# ALERT DESK ZW:Mapping Digital Harm, Safety Practices & LBQT Survival in Zimbabwe’s Online and Offline Worlds

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# Abstract

This research report is grounded in an intersectional feminist and community driven methodology, investigating the multifaceted digital realities of LGBTQIA+ individuals in Zimbabwe. In an era where digital spaces are simultaneously sites of vital community and pervasive violence, this study documents the specific manifestations of online anti-LGBTQIA+ hate speech and digital insecurity.

Through a mixed methods approach consisting of a nationwide survey , a digitally facilitated story circle with peer-to-peer story collection, and an intimate 7-day digital diary, we move beyond a narrative of mere victimhood to center queer agency and ingenuity.

Our findings unearth a landscape where major social media platforms are complicit in enabling inadequate moderation and reporting systems, forcing LBTQIA+ users to become architects of their own safety. The study documents a rich tapestry of community-grown resistance strategies, from secure communication measures to collective care practices that mitigate psychological trauma.

The insights generated are not merely analytical; they are the foundational blueprint for the **ALERT Desk ZW**, a community-owned platform designed to facilitate faster incident reporting, provide accessible safety resources and amplify Queer voices in the fight for safer digital futures.


## Definitions of Digital Harms as used in this research report

**Hate Speech**: Derogatory, dehumanizing, or violent language directed at LGBTQIA+ persons including local language slurs such as ngochani, stabane, blambi, moffie, and coded terms like “after 9.”

**Non Consensual Image Sharing**: Distribution of private images without consent to shame, blackmail, or out queer individuals.

**Blackmail / Coerced Exposure:** Using sexuality or private content as leverage for money, silence, or compliance.

**Doxxing:** The intentional exposure of a queer person’s private information such as their full name, home address, workplace, school, phone number, or social ties—in retaliation for something they said, posted, or refused to comply with.

**Cyberbullying :** Targeted cyberbullying refers to repeated harassment, insults, slurs, or coordinated attacks specifically directed at a queer person (or someone perceived to be queer) based on their identity, appearance, gender expression, or activism

**Offline Spillover Harm:** Physical, emotional, or economic consequences triggered and fuelled by digital exposure

**Catphishing/ Coerced exposure**: Catfishing refers to creating a fake identity,usually a false profile, name, or persona to deceive or lure someone into sharing personal information, intimate content, or details about their sexuality.Coerced exposure happens when the person behind the fake identity pressures or manipulates the queer individual into revealing parts of their life they did not consent to share such as sexual orientation, gender identity, photos, or personal details.

# 1. Introduction: Digital Life as a Site of Both Harm and Possibility

The Alert Desk was born from a simple but urgent truth: **for many LBQT and LGBTQI Zimbabweans, the internet is both a refuge and a risk**. Digital spaces offer visibility, joy, community and resistance.Yet they also expose queer bodies to heightened surveillance, harassment, blackmail, and public humiliation. Zimbabwe-focused reporting and research echo this duality, documenting how queer Zimbabweans use Facebook, WhatsApp and other platforms to humanise themselves and mobilise, even as they face trolling, moral panic and threats.Unbias The News+1

Through a **national survey of 101 LGBTQI Zimbabweans**, an **online story circle**, and a **seven-day digital diary**, this research maps the everyday digital threats queer people face,  the strategies they invent to stay alive, emotionally grounded, and politically present.

The tone across all data is consistent: **digital harm is not exceptional; it is routine**. And yet, threaded through these experiences is a fierce clarity, resistance, and insistence on joy. In alignment with feminist principles and the LBQT Girls Safety framework , this report grounds digital safety in care, agency, community, and the right to exist freely.

## 1.1 Digital Terrain Analysis-Literature review (Media Monitoring and Scrapping)

Our monitoring and literature review process confirms that Zimbabwean LGBTQI+ persons navigate a deeply hostile digital ecosystem. Hate speech is rampant, platform moderation is systemically ineffective and digital threats are often a precursor to online harm. This activity is organized, leverages local derogatory terminology and exploits the algorithmic amplification and inadequate reporting mechanisms of major social media platforms. The data assessed provides irrefutable evidence for our upcoming Social Media Safety index and advocacy efforts

**Methodology Overview: Feminist & Ethical Digital Monitoring**

Our approach was designed to gather evidence without exposing researchers  or the community to unnecessary harm. It centred on feminist principles of care and honesty

Platforms Monitored: Facebook, X(Twitter), TikTok, Instagram and popular Zimbabwean news page comment sections.

Approach: Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), Netnography and qualitative scrapping of public posts, hashtags and comment threads

Tools: Combination of manual monitoring by a trained researcher (to understand context) and targeted ethical scrapping on individual platforms using keywords . All scrapping complies with platform Terms of Safety (ToS) and focuses on publicly available data.

Keywords & Hashtags tracked: We used a lexicon developed in consultation with community members:

- Explicit hate terms: ngochani, stabane,magays,after 9, blambi, Moffie
- Coded & Dog- Whistle language: Phrases like “people who are confused”, “unAfrican”, “twin plug” , “protecting our culture”, often paired with rainbow emoji to covertly target queer individuals.

