on family members, government agents, and NGOs.

**Key words: Social Media, LGBTQIA+, Community, Self-expression, Uganda,**

## **Relevance to Development Studies**

My study sought to understand how non-binary people in Uganda used social media before the signing of the bill and how has their self-expression changed after the signing of the bill into law on 26<sup>th</sup> March, 2023. Through this, I will inform the development of policies that are more inclusive and responsive to the needs of LGBTQIA+ community. Also, my study is relevant to global debates on human rights and social justice as the experiences of the vulnerable community in Uganda are not unique and many other countries especially in Africa and Asia face similar challenges. The findings will help gain understanding on the challenges and opportunities that come along social media being used as a tool for self-expression and generally creating an environment that is safe for the marginalised community in Uganda.



# Chapter 1

## 1.0 Introduction

The study examines the role of social media on the self-expression of the LGBTQIA+ community in Uganda. Specifically, the researcher will understand how these marginalised people were empowered before the signing of the bill and the response adopted by these non-binary community after the bill was signed into law on the 26 May, 2023. Worldwide, there are more than 70 nations that chose to categorise same-sex sexual conduct or its promotion as unlawful acts. In 66 countries, legal domains consider private, consensual same-sex sexual engagement as criminal conduct, while 41 of the nations criminalise private, consensual sexual interaction between women using statutes against ‘lesbianism,’ ‘intimate relations with an individual of the same gender,’ and ‘flagrant indecency.’ Even within legal jurisdictions that do not openly criminalise women, arrests or the threat of arrests have been imposed on lesbians and bisexual women. Roughly 14 countries criminalise the gender identity and/or presentation of transgender individuals, employing so-called ‘impersonation,’ ‘cross-dressing,’ and ‘disguise’ regulations. Also, many other nations target transgender individuals through a group of laws that outlaw same-sex activity and disturbances to public order. There are also 12 countries with legal jurisdictions where the death penalty is enforced or, at the very least, a potential consequence for private, consensual same-sex sexual involvement. Among these, a minimum of 6 countries actively enforce the death penalty – namely Iran, Northern Nigeria, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, and Yemen. The option of imposing the death penalty is legally available in Afghanistan, Brunei, Mauritania, Pakistan, Qatar, the UAE, and Uganda (Human Dignity Trust, 2023).

On the 21st of March, 2023, the Ugandan Parliament ratified a piece of legislation that intensifies the legal repercussions against individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex within Uganda. The newly enacted Anti-Homosexuality bill introduces a life sentence for

consensual same-sex activities among adults, which were already deemed unlawful, and introduces the possibility of the death penalty for what it terms “aggravated homosexuality.” This pertains to cases where same-sex acts involve minors or individuals with disabilities, or instances where substances such as drugs or alcohol might impair judgement. The bill criminalises activities that advocate for homosexuality with potential penalties of up to 20 years of imprisonment. The bill explicitly seeks to safeguard the “traditional family” through various measures (The Anti-Homosexuality Act, 2023). This section will consist of the contextual background to the study, statement of research problem, research questions and objectives, the research problem, theoretical approach, methodological strategies, original contribution, justification of the study, the scope and limitations of research and possible practical problems, ethical and political choices and personal involvement.

## **1.1 Contextual Background to the Study**

Uganda adopted laws that considered homosexuality a crime, brought in during colonial times from Britain. The colonialists did not value the “Traditional African Family” in Uganda and did not create these laws to protect it. They viewed the traditional African family as inferior to their monogamous family structure, considering it uncivilised and morally wrong. This viewpoint was evident in the well-known 1917 case of *R. v. Amkeyo*, where customary marriages were dismissed as mere transactions for acquiring wives.<sup>1</sup> Today, with various economic, social, and political challenges in the country, homosexuals in Uganda are often scapegoated and blamed as the primary threat or the real problem in society.

The new law against homosexuality targets not only individuals who identify as homosexual but also those who support or fund advocacy efforts for LGBTQIA+ rights. This law imposes severe penalties including significant fines and up to three years of imprisonment, for any person in a position

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<sup>1</sup> *R v AMKEYO* (1917) EALR 14

*R V Amkeyo* was a case that basically discussed the evolution of English Customary law and common law

of authority who fails to report a homosexual individual within 24 hours of learning about them. The law burdens family members to spy on each other and threatens relationships beyond family, such as an LGBTQIA+ person seeking confidential advice from their priest or doctor, as the law requires these professionals to breach trust and confidentiality by reporting them to the police within 24 hours. The law puts individuals like a mother trying to understand and accept her child's sexual orientation at risk of being arrested for not reporting her child to the authorities. Likewise, teachers, priests, local council members, counselors, doctors, landlords, elders, employers, members of parliament, lawyers, and others would face similar consequences. In addition, the law silences human rights activists, academics, students, donors, and non-governmental organisations – limiting the space for civil society. Furthermore, the bill undermines the media's essential role in reporting freely on any issue (The Anti-Homosexuality Act, 2023).

Almost 68 countries have jurisdictions that criminalise LGBTQIA+ individuals including 64 that have in place laws that criminalise the community and more than 30 countries in Africa alone (Statista, 2023). Non-binary people in these countries face discrimination, social stigma, harassment, physical violence, exclusion, and even improvement in their daily lives (BBC News, 2022).<sup>2</sup> This creates an environment of fear and isolation for many vulnerable people who may feel as if they have nowhere to turn for support and the fear of being persecuted. In other circumstances, there are collective rapes committed against lesbians and killings of members of non-confronting gender in different states despite the calls for freedom and equality (Koraan & Geduld, 2015; Delia, 2011). The lack of legal protections and societal acceptance lead to loss of identity, sense of belonging and self-esteem calls for other means of survival. One of these means is through the use of social media as a tool to create and strength the LGBTQIA+ community worldwide.

Worldwide, through social media platforms such as Tiktok, Grindr, Twitter, Jack's, Facebook, Scruff, Her, Romeo, and Instagram, marginalised

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-43822234>

individuals can connect with one another, share their experiences, and advocate for their rights. It has also been used to organise LGBTQIA+ events and protests such as pride marches and rallies, and to raise awareness about non-binary issues. Several individuals have tested their self-expression and identity through using online platforms because it is able to locate LGBTQIA+ community specifically (Mohd, 2018). Many individuals have used social media to share their experiences and increased visibility and representation. Others have used it to connect and build supportive networks, while some have used it for advocacy and activism with hashtags and campaigns going viral to raise awareness about issues affecting their community.<sup>3</sup> Because marginalised individuals experience rejection and find hardship obtaining support in their offline community, social media platforms help them to build friendships with like-minded people and maintain online connections by expressing their authentic identity safely (Chan, 2021; Brandt & Carmichael, 2020). On 21 March 2023, Uganda's parliament passed a law that would criminalise identifying as non-binary and it is among 32 nations in Africa that ban same-sex relationships, where punishments range from imprisonment to the death penalty.

Studies have shown that social media has both benefits and risks (Olu, 2017). Social media usage is well-documented to be linked to increased perceived social support (Byron et al., 2019). However, there is growing evidence suggesting that social media usage is associated with lower self-esteem, loneliness, and poor sleep quality (Keheller, 2009). While some studies have revealed that social media usage was associated with representation, activism (Leanna, 2017). However, few studies have explored the self-expression of the LGBTQIA+ community after the signing of the anti-homosexual bill.

## **1.2 Research problem**

The LGBTQIA+ community is oppressed in Uganda and this is now formalised by legislation. The Ugandan President Yoweri Museveni signed a bill

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<sup>3</sup> <https://online.maryville.edu/blog/a-guide-to-social-media-activism/>

criminalising same sex conduct, including potentially the death penalty for those convicted of “aggravated homosexuality” into law. The Anti-Homosexuality Act of 2023 violates multiple fundamental rights guaranteed under Uganda’s constitution and breaks commitments made by the government as a signatory to a number of international human rights agreements. Uganda’s penal code already punishes same-sex conduct with life imprisonment – a criminal offense that it rarely prosecuted – but the new law creates new crimes such as, the “promotion of homosexuality” and introduces the death penalty for several acts considered as “aggravated homosexuality.” In addition, anyone advocating for the rights of same-sex individuals including representatives of human rights organisations or those funding organisations that do so, can face up to 20 years in prison for promoting homosexuality. Discrimination and violence against the non-binary community is already prevalent in Uganda and after the Ugandan government passed the scrapped Anti-Homosexuality Act, people faced arbitrary arrests, police abuse, loss of employment, evictions by landlords, reduced access to health services because of their gender identity.<sup>4</sup>

Before, the signing of the Bill, the LGBTQIA+ community in Uganda was working to promote acceptance through activism, representation, and advocacy through various platforms. Just like countries that use social media to create legal acceptance by using it to connect with friends and advocating for their rights. Cheng and Ding (2020) found that gay-specific social networking platforms like Blued were used to search for health information by sexual minority men while others used it for self-discovery and identity. Research has found motivations for using social networking applications (like Grindr, Scruff, and Romeo) to include exploring the same-sex community and maintaining friendship networks (Zervoulis et al., 2020). For vulnerable people, social media fulfills the needs for sexual and romantic relationships. In most places around the world, attitudes towards non-binary are changing from more conservative to becoming more liberal. The world is becoming more

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<sup>4</sup> <https://www.voaafrica.com/a/uganda-arrests-men-for-practicing-homosexuality-/7010184.html>

accepting – moving from being more discriminative to more empowerment. But, in Uganda, it is going from a place of more empowerment to a place of more discrimination. In March 2023, the anti-homosexual bill that criminalises LGBTQIA+ people was ratified creating a harsh environment for LGBTQIA+ community in Uganda. Yet, most of the literature focuses on the benefit and discriminatory aspects of social media. The focus of my study is to understand how people react online to being criminalised overnight due to the bill.

