Digital Wounds, Lived Realities: A Synthesis of Evidence on Online Hate and its Impact on Gender and Sexual Minorities in South Africa

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Abstract

South Africa, despite progressive legislation, continues to grapple with high rates of hate speech and violence against gender and sexual minorities (GSM). Online platforms have become a breeding ground for hate speech, potentially impacting the mental health and social inclusion of GSM individuals. This study employed a qualitative research design, integrating a systematic literature search guided by the PRISMA framework with a thematic analysis of secondary data between 2014–2024 to understand the impact of online hate speech on the mental health and social inclusion of GSM individuals in South Africa. Guided by multi-theoretical frameworks of minority stress theory, cyberpsychology and social identity theory, this study used thematic analysis of peer-reviewed articles focusing on "online hate speech," "GSM," "mental health," "social inclusion," and "South Africa." from databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, Sabinet, Web of Science, and AJOL and the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ). This study finally included nine papers from the initial 137 articles and documents identified during the search process. This study highlighted the prevalence of online hate speech against South Africa's LGBTQ+ community, linking it to worsening mental health, social exclusion, and healthcare barriers. It emphasised gaps in legal protections, education, and advocacy. Urgent policy interventions are needed to combat hate speech and support GSM.

Keywords: *online hate speech, gender and sexual minorities, mental health, social inclusion, South Africa, LGBTQI.*

Introduction

The digital revolution has transformed global communication, providing platforms for expression and engagement across geographical boundaries. However, these digital advancements have also facilitated the proliferation of online hate speech, which disproportionately affects marginalised communities, including gender and sexual minorities. This phenomenon has emerged as a significant concern, particularly in South Africa, where historical and socio-political complexities exacerbate the challenges faced by these vulnerable groups. Online hate speech not only inflicts psychological distress but also undermines social cohesion and inclusivity, contributing to broader public health concerns (Nkrumah, 2018; Kaushik, 2020). Research indicates that exposure to online hate speech correlates with severe mental health outcomes, including increased levels of anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Lucassen et al., 2017; Doyle and Molix, 2015). Other studies suggest that persistent experiences of discrimination and exclusion can lead to chronic stress and adverse health outcomes (Meyer et al., 2021; Källström et al., 2022). In the South African context, where attitudes toward gender and sexual minorities remain polarised, the psychological burden of online hate speech is particularly pronounced.

The dual nature of digital spaces, offering both empowerment and vulnerability, further complicates the issue. While online platforms can offer safe spaces for community building and advocacy, they also serve as arenas for targeted harassment and exclusion (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2012; Mustanski et al., 2014). The paradox of online engagement for marginalised communities requires a deeper understanding of the factors that amplify or mitigate the negative impacts of hate speech. Despite the global discourse on online hate speech, research focussing on its impact on gender and sexual minorities in the South African context remains limited. Most existing studies have primarily examined hate speech from a legal and policy perspective rather than its psychosocial consequences (Saunderson et al., 2019; Williams et al., 2019). Additionally, while international research has established links between online hate speech and mental

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health issues, localised studies addressing the unique socio-cultural and digital landscape of South Africa are scarce (Döring & Mohseni, 2020; Stefăniţă & Buf, 2021).

Research Problem

The proliferation of online hate speech has emerged as a pressing social issue, particularly affecting gender and sexual minorities in South Africa. Despite the country's constitutional protections against discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity, the digital landscape remains rife with hate speech that can exacerbate mental health issues and hinder social inclusion for these marginalised communities (Saunderson et al., 2019; Ştefăniţă and Buf, 2021). The anonymity and reach of social media platforms have facilitated the spread of derogatory language and harmful stereotypes, leading to increased instances of psychological distress among individuals targeted by such discourse (Wachs et al., 2021; ElSherief et al., 2018). Research indicates that exposure to online hate speech can result in significant mental health challenges, including increased anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation among gender and sexual minorities (Kansok-Dusche et al., 2022; Garland et al., 2020). The cumulative effects of witnessing or experiencing hate speech can create an environment of fear and isolation, further marginalising these individuals within society (Obermaier et al., 2023; Wachs et al., 2021). Furthermore, the lack of effective moderation and regulation of hate speech on digital platforms exacerbates the problem, allowing harmful rhetoric to proliferate unchecked (Lupu et al., 2023; Jääskeläinen, 2019). Social norms, individual behaviours, and the broader socio-political context in South Africa compound the complexity of addressing online hate speech. Moral disengagement, empathy, and the perceived social environment influence how individuals respond to hate speech as bystanders or perpetrators (Saunderson et al., 2019; Henry and Powell, 2016). This dynamic creates a challenging landscape for understanding the full impact of online hate speech on mental health and social inclusion for gender and sexual minorities.