**DEEP DIVE: Platforms specific analysis & Evidence:**

From the digital scrapping and monitoring, here is a breakdown of findings per platforms, with traceable examples:

**A. Facebook, WhatsApp & Instagram ( Meta platforms)**

Common threats: Facebook (and its group feature) is the epicentre of organised hate speech while instagram sees high volumes of comment- based harassment and doxxing. Mets’s moderation systems consistently fail to recognize Zimbabwean specific hate terminology and context. Terms like Ngochani and Stabane in vernacular posts contributed to about 90% of the hate speech content and comments after searching on each of the platforms

Moderation analysis/gap: Meta’s recent policy rollback has weakened protections for LGTBQI+ users, allowing hate speech to proliferate 1:Meta new policy

Examples: Posts mocking queer people using slurs like *stabane, magays, ngochani* and *blambi* were found in public groups and in comment sections of certain Zimbabwean posts with no actions taken.

**B. TikTok**

TikTok is a dual-edged sword. It is a vital space for queer community and building. In comparison to the other platforms, TikTok actually has more queer people being unapologetically visible in their diversity. Creators like Makhosi & Prosexy are some of the brave queer users of the platform that assert their identity. However, this does not excuse the hate comments and threats left under people's posts. In some aspect, this visibility makes creators hyper-vulnerable to coordinated harassment in comments and duets. 2:Queer resistance

Moderation analysis/gap: TikTok's algorithm amplifies visibility but lacks robust moderation in local languages. This inadvertently amplifies content with high volume of comments by presenting them on the "For You Page" (FYP) of users who interact with similar negative comments.

**C. Twitter/X**

X is a hub for public, vitriolic hate speech from high-profile accounts, which then is amplified by their followers. The platform's reduced moderation capacity has created a permissive environment. Terms like "*after 9", "stabane/ngochani*" are used both pejoratively and subversively. Activists and some queers users of the platform reclaim them in threads, but hate replies are very much common and normalised within the Zimbabwean context. The majority of tweets contain slurs and misinformation dubbing homosexuality as an "imported cult" meant to destroy our cultures as Africans. This sentiment isn't just a Zimbabwean problem, but a plague present in other African timelines

Example: A known controversial self-proclaimed "public figure", Knight Shadaya is widely known on the platform for his misogynistic and homophobic tweets. 3. He has managed to leverage his account to amplify dehumanizing rhetoric towards women and LGBTQI+ persons in Zimbabwe. 4

Moderation analysis/gap: X's content moderation systems are critically under-resourced for African languages, including those used in Zimbabwe. The automated systems fail to detect coded hate speech and homophobia expressed in vernacular languages and cultural context. In addition, the platform's algorithms have been shown to prioritize and amplify divisive and emotionally charged content because it drives engagement. The operational changes have directly led to a more permissive environment for hate speech, leaving LGBTQI+ Zimbabweans exposed to targeted online abuse.

**D. YouTube**

YouTube is the world's largest video platform that not only serves as a canvas for creators but a resource hub across different sectors and disciplines. Its content

moderation systems are heavily reliant on automated algorithms and lack sufficient human oversight, especially for non-English and vernacular Zimbabwean languages. This results in the failure to detect coded hate speech and local slurs or culturally homophobic rhetoric. The platform's 2025 policy shift toward favouring "freedom of expression" over harm reduction further weakens enforcement, allowing hateful content to remain public under the guise of "public interest" 5:YouTube content moderation .

Example(s): Digital storytelling channels like Purple Hand Africa and Purple Royale document lived experiences of Queer Zimbabweans.

Moderation analysis/gap:For many organisations or Queer Zimbabwean creators who use the platform, the default security measure has become disabling the comment feature. This is one of the themes that emerged during this media monitoring process for Youtube. However, from the few that we found, comment sections contained slurs and hate comments dehumanising queer persons under a façade of "preserving" culture. 6

**Synthesis of Findings**

| **Theme** | **Evidence from Monitoring** | **Implication & Connection to Research** |
|---|---|---|
| Use of localised hate speech | Pervasive use of terms like ngochani, stabane, moffie across all platforms | Confirms the need for platforms to integrate localized context and Zimbabwean languages into the AI moderation systems |
| Coded Incitement to violence | Use of phrase like "After 9"to suggest violence towards those in the closet | Demonstrates how hate speech evolves to evade automated detection , requiring human moderators with cultural competence |
| Doxxing & Digital threats | Dangers revealing of individuals' locations and personal details | Directly links to digital and physical insecurity, validating the need for Alert Desk's incident reporting dashboard and digital safety guides { link to dig sec guide} |
| Moderation failure | Systemic non-action on reported content, especially on local languages and contexts | Exacerbates the need for developing the Social Media Safety Index |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Community Resilience | -Use of #ThisFlagIsOursToo and creator activism across different platforms. | Highlights the dual reality: despite the violence, Queer Zimbabweans are courageously reclaiming digital spaces, which informs our advocacy agenda |

### Language Analysis: Derogatory Terms

Our media monitoring and literature review reveal that LGBTQI Zimbabweans face pervasive digital hate speech through culturally specific derogatory terms designed to dehumanize and erase their identities. Commonly weaponized slurs include "*ngochani*",(a shona derogatory term for gay men and trans women often used to mock gender non conformity based on expression), *stabane* ( targeting masculine-presenting women, gay men and lesbians) and *kufemera mugotsi* ( a shaming phrase questioning any same sex relationships and intimacy).