### **1.3 Justification and relevance of this research**

Despite significant progress in the promotion of rights of the LGBTQIA+ community in countries such as the USA and European countries, the vulnerable community continue to face social stigma, violence, discrimination, and exclusion in many parts of the world. Also, while social media has undoubtedly played a positive role in strengthening the same-sex community in countries with freedom and equality for these marginalised individuals, they also face a set of challenges such as online harassment, hate speech, and using social media puts them on the risk of being ousted to their family, friends, community, and employers. However, social media has provided a space for the gay community to share their stories and advocate for their rights. In Uganda, the non-binary individuals used social media platforms as a means of self-expression, connecting with supportive communities, and raising awareness about their rights and experiences. My study seeks to understand how they used social media before the signing of the bill and how has their self-expression changed after the signing of the bill into law on 26<sup>th</sup> May, 2023. Through this, I will inform the development of policies that are more inclusive and responsive to the needs of vulnerable communities. Also, my study is relevant to global debates on human rights and social justice. As the experiences of the same-sex people in Uganda are not unique and many other countries especially in Africa and Asia face similar challenges. The findings will help gain understanding in opportunities that come along social media being used as a tool for self-expression and generally creating an environment

which is safe for the same-sex individuals in Uganda. There are many multiple ways of making the lives of LGBTQIA+ people better such as political campaign, advocacy groups, and policy influence. But another way is to see how they can cope online and this is the focus of my research.

## **1.4 Chapter Outline**

In the first section of my RP introduces my study, present the contextual background and the statement of the research problem. Further, it elaborates the justification of the study describing why it is necessary to carry out this study. Also, the research questions and objectives clearly presented, including the current state of academic field in my research area.

My second chapter presented the theory that guides the study and provide reasons why it is necessary to adopt it. It also makes a review of the existing literature on the area of my study. In this review, the study presents the research gaps that need to be addressed.

The third chapter presents the kind of methodology I intent to use to complete my study, in which the methodology is linked to theoretical perspective that informs the study. The nature of data that is needed to carry out and mention the plan in place to collect, analyse and present that data.

The findings of the study are presented in chapter four and five, since the study findings was analysed thematically and has two research questions, the researcher presented what participants said about the research questions and adding their voices helped to obtain initial understanding of the study. In this chapter, the researcher also discussed the findings with what other scholars have done in line with my topic.

Finally, chapter six drew conclusions for the study and gave recommendations on what could be done to improve practices in the study.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Theoretical and literature review**

#### **2.1 Role of Social Media on LGBTQIA+ community**

LGBTQIA+ individuals active on social media platforms engage in continuous socialisation due to the capacity of social media to facilitate extension, establishment, and renewal of previous friendships within their social circle (Pempek et al., 2009). Young people employ various online methods to connect with fellow LGBTQIA+ individuals for the purpose of friendship. This includes both those who reside in close proximity as well as those who are geographically distant (Harper et al., 2015). Online chatrooms, mobile applications, and social networking sites are the primary channels that marginalised individuals use to establish connections, either with younger or older men transitioning from virtual acquaintances to real-life partners (Hamargrper et al., 2015). The LGBTQIA+ community has harnessed the potential of social media as a means of information dissemination within their collective, particularly through platforms such as social networking sites, blogs, and discussion forums. These platforms provide avenues for people who identify as heterosexual but are grappling with a “confusing identity” to access information, shape their sense of identity, and understand the norms and roles of the LGBTQIA+ community (Pingel et al., 2012).

Social media users like those on Facebook, Tiktok, Twitter, Instagram and others share their current status, emotions, activities, and sentiments within their own feed, as opposed to posting directly on another user’s timeline (Bazaorva et al., 2015). Those who engage in social media often update others about their activities by modifying their “current status,” a feature prominently displayed at the top of their profile (Pempek et al., 2009). Both Facebook and Twitter offer similar functionalities that allow users to share their statuses. Sponcil and Gitimu (2013) found that students employed a variety of methods to communicate with their friends and family on social networking platforms. While wall posts and status updates are the most common ways of communication, individuals also used private messages and image



uploads. It is likely that posting wall posts and status updates is perceived as a more convenient and expedient method of communication compared to sending private messages or sharing photographs.

The use of social media by the LGBTQIA community is a valuable avenue for them to establish connections and engage with one another. In the era preceding technological advancements, many same-sex individuals used to physically meet and socialise in venues like bathhouses, cruising parks, and public restrooms. Moreover, the introduction of a singular application known as “Grindr” revolutionised their interactions, enabling them to connect just as effortlessly as using popular apps like WhatsApp (Van De Wiele & Tong, 2013). Internet applications and social networking platforms are easily accessible to a wide range of individuals. Grindr was exclusively developed for gay and bisexual men, serving as a dating and proximity-based application. The use of Tumblr to explore youth intimacy unveiled the advantages of leveraging social media for same-sex relationships. Using Tumblr, the LGBTQIA+ community found a welcoming environment that creates a sense of belonging and facilitated the formation of relationships among vulnerable individuals, allowing them to bond (Hart, 2015).

The use of social media has brought anonymity where individuals engage without revealing their true identities. Anonymity, as defined by Goddyn (2001), involves the absence of named, identified, or known authorship or origin, lacking individuality, distinctiveness, or recognition. This anonymity often enables people to adopt false identities or to present themselves in a more authentic manner. However, alongside the ability to assume multiple identities, the usage of social media has given rise to a phenomenon known as cyber stalking, whereby anonymous users engage in stalking behaviour directed at someone’s online profile (Gan & Jenkins, 2015). This occurrence stems from the personal information shared by users on their profiles. Harper et al. (2015), these platforms have provided numerous opportunities for gay and bisexual individuals to explore and develop their sexual orientation identity, particularly within them being queer.

### **2.1.1 Non-use of social media**

A study by Brubaker et al (2016) found that some LGBTQIA individuals left using Grindr because they eliminated distractions. In their study, some LGBTQIA+ individuals described self-realizations and others reiterated Grindr's incapability to facilitate appropriate connections. One of the quotes in the paper reads:

“People don't actually know what they want most of the time, so Grindr may be very good at getting you ... outside your bounds, but then after a while you begin to understand what you do and don't want, and suddenly Grindr's very bad at helping you find that. (Jacob)” (Brubaker et al., 2016)

A similar study by Choi et al. (2011) found that non-binary individuals indicated that they actively avoid situations where they might experience racism. The decision to disassociate from social settings involved how the men perceived they would be treated at certain places. Experiences of sexual racism among gay and bisexual men of color have significant repercussions. Zamboni & Crawford (2007) revealed that African-American LGBTQIA+ who encounter racism within gay communities encounter challenges related to their sexuality and relationships. This includes difficulties in finding a partner, maintaining emotional connections, and facing issues like premature ejaculation. In addition, Chae & Yoshikawa (2008) found elevated levels of depression and instances of engaging in unprotected sex among gay and bisexual men who identify as Asian. In Uganda, non-binary individuals in media is largely characterised by negativity – depicting them in a pitiful manner, resorting to stereotypes and lacking sensitivity, respect, and consideration for their privacy.

The loose privacy and security leakages of social media have given rise to issues such as the proliferation of fake profiles and cyber stalking. These concerns generate a sense of insecurity within the LGBTQIA+ community, impacting their willingness to establish friendships through these platforms

and thus, non-use. Also, the increase in anonymous interactions on social media further deters marginalised individuals from engaging in friendships due to the uncertainty it brings. The same social media platforms also expose the same-sex community to the judgments of others. Like in other countries, LGBTQIA individuals remain vigilant about the content they post as they are continuously confronted with the need to be cautious in their online interactions (Sushama et al., 2021).