Furthermore, the existing literature highlights a gap in comprehensive studies examining the intersection of online hate speech, mental health, and social inclusion within the South African context (Bowker and Ophoff, 2022; Modha et al., 2021). While there is a growing body of research on hate speech in general, there is a need for targeted investigations that focus on the unique experiences of GSM in South Africa, particularly in the digital environment (Ştefăniţă and Buf, 2021; Garland et al., 2020). Without immediate action, the adverse psychological and social consequences for GSM will continue to worsen, potentially leading to higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicide. Understanding the impact of online hate speech will aid in developing more effective policies and interventions. By addressing this issue, society can foster a more inclusive and supportive digital environment, thus improving mental well-being and social cohesion for marginalised communities. Moreover, existing studies mainly emphasise legal and policy frameworks rather than exploring GSM's psychological and social implications. This research provides new insights into how hate speech manifests itself in digital spaces, its direct effects on mental health, and the effectiveness of current social media moderation policies.

Research Focus

While online hate speech has been widely studied in global contexts, there is a lack of comprehensive research focused on South Africa. This study fills this gap by systematically analysing the effects of online hate speech on mental health and social inclusion for gender and sexual minorities in South Africa. By integrating insights from minority stress theory, cyberpsychology, and social identity theory, this research will provide a deeper understanding of how digital environments influence psychological well-being and community belonging. Furthermore, the findings could inform targeted interventions, contribute to policy development and advocacy efforts to promote safer and more inclusive online spaces and provide evidence-based recommendations for policymakers, mental health professionals, and regulators of digital platforms to improve protective measures for GSM. The primary aim of this study is to investigate the relationship between online hate speech, mental health outcomes, and social inclusion among gender and sexual minorities in South Africa with the following objectives:

- To analyse the impact of online hate speech on the mental health of gender and sexual minorities in South Africa, including social inclusion and access to essential services in South Africa.

- To identify effective policy, legal, and advocacy interventions that can mitigate the harmful effects of online hate speech on GSM individuals in South Africa.

Guided by the objectives, the study aimed to answer the following questions:

- How does online hate speech impact mental health, social inclusion, and access to essential services for GSM in South Africa?

- What policy, legal, and advocacy interventions can mitigate these effects?

Literature Review

Online hate speech is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon that has attracted considerable attention in both academic and public discourse. While there is no universally accepted definition, it is generally understood as any form of communication that disparages or incites violence against individuals or groups based on characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, or nationality (Miok et al., 2019; Garland et al., 2020). This definition encompasses a range of expressions, from derogatory comments and slurs to more insidious forms of hate that may not explicitly call for violence but still contribute to a hostile environment for marginalised groups (Garland et al., 2020; ElSherief et al., 2018).

The distinction between hate speech and other forms of online aggression, such as cyberbullying, is crucial to understanding its implications. Cyberbullying typically involves repeated aggressive behaviour directed at an individual, while hate speech can manifest itself as a single act or comment that targets a collective group (Kansok-Dusche et al., 2022; Miškolci et al., 2018). This differentiation is important as it highlights the varying motivations and impacts of each type of online aggression. In addition, the context in which hate speech occurs plays an important role in its interpretation and impact. For example, the same statement may be perceived as hate speech in one cultural context but not in another, reflecting the influence of social norms and values on the definition of hate speech (Álvarez and Winter, 2018; Jääskeläinen, 2019). This variability underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of hate speech that considers both the content of the speech and the societal context in which it is situated. In the context of this study, GSM include, but are not limited to, individuals who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, asexual, transgender, queer, and/or intersex. Individuals with same-sex or -gender attractions or behaviours and those with variations in sex characteristics are also included (National Institute of Health, 2024).