Regional terms like "*moffie*"( an Afrikaans slur equivalent to "faggot") and *"twin plug*"( a South African derived term for bisexuality) also circulate in digital spaces, reflecting cross boarder linguistic violence.
These terms are frequently deployed alongside English-language slurs (e.g faggot or dyke) to amplify stigma. Such language reinforces patriarchal norms, frames queerness as "un-African"and incites real-world violence by equating LGBTQI existence with criminality or moral decay. This analysis underscores the urgent need for platform-specific content moderation policies that recognize cultural contextual hate speech and center the safety of queer Zimbabweans. 7:Language analysis

## 2. Who We Heard From: A Young, Urban, Digitally Present Community

The survey reached **101 respondents**, predominantly between **18–34 years**, living in **Harare, Chitungwiza, Bulawayo**, and other urban centers.This reflects a digitally active generation carrying both the visibility and the vulnerability of being queer online in a conservative society. Global research with LGBTQ+ youth finds that those who struggle to access safe offline community often turn online for support and affirmation – but also report higher rates of anxiety, depression and suicidal ideation linked to hostile digital environments.The Trevor Project+1 This wider evidence base underlines why listening to a young, urban, digitally present queer community is not a "niche" choice, but central to understanding how harms play out in Zimbabwe's current context.

### Diverse Identities, Shared Risks

Participants identified across lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, transgender, asexual, gender-fluid, and other identities. Their common thread:
**Digital harm touches every corner of queer identity**, though with different intensities depending on gender expression, class, and geography.

The LBQT Girls Safety report mirrors this pattern, noting that **violence is inseparable from gender, class, and social judgment** in Zimbabwe's public and private spheres.

## 3. Prevalence of Digital Violence: A Daily Landscape of Harm

Across narrative and quantitative data, one finding was inescapable:
**digital violence is constant, multi-layered, and emotionally exhausting**.

*" At some point I had to deactivate all my social media accounts for a while so that I could focus of myself, my healing because I become an online punching bag"- Anonymous ( Digital Security story circle )*

### Most Common Forms of Harm

(From the survey)

- **Hate speech:** 66 respondents
- **Sexual harassment:** 24
- **Non-consensual image sharing:** 23
- **Hacking & impersonation:** 30 combined
- **Blackmail:** 14
- **Doxxing & death threats:** several severe cases

Hate speech emerges as the most common digital threat followed by complex combinations involving sexual harassment, blackmail, non-consensual image sharing, device hacking, doxxing, and impersonation. Experiences are often overlapping rather

than isolated, for example sequences such as “Blackmail; Non consensual image sharing” or “Sexual Harassment; Hate speech; Device hacking,” pointing to layered forms of abuse that escalate across threat types. Only a very small number of respondents indicate no experiences of such harms, reinforcing that exposure to digital violence is widespread in this group.

International and local studies confirm that the high rates of hate speech, sexual harassment, blackmail and doxxing documented by Alert Desk ZW are not isolated incidents, but part of a wider pattern of technology-facilitated gender-based and queer-phobic violence.emthonjeniwf.org+1. Zimbabwean reporting shows similar trends, with the Gender Commission and civil society noting sharp rises in cyberstalking, revenge pornography, impersonation and online humiliation targeting women and sexual minorities.ZimNow+2263Chat+

Story circle participants further described:

- revenge doxxing
- catfishing and coerced exposure
- unauthorized photo circulation
- targeted online bullying

The digital diary reinforced this, showing harassment spilling from kombi ranks to WhatsApp groups, an unbroken chain of queerphobia that travels across platforms and landscapes.

### Hate Speech as a Daily Reality

59% of respondents encounter queer-targeted hate speech weekly or daily.
This confirms what many LBQT activists have long said across the world:
**hostility is the backdrop, not the climax, of digital engagement in Zimbabwe**.

## 4. Platforms of Risk: When “Public” and “Private” Spaces Fail

One of the most striking findings from our research is that **WhatsApp and Facebook are the platforms where the most severe abuse occurs.**This contradicts assumptions that harm originates from strangers online. Instead:**Violence often comes from proximity-family groups, church members, schoolmates, neighbors.** With this data analysis, the information feeds into the **Social Media Safety Index**, a crucial component of the **ALERT DESK ZW.**

The index is developed from answers by **101 LGBTQIA+ people in Zimbabwe**, most of them aged **18–34**, and representing a wide range of gender identities and sexualities *(survey analysis report).* This is a young, digitally connected community, talking about how safe (or unsafe) it feels to be visibly queer online.

## 4.1 A simple way to read the scores

For each platform, respondents rated:

**"How safe do you feel expressing your queer identity here?"**
1 = *Very unsafe* → 5 = *Very safe*

We turned those answers into a **simple safety score out of 5** for each app:

- **1–2/5** → Mostly unsafe
- **3/5** → Mixed / depends
- **4–5/5** → Mostly safe

We also looked at **where the worst abuse happens most often**.