Whittier (2012) argues that the public disclosure of stigmatised identities impact individuals both emotionally and cognitively contributing to shifts in personal identity and influencing the beliefs of observers about the stigmatised group. This agrees with the concept of visibility politics aiming to bring about change by making a group's collective identity and perspective publicly visible (Whittier, 2017). Roberts (2005) defines visibility as the full and accurate perception of individuals by others providing them with self-identity, authenticity, and credibility. Lewis and Simpson (2010) present visibility and invisibility as having advantages or disadvantages. Lollar (2015) contends that visibility empowers individuals – granting them the ability to speak, control their perception, and be heard. In contrast, research indicates that invisibility puts marginalised groups at a disadvantage – denying them power, voice, and recognition (Buchanan & Settles, 2019; Lewis & Simpson, 2010; Simpson & Lewis, 2005). Foucault suggest that power operates through visibility and knowledge, shaping control and counter-control. While visibility humanise marginalised groups, evoke empathy, and support action, it also has the potential to create a perception of difference or “otherness,” leading to prejudice (Frank, 2017). The concept of the “other” involves individuals or groups intentionally positioned outside the societal norm defined by faults and susceptible to discrimination (Staszak, 2008). Sociologists use the idea of otherness to illustrate how social identities are constructed – illuminating that the “other” is not merely someone outside the group but intentionally situated there by the dominant group in society leading to processes of othering (Salma, 2020).

The perception of being different often subjects marginalised individuals to increased surveillance, a phenomenon termed hypervisibility (Settles et al. 2019). Hypervisibility results in individuals being recognised for their ‘otherness’ or deviation from the norm (Settles et al., 2019). Correlated with hypervisibility is a loss of control over how individuals are perceived, heightened scrutiny, and magnification of their failures (Brighenti, 2007; Kanter, 1977, 2008; Lewis & Simpson, 2010; Settles et al., 2019). Within the visibility and invisibility, individuals strategically decide when to blend in and be invisible or when to be visible creating a nuanced engagement with others (Stead, 2013). In situations where visibility poses threats to marginalised groups, some individuals opt for strategic invisibility as a form of resistance (Lollar, 2015). This strategic invisibility reflects a conscious choice by individuals to navigate systemic constraints, maintaining agency by keeping certain aspects of themselves unknown or their physical presence unseen (Lollar, 2015). However, managing visibility through strategic invisibility comes with trade-offs, impacting one’s sense of authenticity and belongingness within a social group or organisation (Settles et al., 2019). In this study, LGBTQIA+ individuals as an underrepresented marginalised group lacking societal acceptance and recognition, may experience invisibility in terms of personal identities or capacities, yet face hypervisibility due to gender markers and sexual orientation that set them apart from the dominant group (e.g., binary norms, sexual codes, heterosexuality). This hypervisibility intensifies negative experiences as the ‘other,’ leading some individuals to choose invisibility depending on the context, concealing their authentic selves.

While, literature has shown the progress that social media has contributed to the self-expression of vulnerable community, few studies have been done in a country where there is law that prohibits any same sex activities including its promotion. Thus, this will seeks to understand how the self-expression of the LGBTQIA+ community change after the signing of the bill.

## 2.2 Theoretical approach

The theoretical perspective that the study based is discussed here to answer the research questions.

In the study, the concept of mobile media non-use as an expression of agency advanced by Chib et al (2021) was employed. According to this perspective, mobile media non-use becomes a means for individuals to assert their agency, resist dominant narratives, and express their authentic selves in the digital landscape. The study explores how individuals' deliberate decisions to disengage or limit their use of mobile media platforms not only reflect their autonomy to societal norms but also serve as a powerful form of self-expression. According to Chib et al (2021) refraining from or minimising reliance on mobile media, individuals resists the pressures of conformity and challenge societal norms that dictate constant connectivity. This conscious decision to limit engagement becomes a form of expression – allowing people to communicate their values and personal boundaries. In addition through intentional limited use of mobile media platforms, individuals assert their agency and make deliberate choices about how they express themselves in the digital realm, thus unmaking the identity created.

The conceptualisation of mobile (non-)use as an expression of agency emphasises the necessity for individuals to actively choose whether and how to abstain from use (Sambasivan et al., 2009; Satchell & Dourish, 2009). Beyond a simplistic understanding of agency, the study view a range of agentic strategies driven by individual motivations within specific sociostructural contexts, each yielding (dis)empowerment outcomes. Motivations for (non-)use are many, with some LGBTQIA+ individuals abstaining from mobile media to publicly reject consumerist culture (Portwood-Stacer, 2013). However, this act of (non-)use is not isolated; it creates reactions from social audiences showing how the dialectical tensions and interactions between individual choices and how society responds (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Giddens, 1984).

Chib acknowledges (non-)use not only as a straightforward expression of agency but also as a response to sociostructural constraints. For example, LGBTQIA+ individuals on dating apps may quit the platform due to unwanted interactions, illustrating how (non-)use provides individuals a feeling of control over digitally mediated circumstances in the face of oppression (Chan, 2018). Also, (non-)use is not without consequences; it provokes sociostructural responses. Pei (2019) notes instances where LGBTQIA+ individuals were punished by others in their lives for engaging in “hidden mobile social spaces” deemed transgressive.

As individuals enact agentic practices, including mobile-enabled strategies of (non-)use, they continually renegotiate the delicate equilibrium between agency and structure. This process, characterised by ongoing dialectical tensions, unfolds in daily life, where agentic acts provoke sociostructural responses, and vice versa. These communicative practices of (non-)use, in sometimes eliciting sociostructural responses, simultaneously affirm the potential for social transformation, both empowering and disempowering.

Mobile use is conceived as varied and visible contrasting starkly with the expected total absence of use in the case of mobile media (non-)use. However, Chib et al recognises that (non-)use strategies are many.

#### *Contextual (Non-) Use vs. absolute nonuse*

Rather than viewing the absolute lack of access to mobile media as the absence of agency, Chib et al. proposed that the choice to relinquish mobile use can be a conscious decision to explicitly accept social inequalities. This may manifest in environments where marginalised individuals choose not to disrupt societal norms. Also, mobile (non-)use is not always absolute but can be selective and context-dependent, involving intermittent (non-)use and abstaining from specific functions, platforms, or connections with certain users (Baumer et al., 2018).

#### *Invisibility as a continuum*

The invisible nature of mobile (non-)use allows LGBTQIA+ individuals to develop strategies to avoid harassment and oppression. For example, vulnerable individuals refrain from posting certain content on social media to avoid potential discrimination. In another way, mobile (non-)use can also be visible, noticed by other users when content is deleted or when they have been blocked on mobile platforms. This visible (non-)use may provoke a societal response but also reflects a form of resistance, such as LGBTQIA+ individuals employing specific strategies to navigate online spaces (Manning et al., 2019). This is illustrated in the figure 2.1.

	Contextual			Absolute
	Distancing	Deletion	Blocking	Departure
	<b>Definition:</b> meaning the lack of desire to engage with certain users	<b>Definition:</b> erasing existing digital traces	<b>Definition:</b> abrupt cessation of contact with certain users	<b>Definition:</b> Leaving mobile use completely (relative to a certain platform)
	<i>I reply messages from social media apps late to avoid being asked many questions. (Hikion, lesbian, 25years)</i>	<i>I decided to delete all my posts related to LGBTQIA+ topics and associations. (Victor, Gay, 29years)</i>	<i>I started blocking anyone who seemed even remotely suspicious or could pose a threat. I didn't want unknown entities prying into my life, especially when the consequences could be severe. (Dan, Gay, 35years)</i>	<i>The more show myself online, the more I risk myself to the authorities. Some people have already been arrested because of their past posts. (Kamukama, gay, 31years)</i>
Visible				

**Figure 2.1. Illustration of Chib’s model**

**Source: Chib et al. (2021) pg. 19<sup>5</sup>**

The non-use model in Figure 2.1 was adopted from Chib et al. (2021) and it is based on the graduations of mobile media (non-)use from contextual to absolute. Along the visible strategies, they suggested a number of strategies: distancing, deletion, blocking, and departure from which marginalised individuals may choose to use social media platforms. These strategies may be used in combination depending on the challenges that individuals encounter, however, it should be noted that they capture different aspects of (non-)use. The model illustrates that individuals tend to adopt absolute measures of

<sup>5</sup> Chib et al. (2021) ‘Mobile Media (Non-)Use as Expression of Agency,’ *Mass Communication and Society* 24(6): 19, DOI: 10.1080/15205436.2021.1970187

(non-)use especially where the power repercussions exist and lead to increased backlash especially when less absolute (non-)use strategies have been noticed. More visible strategies lead to increased oppression and plant the seeds of sociostructural transformation. The model was adopted for this research based on Chib's et al. (2021) assertion that, "Mobile Media (Non-)Use Typology can be applied to people from various walks of life" (pg.20.)