Types of Online Hate Speech

Online hate speech can be categorised into several types based on the nature of the targeted group and the intent of the speech. Common categories include:

Racial Hate Speech: This type targets individuals based on their race or ethnicity, often perpetuating harmful stereotypes and inciting racial violence. It can manifest itself in derogatory language, imagery, or calls for segregation (Miok et al., 2019; Garland et al., 2020).

Sexual Orientation Hate Speech: This form of hate speech is directed at individuals based on their sexual orientation or gender identity. It often includes slurs and derogatory remarks aimed at LGBTQIA+ individuals, contributing to a climate of fear and exclusion (Ştefăniţă and Buf, 2021; Gitari et al., 2015).

Religious Hate Speech: This targets an individual based on their religious beliefs and can incite violence against religious minorities and perpetuate intolerance. It often involves inflammatory rhetoric that seeks to delegitimise or dehumanise individuals based on their faith (Garland et al., 2020; Keya, 2023).

Gender-Based Hate Speech: This category includes speech that targets individuals based on their gender, often manifesting as misogyny or transphobia. It can contribute to systemic discrimination and violence against women and gender non-conforming individuals (Ștefãnițã and Buf, 2021; Jääskeläinen, 2019).

Disability Hate Speech: Designed to target people with disabilities, this type of hate speech often uses derogatory language and perpetuates harmful stereotypes, further marginalising already vulnerable populations (Miok et al., 2019; Keya, 2023).

Historical and Legal Overview

The interplay of colonialism, apartheid, and the post-apartheid struggle for equality marks the historical context of gender and sexual minorities in South Africa. Under apartheid, laws were explicitly discriminatory, criminalising same-sex relationships and enforcing rigid gender norms. The end of apartheid in 1994 marked a significant turning point, as South Africa became the first country in Africa to enshrine protections for sexual orientation in its Constitution (Vincent and Howell, 2014). The legal framework established during this period, including the Civil Union Act of 2006, which legalised same-sex marriage, reflects a commitment to human rights and equality for all citizens, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity (Vincent and Howell, 2014).

Despite these legal advancements, the lived experiences of GSM often reveal a stark contrast between legal rights and social realities. While many LGBTQIA+ individuals express pride in the legal protections afforded to them, they simultaneously report high levels of discrimination, violence, and social exclusion (Crandall et al., 2022; Closson et al., 2023). This dissonance highlights the ongoing challenges GSM faces in navigating a society that, while legally progressive, remains deeply influenced by historical prejudices and cultural attitudes.

South Africa's legal framework regarding hate speech is primarily rooted in the Constitution, which explicitly prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. The Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (2000) further reinforces these protections by criminalising hate speech and promoting equality (Álvarez and Winter 2018). Additionallythe Films and Publications Act (1996) regulates the distribution of content that can incite violence or hatred against specific groups, including those based on sexual orientation (Windisch et al., 2022).

Despite these legal protections, the enforcement of hate speech laws remains inconsistent. The South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) has been active in addressing hate speech incidents. However, the effectiveness of these interventions often hinges on public awareness and the willingness of victims to report incidents (Bilewicz et al., 2015). Furthermore, the lack of comprehensive guidelines for social media companies on the moderation of hate speech complicates the enforcement of existing laws (Costello et al., 2018).

Social Challenges and Cultural Attitudes

Cultural attitudes towards GSM in South Africa are diverse and often polarised. While urban areas, particularly cities such as Cape Town, are perceived as more accepting and inclusive, rural regions may harbour more conservative views that stigmatise LGBTQIA+ identities (Moyo & Thow, 2020; Closson et al., 2023). The intersection of race, class, and sexuality further complicates these dynamics, as individuals from marginalised backgrounds may face compounded discrimination and violence (Closson et al., 2023; MacLachlan et al., 2012).

Social challenges for GSM include high rates of hate crimes, bullying, and discrimination in various spheres of life, including employment, healthcare, and education (Breen and Nel, 2016; Munyuki & Vincent, 2017). The persistence of homophobic attitudes, often rooted in traditional beliefs and cultural norms, contributes to a climate of fear and marginalisation for LGBTQIA+ individuals (Hout and Wessels, 2021; Nduna et al., 2017). Furthermore, the historical legacy of apartheid and the ongoing socioeconomic inequalities

exacerbate the vulnerabilities faced by GSM, limiting their access to resources and support systems (Faulkner et al., 2017; Conway, 2021).