Public platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and X/Twitter were widely rated as **unsafe or very unsafe.**Across all platforms, trust averaged **2.28/5**.

## 4.2 Alert Desk Social Media Safety Index (by platform)

**Key takeaway:**
None of the major platforms reaches **3/5**.
Every app sits in the **unsafe or mixed** zone for queer users.

| Platform | Safety score (out of 5) | What most people feel | Where “worst abuse” happens |
|---|---|---|---|
| **WhatsApp** | **2.6 / 5** | 46% feel unsafe, 20% feel safe | **38%** of respondents say their worst abuse happened here |
| **Instagram** | **2.5 / 5** | 47% feel unsafe, 18% feel safe | **13%** name it as their worst platform |
| **TikTok** | **2.3 / 5** | 53% feel unsafe, 18% feel safe | **4%** report worst abuse here |
| **X/Twitter** | **2.2 / 5** | 57% feel unsafe, 16% feel safe | **9%** report worst abuse here |
| **Facebook** | **1.8 / 5** | 78% feel unsafe, only 8% feel safe | **23%** say their worst abuse happened here |

Safety scores cluster towards “very unsafe” and “neutral,” with relatively few respondents reporting feeling “very safe.” For WhatsApp, 25 rate it “very unsafe,” 35 “neutral,” and only 9 “very safe,” while Facebook is rated even more negatively, with 49 “very unsafe” and only 2 “very safe.” Instagram and X/Twitter show similarly low safety perceptions, and even TikTok, while slightly better distributed, still has more “very unsafe” than “very safe” ratings, highlighting a generalized sense of risk when expressing queer identities online.

This lack of trust mirrors the story-circle narratives, where participants described online spaces as extensions of offline harm—spaces where outing, shaming, and fetishization thrive.

# 5. How Queer People Respond: Self-Protection Over Platform Protection

Across all data sources, queer Zimbabweans overwhelmingly rely on **self-driven survival strategies**, not institutional mechanisms. This further amplifies the manner in which platform continue to fail African Queer users i their diversities

## Most Common Responses to Harm

- Blocking users
- Withdrawing from conversations or entire platforms
- Switching to private accounts
- Avoiding location tags
- Using pseudonyms

Reporting to platforms was rare and rarely effective. Almost half of those who reported never received a response. Story circle participants echoed this frustration, noting that **community guidelines ignore local languages**, allowing homophobic content to flourish unchecked. This in turn has fuelled the increasing growth of hate crimes in indigenous languages with hate slurs and threats flooding comment sections of Queers users of social media platforms.

The self-driven tactics described in this study mirror patterns seen in both global and research on LGBTQ responses to online hate. Feminist cybersecurity work argues that this burden-shifting where survivors must constantly adapt their behaviour to stay safe reflects a security model that prioritises corporate liability and state concerns over the everyday safety of women and queer people.GNET The Alert Desk data therefore aligns with a wider feminist critique: queer communities are being forced to act as their own moderators, risk assessors and first responders, while the institutions with actual power over infrastructure remain distant and unaccountable.

## 6. Emotional & Mental Health Impact: Harm Inside the Body

Studies from multiple contexts show that digital hate and harassment have deep emotional and mental health impacts on LGBTQ+ people, including heightened anxiety, depression, shame, and sleep disruption.These are patterns also captured in this report.SAGE Journals+2Taylor & Fra. Zimbabwean analysis of online gender-based violence similarly warns that digital abuse undermines survivors' confidence, sense of safety and participation in public life, with effects that spill into family relationships, schooling and work.emthonjeniwf.org+1. Digital harm is not abstract, it lands inside people's bodies, routines, and sense of safety in every aspect.

From the survey:

- **59% reported moderate to severe anxiety**
- **51% reported moderate to severe depression**
- **65% reported significant levels of self-censorship**
- **62% reduced activism due to fear**

These quantitative findings mirrored the diarist's daily emotional navigation—fear in public spaces, hypervigilance in shared accommodation, shame and exhaustion from continuous slurs, disrupted sleep, and limited physical movement.

Story circle narratives similarly described:

- shrinking oneself in public
- avoiding town unless absolutely necessary
- adjusting dress to "blend in"
- burying traumatic memories to cope

*" I still remember the day someone screenshot my Facebook post about Pride Month and shared it in a local Masvingo group. The comments were filled with hate and*

*transphobic jokes. I pretended to brush it off, but inside, I was shaken. For days, I avoided town, feeling like everyone knew my business. I even changed my profile picture and stopped posting personal stuff. It wasn't just online anymore; it followed me into real life. Ndaitotya kufamba."* Anonymous ( Peer story submission)

*"I was bullied online when someone shared sensitive material on me. I helped a student in doing their thesis then the professor took parts of their work and published it online creating a lot of backlash on me. It went as far as reaching nationally influential platforms such as Zim Celebs and Nash TV.Family wisely it created uphills because some family members started attacking me saying I bring shame to the family name.I had a lot of people who knew and understood me commenting on my behalf.We did an investigation to discover that it was the lecturer who leaked the clip but to our disappointed he wasn't fired but just forced to just apologize.*-Anonymous (Peer story)

These emotional responses represent a form of **internalized safety labor**, a quiet and persistent tax on queer life on a daily basis.