Mobile media non-use in this study refers to the understanding of the decision of individuals to refrain from or limit their use of mobile media platforms. Chib et al. (2021) views mobile media non-use as not a passive absence of engagement; instead, as an active expression of agency. Individuals who choose to disengage their use of mobile media are asserting their autonomy, resisting dominant narratives, and expressing their authentic selves in the digital landscape. This intentional decision to avoid or minimise reliance on mobile media is seen as a form of self-expression – letting individuals to communicate their values, personal boundaries, and resistance to societal norms/pressure. Positively, mobile media non-use goes beyond use versus non-use. It indicates that non-use ranges from selective non-use to absolute non-use. Contextual non-use involves making conscious decisions about when and how to engage with mobile media while absolute non-use involve a complete avoidance of these platforms. Furthermore, it considers the visibility of non-use. Some individuals may choose to make their non-use noticeable, sending a message to their social environment. Others may opt for a more invisible form of non-use to evade societal pressures and control.

The study employs this framework to explore how these acts of (non-)use contribute to the negotiation of agency in the digital landscape. It shows that non-use is not a one-sided action; it triggers reactions from social audiences highlighting the interactions between individual choices and societal responses. This approach is important for understanding the complexities of mobile media (non-)use and its potential impact on social transformation.



## **2.3 Research questions**

With the objective to understand the role of social media on the self-expression of the LGBTQIA+ community in Uganda. The following research question and sub-questions were proposed.

### ***Main question***

How to make the live of LGBTQIA+ people better after the signing of the anti-homosexuality bill?

### ***Sub-questions***

1. How did social media empower the LGBTQIA+ individuals before the signing of the anti-homosexuality bill in Uganda?
2. How have LGBTQIA+ people responded on social media to the signing of the anti-homosexuality bill in Uganda?

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology and Methods**

This section presented the methods through the data collected was collected and analysed. It entailed the study design, participants, tools for data collection, and analysis of data, and ethical choices, political and postionality.

#### **3.1 Study Design**

A qualitative study of the role of social media on the self-expression of the LGBTQIA+ community in Uganda was conducted, comprising data collected via in-depth interviews. The study used in-depth interviews with LGBTQIA+ individuals who were using social media to express themselves before the signing of the bill. The interviews were semi-structures and a funnel and probe technique was employed (Minichiello et al., 2008).

#### **3.2. Participants**

The study used purposive sampling technique to identify the specific characteristics that my participants must possess. Participants were selected purposely because they would be talking from personal experience about a topic that they knew well and, therefore, would be motivated with an incentive to participate (Morgan & Krueger, 1998). In addition to convenience sampling method, snowball sampling was also used. Snowball sampling method is a technique used to find subjects through referrals by other subjects, whereby the first subject refers to the second who gives a name of the third and so on (Johnson, 2014). Some participants were able to refer other LGBTQIA+ individuals to be part of the study during the data collection process which helped increase the sample group. Snowball sampling was valuable for identifying participants within a potentially hard-to-reach community like LGBTQIA+ individuals. According to Vasileiou, Barnett, Thorpe, and Young (2018), the appropriateness of the sample is of primary importance further asserting that qualitative samples are purposive, selected by virtue of their capacity to provide rich relevant information on the phenomenon under

investigation. The sample comprised of 10 participants who self-identify as members of the LGBTQIA+ community. The individuals who identify as LGBTQIA+ using social media either with or without LGBTQIA+ flags or on their profiles were targeted. The researcher began by identifying the social media platforms commonly used by same sex community in Uganda like Facebook, Tiktok, Twitter, and Instagram. She then searched for users who identify as LGBTQIA+ and use keywords such as Uganda, LGBTQIA+ and activism to identify my potential participants. Then a message was sent to these individuals introducing the study by explaining its purpose, requesting to participate, expected duration of the interview session, and how the researcher intends to use their responses. The interested participants were asked to confirm their willingness to participate in the study and then they were invited to participate the researcher then agree with them when it is appropriate for them to do the interview.

Specific eligibility criteria for the participants were as follows: aged 18 and above, willingness and consent to participate in the study, and self-identity as members of the LGBTI community. The sexual identities of participants were lesbians = 3, gay = 4, bisexual = 1, heterosexual = 2. The gender identities were transgender = 3, female = 3, male = 2 and intersex = 1.

**Table 3.1. Table of interviewees**

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Gender identity</b>	<b>Sexual identity</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Place of residence</b>
Kazini	Male	Gay	26	Kampala, Uganda
Jona	Female	Lesbian	22	Canada
Jeboah	Intersex	Heterosexual	25	UK
Victor	Transgender woman	Gay	29	Kampala, Uganda
Kamukama	Transgender woman	Gay	31	USA
Hikion	Female	Lesbian	25	Kampala, Uganda
Arisa	Male	Bisexual	38	Kampala, Uganda
Kems	Female	Lesbian	23	Nairobi, Kenya
Dan	Transgender woman	Gay	35	South Africa
Megs	Intersex	Heterosexual	26	UK

A total number of 10 participants were interviewed for this research. All the names used in this paper have been anonymised and do not reflect their real identities.

### **3.3 Data collection tools**

The study used in-depth interviews to collect data from individuals who identify as LGBTQIA+. Interviews help provide a deeper understanding of social phenomena than quantitative methods could provide (Silverman, 2013). The interview guide directed the topics of interest, but the participant and the interviewer was free to explore ideas as they arise. Participants were asked to indicate how they had been using social media to express them, describe how using social media platforms help them express their non-binary identity or connect with others and participants were asked to indicate examples of how their self-expression on social media changed since the signing of the bill. This helped to move discussions into specific examples and details relevant to the participant's experiences. The flexibility of interviews allowed for more elaboration of questions and helped to sort questions in themes (Bryman, 2016). The interview lasted 30-45minutes and was digitally recorded for transcription, the transcriptions was sorted and cleaned to identity details. The study also collected pictures from social media platforms while observing anonymity of data showing evidence of how LGBTQIA+ individuals were using social media before the signing of the bill.

### **3.4 Data analysis**

Recorded interviews were transcribed accurately, and any information that revealed a participant's identity was removed from the final transcript. The collected data was analysed using deductive thematic analysis methods to identify themes with the objective of developing subcategories that described their interpretation of the responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The researcher organised transcripts familiarising themselves with all the data set and journalising to make note of participants comments. This is supported by Braun and Clarke (2006) who argued that researchers should familiarise themselves

with the data in depth and content. I read the transcripts many times to get a clear understanding of each participant's lived experience and this facilitated the definition of codes (Oliveira et al., 2013). I assigned codes to highlighted statements, which described the idea in the text (Flick, 2004). After, I identified the relationships between codes and creating categories where I combined the codes into different categories and putting them into my initial themes. The generated themes were repeatedly reviewed many times and fine-tuned to ensure they explained the data in line with the coded data. The themes identified are presented in the subsequent chapters.

### **3.5. Ethical choices, political and postionality**

I decided to study the role of social media on the self-expression of the LGBTQIA+ community in Uganda because of my understanding of the societal values in the country. Having grown up in Uganda, I have witnessed the complexities surrounding LGBTQIA+ issues and the unique challenges faced by the community in an area where homosexuality is highly stigmatised and criminalised. Even before the bill's signing, gay couples were discriminated against and stigmatised; therefore, this study is deeply rooted in my lived experiences and cultural understanding of Uganda. I sought, thus, to understand how the self-expression of the LGBTQIA+ community in Uganda has transformed following the signing of the anti-homosexual bill. Has social media provided platforms provided alternative spaces for LGBTQIA+ individuals to express themselves authentically, share their experiences, and mobilise for social change?

I adopted an approach that incorporated both anonymisation and participants' choices regarding their level of visibility. During the informed consent process, participants were informed about the potential risks and given the opportunity to indicate their preferences for how they would like to be represented. This ensured that participants had control over their visibility – whether they chose to be anonymous or be identified based on their personal

motivations. I also avoided repeating quotes from a similar participant. I ensured that either written or oral consents were accepted and I ensured withdrawal from taking part in the study be voluntarily.

### **3.6 Limitations of the study**

The participants were selected based on specific characteristics potentially excluding certain perspectives in the LGBTQIA+ community. The sample was not a representative of the entire LGBTQIA+ individuals in Uganda who use social media for self-expression. The process of identifying participants relied on individuals who actively identify as LGBTQIA+ and expressed themselves on social media. However, the researcher tried to use snowball sampling to minimise this by identifying individuals that have been referred to by a participant. Individuals who accepted to respond and participate had particular experiences that differed from those who did not participate. To overcome these challenges, I explained to the participants the purpose of the study and ethical safeguards that my study was following to encourage participants to engage.