## 7. Intersectional Vulnerability: Risk Intensified by Identity, Location and Class

Feminist research across Southern Africa shows that gender, sexuality, class, race, disability and geography layer together to shape who is most at risk of violence, both online and offline.WLSA statement. Within this frame, our research revealed how digital risk/harm is consistent with intersectional analyses that warn against treating "LGBTQI" experience as flat or singular.

Respondents reported that risk is amplified by:

- **Sexuality**
- **Gender identity**
- **Location**
- **Class**

Respondents largely agree that their sexuality and gender identity increase online risks, with many rating these dimensions at the upper end of the 5-point agreement scale. Location and class are also seen as significant risk multipliers, while race is somewhat less strongly but still noticeably associated with heightened vulnerability.

Data privacy concerns are very high: 51 respondents choose level 5 (most concerned) and 21 choose level 4, leaving only a small minority reporting low concern about platforms sharing their data with third parties.

This research data resonates strongly with the LBQT Girls Safety data, where:

- masculine-presenting women faced heightened suspicion
- feminine-presenting queer women faced fetishization
- poorer or high-density neighborhoods carried increased threat

Queer safety is therefore not a single-issue experience, it is shaped at the intersections of **identity, poverty, geography, and visibility**.

# 8. Offline Spillovers & A Week in the Life: The Digital Diarist's Window Into LBQT Survival

## 8.1 What the Digital Diary Is and Why It Matters

As part of this research, we invited one young queer person, gender non-conforming , to keep a **7-day digital diary**. Each day they completed a structured template (tick boxes and short answers) and a free-writing reflection about where they were online, what happened, how it felt in their body, and what changed in their offline life.

In the wider methodology, this diary sits alongside the **national survey** and **digital story circle**, giving us a close-up, time-based view of how digital harm and offline violence show up together.

### Table 8.1 – Digital Diary Overview

| Aspect | Description |
|---|---|
| Timeframe | 7 days in late October, including weekday commutes, study days, and a weekend with a weekly roll-up. |

| | |
|---|---|
| Diarist | Young queer student living in a shared boarding house, perceived as gender non-conforming and repeatedly called “ngochani”, “sim2”, “bakers inn”, “manyowa” by others. |
| Method | Daily tick-box questions (access, platforms, harms, responses, offline effects, safety scales) + an open narrative entry. |
| Main online spaces | WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, TikTok, university WiFi, public WiFi, mobile data, friends’ hotspots. |
| Main offline spaces | Kombis and kombi ranks, campus and library, boarding house, friend’s boarding house. |
| Internet reliance | Rated 4–5/5 on most days; the diarist repeatedly describes the internet as “essential” for coping and staying connected to safer-feeling spaces. |
| Core themes | Constant digital reliance in hostile environments; public transport and campus as high-risk zones; digital platforms as both refuge and risk; everyday verbal and sexualised threats; self-built safety strategies and care networks; strong emotional and mental health impact. |

The diary functions as more than “extra data.” It is a **standpoint**, a realistically grounded, lived account of how queerphobia and patriarchy travel through transport systems, classrooms, homes, and timelines. It allows us to see **offline spillover** not as an abstract category but as a daily rhythm of moving, hiding, and surviving.

Where the survey and story circle show that digital violence is routine and intersectional, the diary gives us one week in which that reality is lived in real time: the kombi ride, the slur in the lecture, the quiet decision to stay indoors, the relief of a TikTok scroll, the late-night struggle to sleep.

### 8.2 A Week of Digital Reliance in Hostile Spaces

Across the week, the diarist is almost always online **from spaces that are not safe**: cramped kombis, crowded campus corridors, shared kitchens, and tense boarding houses. The internet becomes some form of portable shield they carry with them.

**Table 8.2 – Offline Settings, Online Access, and Reliance**

| Typical setting | How they went online | Reliance (0–5) | Impact Example |
|---|---|---|---|
| Kombis / in transit | Personal phone + mobile data or downloaded content; sometimes using music instead of data to cope. | 5 | Music and scrolling used to block out stares and insults, even when data costs limit how long they can stay online. |
| Campus & library | University WiFi and desktops; personal phone on campus WiFi or hotspot. | 5 | Going to campus/library early, choosing quiet corners, using WiFi to stay busy and less visible. |
| Boarding house ("home") | House WiFi when electricity allows; otherwise personal data. | 4–5 | Staying in their room most of the day, using the phone and music as distraction from housemates' insults. |
| Friend's boarding house | Personal data; intermittent use while visiting. | 5 | visit cut short by direct threats ("hatidi ngochani pano"), leading to early departure and withdrawal at home. |

*"Hatidi ngochani pano*" translated from Shona means *" We don't want gays here!"*

Essentially ,this is **safety labour**: ongoing work the diarist does to manage risk, using digital tools to soothe, distract, and stay connected. The internet is not neutral here; it is carefully mobilised as:

- a mental health aid (music, movies, and queer content to “block out” harmful words),
- a social lifeline (friends and love interest checking in via WhatsApp and Instagram),
- and an academic necessity (lectures, webinars, and assignments).