Also, using snowball sampling to identify potential participants within the LGBTQIA+ community created homogenous sample because in this method, there is a tendency for participants to refer others who share similar experiences and characteristics. Thus, homogeneity limits the sample diversity. However, the inclusion criteria designed for the study intended to capture a range of sexual and gender identities.

Another limitation is that, my study used in-depth interviews to collect data allowing participants to explore ideas as they arise, however, the interview session only lasted 30-45minutes [maximum was 42minutes] which limited the richness of the data collected. A crucial challenge was that individuals hesitated to openly identify as LGBTQIA+ or engaged with a researcher they perceived as linked to Ugandan law enforcement team. This resulted in difficulty to find individuals willing to share their experiences openly and honestly due to fear of being arrested. I overcame this by engaging with

LGBTQIA+ advocacy groups with a history of supporting the community to reduce mistrust.

# Chapter 4

## **Empowerment of Social Media to Lgbtqia+ Individuals**

The findings here unveil the different ways through which social media empowers LGBTQIA+ community in Uganda and in particular their self-expression on social media before the signing of the bill. Addressing research question one, I identified three 3 ways including information sharing, coming out and advocacy. Self-expression of the LGBTQIA+ community has been studies before (Abrue & Kenny, 2017; Zhang et al., 2021; Byron et al., 2019). However, the chapter relies on data obtained from study participants.

### ***Information sharing***

Many participants engaged in information sharing on social media platforms. This is an empowering practice which contains a range of communicative strategies and involve disseminating important information through various forms such as written posts, status updates, and textual description. Individuals actively contribute to the collective knowledge of the community by sharing news articles, personal reflections, and links to pertinent resources, creating awareness and education. One participant stated that:

Jona: “I used to share news on Tiktok, Instagram, and Facebook’s timeline.” (Lesbian, 22years)

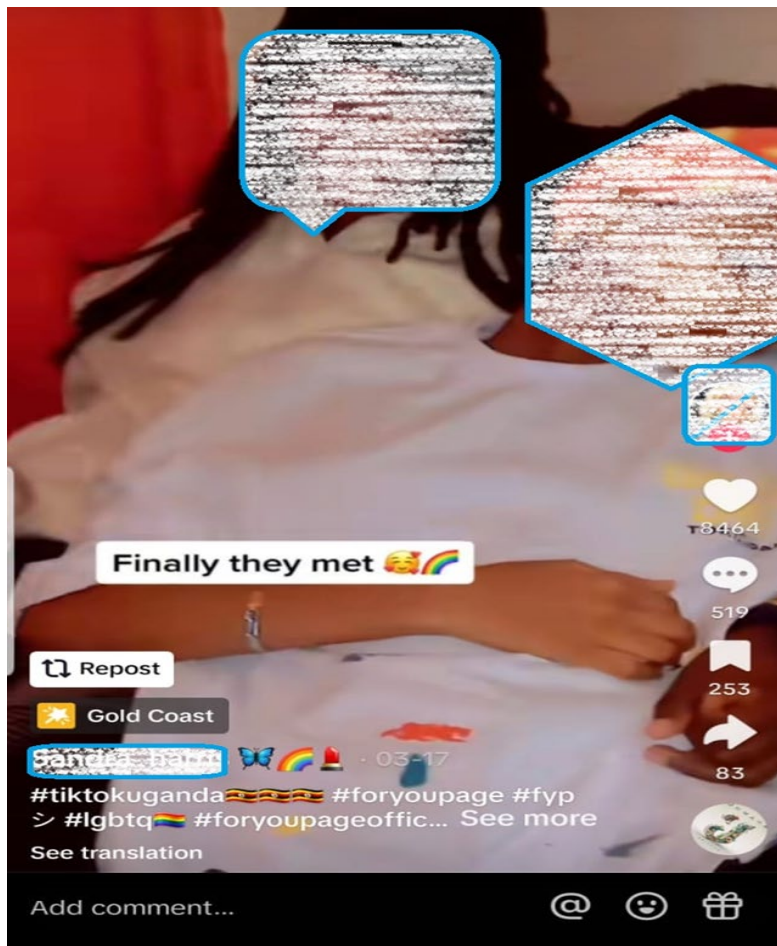
The use of visual content, such as images, infographics, and memes, adds a vibrant dimension to information sharing, making complex topics more accessible and shareable. Live streaming and video content further allows for real-time engagement, Q&A sessions, and the sharing of personal narratives. The practice goes beyond individual efforts to include community-wide collaboration, involving the promotion of events, the sharing of external content from known reputable sources, and the initiation of hashtag campaigns. This approach to information sharing not only educates and informs but also strengthens the sense of community and collective empowerment within the LGBTQIA+ community on social media platforms.



Information sharing manifests in three informational social support strategies, text based communication, visual content sharing, and community engagement.

Visibly, LGBTQIA+ community enacted *text based communication* as a form to share information online. During the interviews participants mentioned sharing information through written posts or status updates on platforms such as Facebook, Tiktok, SnapChat, Instagram, Whatsapp, and Twitter. Others used it to share LGBTQIA+ events or awareness campaigns. As one participant shared:

Arisa: “If I used WhatsApp to involve in casual chit-chat as I use these platforms to get in touch with my friends for work-related discussions or general conversations.” (Bisexual, 38years)



Picture showing a couple sharing their love story with their friends on Tiktok.

Social media served as an active medium for self-expression and exposure with activities such as posting status updates, sharing thoughts, and uploading content. This finding concurs with Urista et.al, (2009) noted that young adults in the US used social media to connect and communicate to their friends. The study also agrees with Specht (1986) who established that social media offers potential for density, in that the actors in social media network have a higher potential of knowing other actors in that network.

The second form of sharing information is seen in LGBTQIA+ individuals sharing *video contents online*. Many used images and memes to share information. While others used online platforms to share live streams, video content, personal stories, and educational materials.

“I used to post colorful pride flags and memes to celebrate my identity openly. I used to share statistics, facts, and stories of personal journey. It was about fighting stigma and ignorance head-on.” (Victor, Gay, 29years, Kampala).

“I and my partner used to make online streams on our social media platforms especially Instagram and Tiktok.” (Kazini, Gay, 26years, Kampala)

This practice of video conferencing allows for real-time interaction and the sharing of experiences. For example, individuals openly celebrate their identity by posting colorful pride flags and memes, sharing statistics, facts, and personal narratives to combat stigma and ignorance. Video conferencing becomes a powerful tool for LGBTQIA+ individuals to express themselves, build community, and actively challenge societal norms. This agrees with social support theory where informational social support is conveyed through personal stories shared in videos or live streams creating a connection with the community. The educational materials and statistics in videos equip individuals with knowledge related to LGBTQIA+ issues.

The third version of information sharing is seen in *community engagement* as form of empowerment through social media. Participants shared content produced by reputable organisations, fellow activists and news outlets.

Also, participants engaged in hashtag (#) campaigns to share personal stories, raise awareness on specific issues and connect with friends. This practice goes beyond individual expression and calls for the collective efforts of individuals to amplify the community's voice. One participant indicated that:

Megs: "I used to push hashtags suggested by friends online, especially if I am interested in the topic. (Megs, Gay, 22years, UK)

Through the use of hashtags, members not only share personal stories but also unite in raising awareness on specific issues, creating a virtual space where experiences are collectively acknowledged. The hashtag campaigns serve as a means of advocacy and allowed the community to connect with a wider audience, educate the public, and challenge misconceptions. This form of information sharing, seen in community engagement showed the collective empowerment achieved through social media platforms – where individuals create shared narratives and organised campaigns to create a more informed and connected LGBTQIA+ community.

As Tiidenberg et al (2021) note, most popular social media platforms offer similar 'possibilities for action' – including the capacity to easily share, archive and search for multi-modal posts (i.e. written text, photographs, screenshots and video). The finding is also seen social support theory where emotional support is evident as participants share content that resonates emotionally, creating a sense of shared experiences. Instrumental support is demonstrated through the dissemination of information from reputable sources providing practical knowledge to solve societal challenges. Esteem support is present in the collaborative sharing of content – contributing to the community's positive self-perception and affirming their collective identity. While, network support is present in hashtag campaigns – creating virtual spaces for individuals to connect, share personal stories, and raise awareness collectively. This agrees with what the study data provided.

### *Coming out*

A second cluster of empowerment strategies of social media in the data involves ways in which LGBTQIA+ members used social media to share their sexual orientation or gender identity with a wider audience. Visibly individuals used social media to control their narrative which allowed them to share their coming-out stories on their own terms. Two forms of coming-out were identified in the study data, personal narratives and visual expression/symbolism.

The first version of coming-out is seen in *personal narratives* where individuals shared their stories on their coming-out experiences. This involved expressing one's authentic self. Many posted heartfelt messages in which they openly discussed their gender identity, sometimes accompanied by photos that captured important moments in their lives. These posts served as a way to communicate their authentic selves to their friends, family, and wider social network.

One participant expressed that:

*“When I decided to come out for the first time on Facebook, I remember sitting down and [...] {I did not care about how people would see me} Clicking that ‘post’ button was full of anxiety and relief, but it felt like a good step toward living my truth. I did it when I was leaving in the U.S at the time. However, I had received support and positive reactions from friends on Facebook and in the U.S. It was not just about me but showing others that it is okay to come out and live your life.”<sup>6</sup> (Kamukama, Gay, 31years)*

As individuals progressed through their “coming out” journeys, they often celebrated important milestones on social media. Anniversaries of when they first came out, Pride Month, or other LGBTQIA+ awareness events provided opportunities to reflect on their growth and express gratitude for the support they had received. In this study, those who shared their personal experiences of coming out on social media expressed how they perceived these

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<sup>6</sup> Kamukama continues that ..... “..... *This was a transformative chapter in my life that inspired others within my network to be more open and accept their diverse sexual orientations and gender identities.*” (Kamukama, Gay, 31years)

platforms as powerful tools. They [social media platforms] allowed individuals to reach a broad audience simultaneously while maintaining a degree of control over their level of vulnerability. This is also seen in other studies for example, Hillier et al. (2012) where LGBTQ youth used social media to connect with others to reveal themselves. Also, in the similar study, participants described how connections were initiated by exploring shared interests.

Settles et al. (2019) established that sharing personal narratives provides emotional support due to communal understanding and this is consistent with the social support theory which argues that emotional support involves the provision of love, empathy, and care (Cutrona & Russell, 1990). Personal narratives contribute to emotional support by allowing LGBTQIA+ individuals to express their authentic selves, creating a sense of belonging and acceptance within the LGBTQIA+ community. In addition, the act of sharing personal stories contributes to esteem support by affirming one's identity and promoting positive self-perception (Cutrona & Russell, 1990). As individuals narrate their coming-out experiences, they contribute to the collective identity of the community, creating a positive sense of self and building esteem among peers.

Second form of coming-out is manifested in the *visual expression* of using images, symbols and visual cues that portray one's sexual orientation or gender identity. Participants described posing images that symbolise LGBTQIA+ pride such as rainbow flags. The visual form of coming-out serves as a powerful empowerment strategy because it provides a visible representation of one's identity. For example when Hikion came out as a lesbian, she posted on Facebook that, "Beautiful things happen when you distance yourself from negativity", then she added an image of "I am a proud lesbian" with 2 rainbow flags at the end of the post. (Hikion, Lesbian, 25years, Kampala – Uganda).

You know, coming-out as an LGBTQIA+ was not an easy task for me .... Because I did not want hurt anyone especially my family, but I had

made up my mind for this. I am happy now that I did openly and social media.<sup>7</sup>

The visual representation of pride symbols serves as a unifying factor that strengthens the social bond within the LGBTQIA+ community and lead to positive self-perception and counters stigmas associated with non-normative identities (Branscombe et al., 1999).

### *Advocacy*

Another important form of empowerment for LGBTQIA+ people in Uganda, *advocacy* entails challenging systemic discrimination, encourage visibility, and instigate social change. Through active participation in advocacy efforts on social media platforms, individuals assert their agency by raising their voices. In the data, two forms of advocacy were identified, one is visibility and the other is awareness.

*Visibility* as a form of advocacy seems to occur when LGBTQIA+ individuals use social media to challenge the historical invisibility and marginalisation they often face. Many individuals engaged actively in campaigns that challenge stereotypes against vulnerable people. They engaged in profile customisation, hashtag campaigns, sharing of personal stories, giving educational content, collaborating with influences, among others. One participant shared:

I use social media not just for self-expression but to educate and raise awareness. [Kems, Lesbian, 23years]

Many shared personal stories through posts, articles, or blogs so that others could understand their different journeys. Others engaged in visual content as memes and artwork that convey messages of inclusivity and pride. Also, there were those that engaged in online challenges that celebrated their identities, for example, Jeboah said, we have pride challenges on social media, where you shared stories, photos, or any other thing that could express your identity.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Interview with Hikion, Lesbian, 25years, Kampala – Uganda

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Jeboah, Heterosexual, 25years

One participant expressed:

When I was doing surgery to remove my breasts because I did not feel comfortable with them. I shared the entire story on Tiktok [every step of it]. (Dan, transgender, 35years)

These cases suggest that advocacy strategies of visibility are more likely to create acceptance of LGBTQIA+ presence in society. Dan's strategy on being live on every step of the surgery is not only for individual expression but also for challenging societal norms through collective online actions.

The next form of advocacy strategy used by non-binary members online was *awareness*, where they actively sought to inform the public issues related to vulnerable community. Participants reported engaging with influencers and public figures to pass their message. Others wore clothes [T-shirts] that sought to promote their rights. Arisa said that he used to organise online discussions where members could join and discuss with the public about LGBTQIA+.<sup>9</sup>

I actively engaged in online campaigns to show people about my transgender experiences and create a space where everyone feels seen and understood. (Jeboah, Heterosexual, 25years)

*Awareness* is an instrumental support that manifests in tangible actions and concrete measures taken to address specific challenges faced by community. This form of support goes beyond emotional reassurance and informational sharing to actively challenging stereotypes and creating awareness – thereby promoting visibility and normalisation for marginalised individuals in society. These align with the goals of social support theories which facilitate positive social change.

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<sup>9</sup> Interview with Arisa, Bisexual, 38 years

## Chapter 5

### Response of the LGBTQIA+ people on social media after the bill

This chapter presents the measures taken by members of the LGBTQIA+ on social media after the signing of the bill. Addressing this research question seeks to identify how their lives were made better after the signing of the bill. Four strategies were identified inductively as *distancing*, *deletion*, *blocking*, and *departure*. These strategies were termed as (Non-) use practices as advanced by Chib et al. (2021). Following this assertion, the four strategies are described including their associated conditions.

#### *Distancing*

The first response that emerged on non-use of social media was visibly distancing themselves from other users by signalling the lack of desire to engage through their (non-)use practices. It involved creating emotional and physical space from digital platforms to distance themselves from potential risks and consequences.

I reply messages from social media apps late to avoid being asked many questions. (Hikion, lesbian, 25years)

Individuals limited sharing personal information, experiences, or details about their identities online. As Kazini (Gay, 26years) mentions, “I only talk to people I know now, even you, if you had not been referred to me, I was not going to reply you.” This deliberate disengagement is motivated by concerns about potential legal repercussions and protect their identities and personal well-being. Distance practices by LGBTQIA+ people can be less emphatic, when the other party recognises the reduced communication or slow response, they respond similarly (Berusch, 2016). Prolonged distancing indicates an ongoing negotiation between individual agency and sociostructural constraints – illustrating non-use in the face of potential risks.

#### *Deletion*

The second strategy used by many participants was *deletion* where there were intentional removal of content, connections, or entire profiles from social media platforms. LGBTQIA+ individuals often deleted information which could



lead them to legal repercussions. One participant [Victor, Gay, 29years] mentioned, “After the bill was put into law, I decided to delete all my posts related to LGBTQIA+ topics and associations. It was not just about erasing my digital footprint; it was a protective measure. I did not want any evidence that could be used against me. Deleting those posts felt like taking control of my narrative and protecting myself from potential harm.”

Deletion is more visible and Arisa [Bisexual] had to avoid generating digital traces that may implicate her being subject to the government wanting to set an example.

I didn’t go for a complete wipe-out, but I did selectively delete posts that I felt could pose risks. Deleting specific content was my way of adapting to the changing landscape while still maintaining some visibility. (Arisa, Bisexual, 38 years)

Some participants opted for a more drastic measure by deactivating or deleting their entire social media accounts to minimise their online footprint. One of the participants I was referred [Jona, Lesbian, 22years] mentioned, “I had to deactivate my old account, which was very active and most people knew me as an activist of non-binary community in Uganda... [But]... I surely want to return to Uganda to my family and I do not want to be arrested when I reach there.

The choices of mobile (non-)use such as deleting reduces visibility lowering the risk of identification and safeguarding against potential harm resulting from the restrictive measures of the bill. Deletion of accounts was a viable option for LGBTQIA+ people to avoid persecution.

### ***Blocking***

Many participants used blocking as a strategy to respond to the signing of the bill. It is a proactive strategic employed by same-sex individuals to regulate their online interacts and protect themselves from potential legal threats. It is a visible disengagement strategy used to prevent some users from having contact with them. Non-binary members blocked social media users to communicate personal boundaries that other users could respect.