This mirrors the broader report’s finding that queer Zimbabweans are **highly online and deeply dependent** on digital spaces to function, even as those same spaces host daily harm.

### 8.3 Forms of Harm and How They Spill Offline

The diary captures a wide spectrum of violence: local langauge slurs, threats of physical and sexual assault, public humiliation, impersonation, and suspicious digital approaches. These are not one-off events; they repeat across different days and settings.

**Table 8.3 – Main Harm Sites, Harms, and Offline Spillovers**

| Site | Harm experienced | Example from the diary | Offline consequence |
|---|---|---|---|
| Kombis & ranks | Verbal abuse, threats of physical assault and gang rape. | Conductors threaten to “beat the gay out of me” if they don’t cut their hair and “dress like a man”; later, they threaten gang rape “since you want to be a girl so much.” | Avoiding classes after incidents; opting for InDrive instead of kombis when they can afford it; ongoing fear and hypervigilance while commuting. |
| Campus & library | Open slurs, mockery, whispering, and giggling during academic activities. | Students call them “ngochani” and “disgusting”; during a presentation someone shouts “ndewe manyowa”; students | Loss of concentration; leaving the library early; skipping or shortening time on campus; feeling school as unsafe rather than nurturing. |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | whisper and laugh in the library. | |
| Boarding house | Coded and direct insults from housemates. | Referencing Mugabe, “sim2,” “bakers inn,” “ngochani”. | Choosing to stay in the room all day; self-isolation; anxiety and sleep disturbance; reluctance to report for fear of backlash from landlord/housemates |
| Friend’s boarding house | Direct rejection and threats | threats (“hatidi ngochani pano”) plus slurs “sim2,” “manyowa,” “bakers inn.” | Leaving abruptly; cancelled study plans; emotional numbness and withdrawal at home; heightened sense that “hate is everywhere.” |
| Digital-only harms | Impersonation. | Impersonation (friend’s photos used on Grindr); suspicious DM urging a friend to click a link and share screenshots | Reporting and blocking accounts; increased caution about links; intensified fear of outing and digital blackmail. |

These episodes show **offline spillover** in motion, digital and physical spaces feeding each other. A threat in a kombi sits in the same nervous system as a screenshot shared in a local Facebook group; a slur shouted in a lecture hall carries the same message as a mocking status update.

The wider data already showed us that many respondents have been **tracked after online arguments, outed in local groups, and harassed at work or school because of exposure online**. The diary gives that pattern a week-long storyline: harm in public transport, humiliation on campus, hostility at home, and suspicious digital approaches all show up in the same life, at the same time.

This reflects how **patriarchal and queerphobic power is spatial**. It doesn’t respect the boundary between “online” and “offline.” Instead, it pursues queer bodies and identities across spaces, using whatever tools ;slurs, rumours, screenshots and threats with no remorse at all.

## 8.4 Platforms, Safety Practices and Queer Joy

During the week, the diarist spends hundreds of minutes each day on WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook and TikTok.

**Table 8.4 – Platforms in the Diary vs. Platform Scores in the Survey**

| Platform | Diary snapshot (time, safety, use) | Key safety practices in diary | Survey perspective |
|---|---|---|---|
| WhatsApp | Used daily for 200–400+ minutes for family, friends, classmates, love interest. Safety rated 4–5/5 in most entries. | Turning off read receipts; hiding statuses from relatives and acquaintances who shame their sexuality; using chat as emotional support line. | Average safety score 2.6/5; 38% of respondents say their worst abuse happened here. |
| Instagram | 100–300+ minutes/day; used for entertainment, chatting with a love interest, posting and engaging with queer creators; consistently rated 4–5/5. | Carefully curating story viewers; using it to build an affirming community where “so many people are eager to understand queer existence and just love, love.” | Safety score 2.5/5; 13% cite it as their worst platform. |
| Facebook | Lower use (25–114 minutes/day); mostly for entertainment and Marketplace; safety rated 3–5/5 because the diarist rarely posts. | Avoiding posting; carrying a “cisgender heterosexual persona” due to relatives and old schoolmates watching; using it as a consumption-only space (reels, shopping). | Lowest safety score at 1.8/5; 23% report their worst abuse here; 78% feel unsafe. |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| TikTok | 140–346+ minutes/day; used for entertainment, inspiration, makeup and video editing tutorials; safety rated 5/5. | No major settings changes; exploring it as a possible platform for queer self-expression; main risk is comment-based hate, though none is recorded in this week. | Safety score 2.3/5; seen as slightly less hostile than Facebook/X, but still largely unsafe. |

A striking and intriguing contrast appears which is, **the diarist often rates platforms as "safe today" because of the work they've already done**: curating followers, hiding statuses, staying silent, or restricting posts. The wider community's ratings in the Social Media Safety Index remain firmly in the "unsafe/mixed" range.

This shows how **"safety" is experienced as a product of self-restriction** rather than platform protection. The diarist feels safer on Facebook on days when they don't post at all, and safer on WhatsApp once they have erased certain relatives and acquaintances from their audience.