I started blocking anyone who seemed even remotely suspicious or could pose a threat. I didn't want unknown entities prying into my life, especially when the consequences could be severe. (Dan, Gay, 35years)

Blocking communicates the person's intent to disengage from using social media. As one participant [Kems] did not hesitate to block any one when she mentioned, "If someone showed signs of hostility, I did not hesitate to block them. Blocking is not just about cutting off connections; it is for maintaining a secure online environment for myself and others in the community." (Kems, Lesbian, 23 years)

The idea of blocking aligns with the concept of strategic distancing and actively blocking some individuals, members are engaging in a deliberate form of (non-)use to create physical space on digital platforms. The act of blocking is a proactive measure to avoid potential risks, agreeing with Chib's notion that (non-)use can be an expression of agency in response to structural constraints.

### *Departure*

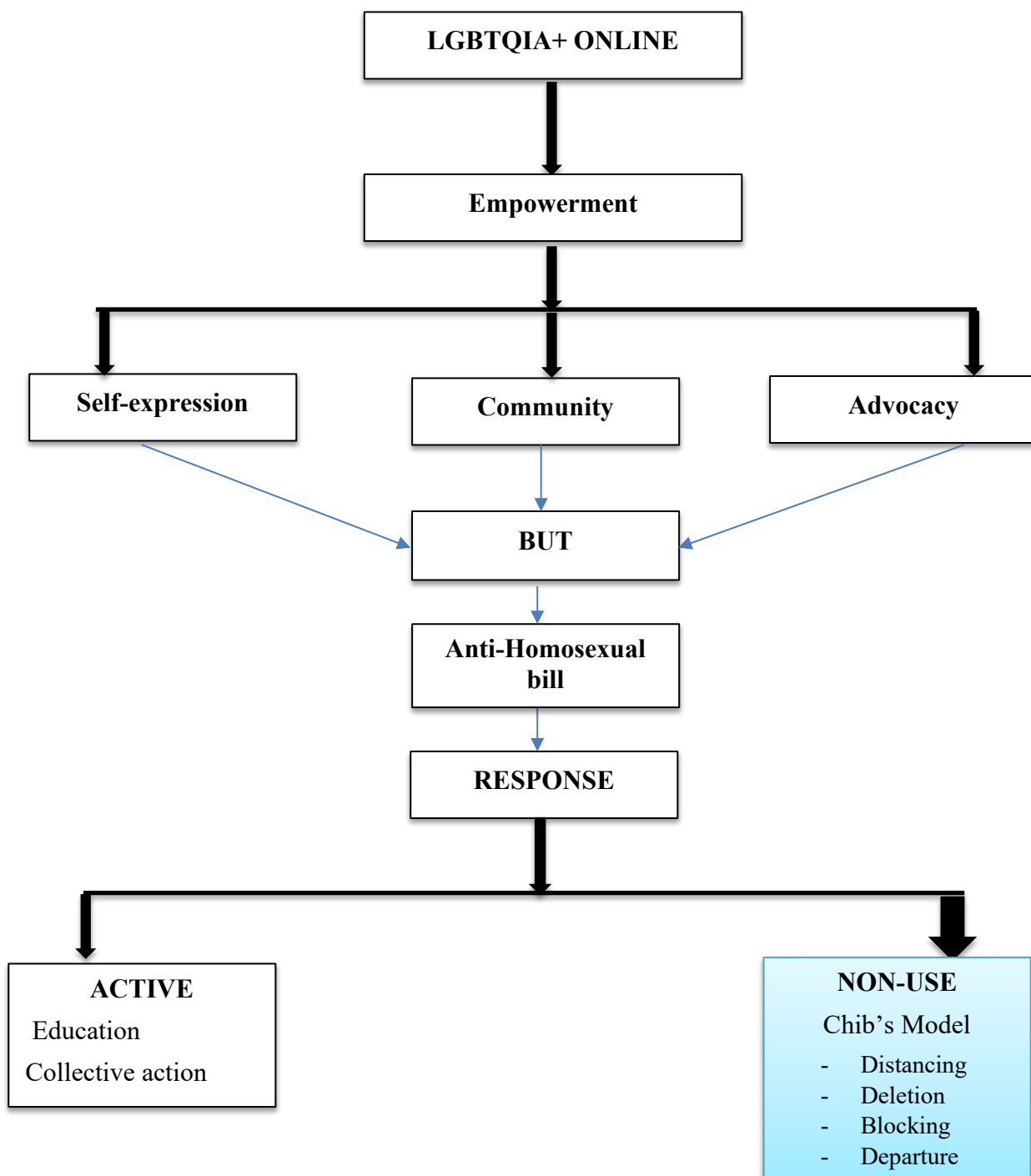
Another strategy adopted by participants is seen in exiting from specific social media where they felt vulnerable. Departure is an absolute form of non-use [complete cessation of mobile media use]. It is an invisibility form as non-adoption of mobile use because individuals feel that using the social media platform poses a risk which cannot be mitigated. Departure is undertaken by individuals when they feel that other strategies such as distancing, blocking, or deletion have not been effectively or inadequate in solving the situation. Some LGBTQIA+ individuals feel that they need to avoid trouble with the legal structure of Uganda at all costs, given the risk of life imprisonment.

The more show myself online, the more I risk myself to the authorities. Some people have already been arrested because of their past posts. (Kamukama, gay, 31years)

While some participants chose non-adoption or complete non-use because they fear a stronger response from the authorities. For example, Kazini chooses to limit her online engagement and use fake accounts, fearing persecution.

This account we are talking on, cannot be traced back to me and I am very careful with myself. You cannot see any of my pics online, you cannot see my face. (Kazini, gay, 26years)

Departure aligns with the idea that (non-)use is be an expression of agency, where marginalised individuals, in response to structural threats, make a conscious decision to withdraw from particular online environments. This departure not only serves as a form of self-preservation but also indicates the challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ groups in sustaining their presence in social media spaces due to external pressures.



**Figure 5.1. Social Media Use by Marginalised groups**

The framework illustrates that through social media platforms, LGBTQIA+ individuals find empowerment in self-expression, community, and advocacy for LGBTQIA+ rights. However, these empowering spaces are

also affected by the signing of the bill. In response to these challenges, individuals adopt active engagement strategies, countering discrimination through education and collective action, or choose non-use strategies, deliberately limiting their engagement with some platforms as a form of resistance as illustrated in Chib's model (2021).

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion

The findings unveil the different ways through which social media empowers LGBTQIA+ community in Uganda and in particular their self-expression on social media before the signing of the bill. I identified three 3 ways including information sharing, coming out and advocacy. Many marginalised individuals used social media for communicative strategies through written posts, status updates, and textual description. Others used social media to share live streams, video content, personal stories, and educational materials. The third version of information sharing was seen in community engagement where content was produced by reputable organisations, fellow activists and news outlets was shared. As Tiidenberg et al (2021) note, most popular social media platforms offer similar ‘possibilities for action’ – including the capacity to easily share, archive and search for multi-modal posts (i.e. written text, photographs, screenshots and video). The finding is also seen social support theory where emotional support is evident as participants share content that resonates emotionally, creating a sense of shared experiences. Instrumental support is demonstrated through the dissemination of information from reputable sources providing practical knowledge to solve societal challenges. Esteem support is present in the collaborative sharing of content, contributing to the community’s positive self-perception and affirming their collective identity. While, network support is present in hashtag campaigns, creating virtual spaces for individuals to connect, share personal stories, and raise awareness collectively. This resonates with what the study data provided. The second form of empowerment strategies was elaborated in coming out identified in personal narratives and visual expression/symbolism. Non-binary individuals also used social media for advocacy purposes to challenge systemic discrimination, encourage visibility, and instigate social change.

I identified four strategies inductively as a response to the signing of the bill and they were *distancing*, *deletion*, *blocking*, and *departure*. These strategies were termed as (Non-) use practices as advanced by Chib et al. (2021). While Chib et al. proposed 8 strategies that vulnerable could respond to online hostile environment, this study found only four of them to have been adopted by non-binary community in Uganda. These strategies were more absolute as individuals tend to select them in situations where the power imbalances in their relationships to sociostructural enforcers is greater (Chib et al., 2021). Through distancing, marginalised individuals limited sharing personal information, experiences, or details about their identities online. Distance practices by LGBTQIA+ people were less emphatic, when the other party recognizes the reduced communication or slow response, they respond similarly. Some individuals opted for a more drastic measure by deactivating or deleting their entire social media accounts to minimise their online footprint. Blocking was employed by same-sex individuals to regulate their online interacts and protect themselves from potential legal threats. Departure was undertaken by individuals when they felt that other strategies such as distancing, blocking, or deletion did not effectively solve the situation.

Today in Uganda, there is a decline in visible advocacy efforts for LGBTQIA+ rights in response to the oppressive legal environment created by the Anti-Homosexuality Bill. Many activists and organisations, once at the forefront of championing LGBTQIA+ rights, have been compelled to scale back their activities and operate cautiously due to the threat of persecution and potential repercussions. Therefore, social media in Uganda is hardly used as – a way of self-expression for the LGBTQIA+ community as a majority have gone anonymous, are isolated, and prefer being invisible and not being referred to as gay people due to the fear of being persecuted in the courts of law which are subjected to life imprisonment. Future research can establish a better understanding of how effects actualise by conducting research on family members, government agents, and NGOs.

The strategies adopted by LGBTQIA+ individuals in Uganda are more absolute in nature and shows how far marginalised people go to safeguard

their identities and well-being from the sociostructural enforcers. Therefore, these strategies are not just symbolic, they are actual response to power imbalance and provide a means for marginalised people to exert agency over online presence – by choosing when and how to disclose personal information and engage with others. These actions minimises the risks associated with being openly part of the LGBTQIA+ community in a hostile environment. Thus, they are a form of resistance allowing vulnerable communities assert control and protect their identities in a restrictive digital space. However, it is difficult now to use online space for open expression as limiting visibility online hinders advocacy and community-building efforts. Only if more private online spaces are created to sustainable identity expression and community connections.



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## APPENDICES

### Appendix I: Interview Guide Protocol for LGBTQIA+ Individuals

**Dear participant,**

My name is Efrance Nabaloga, I am carrying out a study on “the role of social media on the self-expression of the LGBTQIA+ community in Uganda,” in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the Master degree of Arts in Development Studies. I have chosen you as one of my participants to provide information for my study. The information you provide shall only be used solely for the purpose of this research and shall be treated with confidentiality. You are requested to participate in this interview freely by giving your opinion and you can withdraw at any time. This interviews will take not more than 30-45 minutes.

1. Please tell me about yourself?
2. How long have you been using social media to express yourself?
3. Apart from this platform, what other social media platforms do you use to express yourself?
4. Describe to me your experience of using social media platforms to express your non-binary identity or connect with others in the LGBTQIA+ community?
5. How has the signing of the Anti-Homosexuality Bill impacted the ways in which you express yourselves on social media platforms?
6. Please give me some examples of how your self-expression on social media has changed since the signing of the bill?
7. Are there certain social media platforms that have become more prominent for self-expression within the LGBTQIA+ community after the bill was signed?
8. If so, how do you perceive the impact of these platforms on visibility?
9. Have you noticed any shifts in the content you share on social media following the signing of the bill?

10. If yes, how would you describe these changes?
11. In general, since the signing of the bill, has engagement on social media increased or reduced?
12. As we sum up this conversation, tell me in a few lines, what you want to see in Uganda?

**Thank you for your cooperation**

## **Appendix II: Consent to participate in a Research Study**

Title of the Study: The role of social media on the self-expression of the LGBTQIA+ community in Uganda

Investigator: Nabaloga Efrance

ISS

The purpose of this research is to understand the role of social media on the self-expression of LGBTQIA+ community in Uganda. The research question is, “How does the self-expression of the LGBTQIA+ community change after the signing of the bill?”

You are being asked to participate in an online interview. The interview is voluntary and will take 30-45mins to complete.

There are minimal risks attached to this session. All responses are given anonymous. No names, addresses, emails, work information or other identifiers are solicited. All the responses will be stored and eliminated [deleted] after analysis.

Although there are no direct benefits to you, I feel that your contributions on the interview will benefit the LGBTQIA+ communities around the world, NGOs and other institutions in recognising issues that LGBTQIA+ individuals face and in understanding how to better provide accommodation for LGBTQIA+ living in a country with a law against someone identifying as an LGBTQIA+ member or its promotion.

Participation in this interview is entirely voluntary. I appreciate your involvement and encourage you to refer this interview to other LGBTQIA+ people.

If you have any questions about this interview, I will be happy to answer them via email. I may be contacted at [efrancenaba@gmail.com](mailto:efrancenaba@gmail.com) or via Whatsapp +31 6 45265117

Appendix III: Highlights of the Homosexuality Bill  
(2023)

Act

*Anti-Homosexuality Act*

2023

PART II—HOMOSEXUALITY AND RELATED PRACTICES

**2. The offence of homosexuality**

(1) A person commits the offence of homosexuality if the person performs a sexual act or allows a person of the same sex to perform a sexual act on him or her.

(2) A person who commits the offence of homosexuality is liable, on conviction, to imprisonment for life.

(3) A person who attempts to perform a sexual act in the circumstances referred to in subsection (1) commits an offence and is liable, on conviction, to imprisonment for a period not exceeding ten years.

(4) For purposes of subsection (3), a person shall be deemed to attempt to commit an offence when the person intending to commit an offence begins to put his or her intention into execution by means adapted to its fulfilment, and manifests his or her intention by some overt act, but does not fulfil his or her intention to such an extent as to commit the offence.

(5) For the avoidance of doubt, a person who is alleged or suspected of being a homosexual, who has not committed a sexual act with another person of the same sex, does not commit the offence of homosexuality under this section.

**3. Aggravated homosexuality**

(1) A person who commits the offence of homosexuality in any of the circumstances specified in subsection (2), commits the offence of aggravated homosexuality and is liable, on conviction, to suffer death.



- (i) in the case of contravention of paragraph (a), to imprisonment for life; or
- (ii) in the case of contravention of paragraphs (b), (c) or (d), to imprisonment for a period not exceeding twenty years.

(2) The consent of a child or the consent of the child's parent or guardian, person in authority or any other person with parental responsibility over the child to the acts prescribed in subsection (1) shall not be a defence to a charge under this Act.

#### **9. Premises**

A person who, knowingly allows any premises to be used by any person for purposes of homosexuality or to commit an offence under this Act, commits an offence and is liable, on conviction, to imprisonment for a period not exceeding seven years.

#### **10. Prohibition of marriage between persons of same sex**

(1) A person who—

- (a) purports to contract a marriage with a person of the same sex;
- (b) presides over, conducts, witnesses or directs a ceremony purported to be a marriage between persons of the same sex; or
- (c) knowingly attends or participates in the preparation of a purported marriage between persons of the same sex,

commits an offence and is liable, on conviction, to imprisonment for a period not exceeding ten years.

(2) In this section, "marriage" means the union, whether formal or informal, between persons of the same sex.

**11. Promotion of homosexuality**

(1) A person who promotes homosexuality commits an offence and is liable, on conviction, to imprisonment for a period not exceeding twenty years.

(2) A person promotes homosexuality where the person—

(a) encourages or persuades another person to perform a sexual act or to do any other act that constitutes an offence under this Act;

(b) knowingly advertises, publishes, prints, broadcasts, distributes or causes the advertisement, publication, printing, broadcasting or distribution by any means, including the use of a computer, information system or the internet, of any material promoting or encouraging homosexuality or the commission of an offence under this Act;

(c) provides financial support, whether in kind or cash, to facilitate activities that encourage homosexuality or the observance or normalisation of conduct prohibited under this Act;

(d) knowingly leases or subleases, uses or allows another person to use any house, building or establishment for the purpose of undertaking activities that encourage homosexuality or any other offence under this Act; or

(e) operates an organisation which promotes or encourages homosexuality or the observance or normalisation of conduct prohibited under this Act.

(3) Where an offence prescribed under this section is committed by a legal entity, the court may—

- (c) cancel the licence granted to the entity.

PART IV—MISCELLANEOUS

**12. Disqualification from employment upon conviction**

A person who is convicted of the offence of homosexuality or aggravated homosexuality shall be disqualified from employment in a child care institution or in any other institution which places him or her in a position of authority or care of a child or a vulnerable person until such a time as a probation, social and welfare officer determines that the person is fully rehabilitated or no longer poses a danger to a child or a vulnerable person.

**13. Disclosure of sexual offences record**

(1) A person convicted of an offence under this Act shall disclose the conviction when applying for employment in a child care institution or any other institution which places him or her in a position of authority or care of a child or other vulnerable person.

(2) A person who contravenes subsection (1) commits an offence and is liable, on conviction, to imprisonment for a period not exceeding two years and the employment of that person shall terminate.

**14. Duty to report acts of homosexuality**

(1) A person who knows or has a reasonable suspicion that a person has committed or intends to commit the offence of homosexuality or any other offence under this Act, shall report the matter to police for appropriate action.

(2) A person who is otherwise prevented by privilege from making a report under subsection (1) shall be immune from any action arising from the disclosure of the information without the consent or waiver of privilege first being obtained or had.