At the same time, the diary reminds us that there is real **queer joy and affirmation** in these digital spaces: TikTok tutorials and queer content, Instagram communities that "love love," and relationships nurtured in DMs. This aligns with our wider finding that platforms are **simultaneously spaces of harm and resistance**, and that LBQT people are constantly doing the labour of turning unsafe platforms into micro-sanctuaries.

### 8.5 Emotional Labour, Safety Work and Care

Every diary entry ends with quick scales on **emotional strain, physical safety risk, economic impact, and social impact on relationships**. On most days, emotional strain sits at **4 or 5 out of 5**, and physical risk rises to 5 on days with direct threats.

The diarist's coping strategies map onto what this report has already named as **internalised safety labour**: small, constant acts that queer people perform to protect themselves in environments that refuse to do so.

- They change travel routes, avoid crowded paths, and pay more for InDrive to reduce exposure.
- They spend whole days in their room to avoid hostile housemates.
- They arrive early at the library, sit in corners, and leave when whispering and giggling start.

- They use music as a barrier between themselves and the world: “Listening to music helped a lot — it created a barrier between me and the outside world.”

Care appears in several layers:

- **Peer care:** friends who check in by message or in person, offering emotional validation even when they cannot fully understand.
- **Digital care:** queer content on Instagram and TikTok that affirms their identity, and the sense of being “seen, heard and understood” by online communities.
- **Self-care as survival:** withdrawing to rest, watching movies to quiet the mind after violence, and allowing themselves to avoid spaces that feel dangerous.

At the same time, the diary highlights **stark care gaps**: no trusted campus or public transport reporting pathways, no accessible queer-affirming mental health support, and no guarantee that landlords or authority figures will respond safely to reports.

This matches survey findings, where respondents reported high anxiety and depression, low trust in institutions, and heavy reliance on self-protection rather than formal mechanisms.

This paints a picture that tells us that **the cost of survival is being carried by queer people themselves** -emotionally, financially, and socially ,while platforms and institutions lag far behind.

## 8.6 How the Diary Braids Into the Wider Evidence

The digital diary does not stand apart from the rest of the research. It weaves together key threads from the **survey, story circle, and media monitoring**, showing how they land in one life over one week.

### Table 8.5 – Diary Themes and How They Echo the Larger Study

| Diary theme | What the diarist shows | Where it appears in the wider data |
|---|---|---|
| Digital violence as routine | Slurs, threats, and dehumanising comments appear across several | 59% of surveyed respondents encounter queer-targeted hate speech weekly or daily; story circle participants |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | days and spaces, from kombis to classrooms to boarding houses. | describe constant bullying and doxxing. |
| Offline spillover | Harassment on public transport, on campus, and at home is tied to queer identity and digital exposure, and affects movement, study, and sleep. | Section 8 of the original draft documented tracking, outings, and physical danger following online incidents. |
| Platforms as both risk and refuge | WhatsApp and Facebook are risky because of proximity to family and known contacts, yet are used daily; Instagram and TikTok feel like safe, affirming spaces with queer content and community. | The Social Media Safety Index shows low safety scores across all platforms, but also documents community resilience and creator activism. |
| Mental health impact | Emotional strain often rated 4–5/5; difficulty sleeping; withdrawing from spaces; feeling small, numb, or isolated after incidents. | Survey: 59% report moderate–severe anxiety, 51% moderate–severe depression; many reduce activism and self-censor due to fear. |
| Self-built safety ecosystems | Curating followers and status viewers, avoiding specific routes and vehicles, arriving early or leaving spaces early, using music as a “barrier,” leaning on friends and online community. | Sections 5, 9 and 10 show widespread use of self-protection strategies, low reporting to platforms, and limited reliance on formal support. |

Together, these threads confirm what the report argues as a whole:

- **Digital violence is widespread, layered, and deeply tied to local language and culture.**
- **Platforms consistently fail to protect queer Zimbabweans, especially in local languages.**
- **Offline harm is not separate from digital harm; they are part of the same ecosystem of control.**

- **Queer communities hold powerful survival strategies and care practices, but are forced to carry most of the burden themselves.**

The diary gives this ecosystem a human scale. Underneath all the charts and percentages, we see a young queer person simply trying to get through a week: catching kombis, attending lectures, avoiding housemates, scrolling Instagram, listening to music, and choosing, over and over, just to be themself.

# 9. Digital Security Practices & Barriers

Despite pervasive threats, queer people actively build their own safety ecosystems. These ecosystems are some of the simple ways in which Queer Zimbabweans navigate the online space while prioritising their safety.

Feminist digital justice initiatives across the global South highlight very similar practices and barriers to those mapped in this study: people rely on private accounts, encrypted messaging, audience curation and pseudonyms, but face high data costs, limited technical literacy, language barriers and fear of being outed when seeking help.[dawnfeminist.org+1]

### Common Tools Used

- Private accounts
- Avoiding location tags
- Pseudonyms
- Encrypted messaging

### Barriers

- High cost of tools
- Lack of awareness
- Fear of exposure

- Limited technical skills
- Language barriers

These barriers reflect broader structural inequities,not just digital ones. Similar barriers are documented in studies of online GBV in Zimbabwe, which point to the high price of secure devices and data, and to the dominance of English-language resources that may feel alien or inaccessible.emthonjeniwf.org+1

## 10. Community Reliance & Gaps in Support

Over **57% rarely or never rely on LGBTQIA+ community networks** for digital safety support.
This gap signals:

- the need for **accessible, low-risk safety hubs**,
- increased peer-to-peer training,
- and trusted community-led reporting pathways.

Nearly half of respondents (47) are not aware of any digital safety resources, and a further 26 are unsure, meaning only 28 clearly report awareness. Barriers to accessing digital safety tools are dominated by lack of awareness (24), fear of exposure (11), and cost (10), often in combination with technical skills and language constraints. Reliance on LGBTQIA+ networks for digital safety advice is generally low and irregular, with “rarely” (39) and “never” (19) more frequent than “daily” (9) or “weekly” (14), suggesting underutilised peer support potential

The LBQT Girls Safety report similarly highlights **low trust in institutions**, limited access to justice, and the need for **community-driven safety structures**.The fact that more than half of respondents rarely or never rely on LGBTQIA+ networks for digital safety reflects a broader pattern of under-resourced, over-stretched queer community structures in Zimbabwe and beyond

# 11. What the Community Wants: Clear Priorities for Platform Reform

When asked to rank priorities for digital safety reforms, respondents overwhelmingly chose:

1. **Faster reporting processes**
2. **User anonymity tools**
3. **Transparency in decision-making**
4. **Better human and automated moderation**

This is not passive vulnerability, it is informed and articulated advocacy. It goes beyond just " data" but centers actual realities and needs Queer Zimbabweans have in relation to safer digital futures.

The priorities named by participants i.e faster reporting processes, stronger anonymity tools, better moderation (including in local languages) and more transparency – track closely with the demands made by global LGBTQ advocacy, feminist digital rights groups and human rights organisations. GLAAD's 2025 Social Media Safety Index calls on platforms to reinstate robust anti-hate policies, ban targeted misgendering and deadnaming, publish detailed enforcement data and provide safer reporting pathways.AP News+1 Access Now's African analysis urges companies to invest in moderation for African languages, work with local civil society and address how algorithms amplify hateful content.Access Now . The Alert Desk recommendations therefore sit within a wider, coherent advocacy mantra: queer communities are not asking for special treatment, they are asking platforms to live up to their own stated commitments to safety and human rights.

# 12. Synthesis: What the Evidence Tells Us

Across all research components, several truths stand firm:

### 1. Digital violence is widespread, routine, and intersectional.

It targets queer identity, gender expression, class position, and location.

### 2. Platforms fail to protect queer people.

Users must self-moderate, self-protect, and in some cases self-withdraw to survive. Platforms do not consider local languages in their safety policies, this is one of the majority enabling factors to online harm towards queer persons.

### 3. Emotional, mental, and political costs are high.

Digital harm shrinks queer civic space and silences activism. This is seen even outside of Zimbabwe where activists have had to limit the online presence out of fear of being targeted by adversaries within different political movements.

### 4. Risk moves seamlessly across online and offline worlds.

Digital threats escalate into physical fear and restricted mobility.

### 5. Queer communities hold wisdom and resilience but lack accessible safety infrastructures.

There is opportunity—and need—for community-led digital security ecosystems.

### 6. LBQT people know exactly what they need from platforms and institutions.

Their demands are clear, informed, and rooted in lived experience.

## 13. Recommendations: A Care-Centered Roadmap Forward

### For Digital Platforms

- **Create faster, multilingual reporting pathways**
- **Allow greater user anonymity and account segmentation**
- **Strengthen moderation of queerphobic content**

- **Publish transparent data on moderation actions**

### For Community & Civil Society

- Establish **peer-led digital safety hubs**
- Expand **trauma-informed mental health spaces**
- Develop **low-tech, low-cost safety resources**
- Provide **legal literacy and rights education**

### For Institutions & Policymakers

- Integrate **SOGIE-sensitive training** for law enforcement
- Strengthen **privacy and data protection regulations across all platforms**
- Support **safer public service environments** for queer youth

### Advocacy and engagement with platforms

- Build an advocacy component that pushes platforms to implement the community's top priorities: faster reporting and response mechanisms, stronger user anonymity options and greater transparency and moderation quality.
- Use the evidence on high rates of hate speech, low perceived safety and high data privacy concern (especially level-5 concern about third-party sharing) to engage regulators, telecommunications actors and platform representatives

## 14. Conclusion: Toward a Feminist, Care-Based Digital Future

The Alert Desk research affirms what queer Zimbabweans have long known:
**Safety is something we build for ourselves-through knowledge, community, storytelling, and refusal to disappear or forced into hiding**

LBQT and LGBTQI Zimbabweans are navigating digital landscapes that were never designed with them in mind, yet they continue to carve out spaces of connection, joy, and resistance for themselves

This research is not just documentation. It is a call to action—rooted in care, guided by feminist values, and grounded in the lives of those who dare to be visible and vulnerable online.

By listening to their stories and honoring their strategies, we move closer to a Zimbabwe where queer digital life is not merely about surviving, but thriving.

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