Digital Visibility and Vulnerability

The rise of digital technology has provided new avenues for visibility and activism for GSM in South Africa. Social media platforms have become essential tools for advocacy, community building, and self-expression (Netnou-Nkoana et al., 2015; Mathiba, 2021). However, this increased visibility also comes with increased risks, as online hate speech and cyberbullying have emerged as significant threats to the well-being of LGBTQIA+ individuals (Vincent and Howell, 2014; Sanger and Lynch, 2017; Häussler, 2019). Research indicates that exposure to online hate speech can lead to severe psychological distress, including anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation (Marnell et al., 2020; Mafumbu et al., 2022). The anonymity afforded by the Internet can encourage individuals to engage in hate speech without fear of repercussions, creating a hostile digital environment for marginalised communities (Wilhelm, 2020). Furthermore, the intersection of multiple marginalised identities can compound the risks faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals. For example, individuals of racial or ethnic minority backgrounds can experience both racism and homophobia, leading to greater vulnerability (Mustanski et al., 2014). The management of personal identity in digital spaces presents additional risks for GSM. Practices on some platforms can lead to unintended disclosures of sexual orientation or gender identity (Nkrumah, 2018). This lack of control over personal information can have negative consequences, including ostracism from family and friends, discrimination in professional settings, and increased vulnerability to hate speech (Kaushik, 2020). Research has shown that LGBTQIA+ individuals often navigate their online presence carefully, weighing the benefits of visibility against the potential risks of exposure (Doyle and Molix, 2015). The fear of experiencing violence and discrimination can deter individuals from accessing resources or seeking support, further exacerbating feelings of isolation (Liu and Reczek, 2021).

Digital visibility refers to how individuals and communities can present themselves and their identities in online spaces. For GSM, the Internet has become a vital platform for self-expression, advocacy, and community building (Young and Wigdor, 2021; Kern, 2014). Social media platforms, blogs, and online forums allow LGBTQIA+ individuals to share their stories, connect with others, and mobilise for social change. This increased visibility can foster a sense of belonging and solidarity among marginalised groups as they find support and affirmation in digital communities (Grieve and March, 2020). However, the visibility provided by digital platforms is not without challenges. Although online spaces can amplify marginalised voices, they can expose individuals to scrutiny, harassment, and hate speech. This contradiction highlights the complexities of digital visibility, where the risks of backlash and discrimination often accompany the potential for empowerment.

International Comparisons

Comparing South Africa's approach to hate speech regulation with other countries can provide valuable insights into potential improvements. For instance, Germany has implemented strict hate speech laws that criminalise the dissemination of hate speech online, with significant penalties for offenders (Wachs and Wright, 2018). This model emphasises the importance of proactive measures in combating online hate speech and could inform South Africa's regulatory approach.

In contrast, the United States adopts a more permissive stance on hate speech, prioritising free speech protections under the First Amendment. This approach has led to ongoing debates about the balance between protecting free expression and addressing the harms caused by hate speech (Nkrumah, 2018). While this model may not directly apply to South Africa, it underscores the complexities of regulating hate speech in diverse socio-political contexts. Additionally, countries like Canada have implemented comprehensive hate speech laws that include provisions for online harassment, highlighting the need for a holistic approach to addressing hate speech across various platforms (Zhang and Luo, 2019). These international examples could guide South Africa in improving its regulatory framework by adopting best practices from other jurisdictions.

Gaps and Challenges

One major limitation is the ambiguity surrounding the definitions of hate speech and online harassment, which can lead to inconsistent interpretations and enforcement (Lupu et al., 2023). For example, the distinction between hate speech and free speech is often contested, creating challenges for legal practitioners and law enforcement (Kansok-Dusche et al., 2022). Likewise, existing policies may not adequately address the unique experiences of GSM. Research indicates that LGBTQIA+ individuals often face compounded discrimination, which may not be fully captured by current hate speech legislation (Uyheng and Carley, 2020). In addition, the rise of digital platforms has outpaced the development of appropriate regulatory frameworks. Social media companies often operate under self-regulation, leading to significant variability in how hate speech is addressed across different platforms (Palapah, 2023). This lack of standardised policies can create environments where hate speech proliferates, undermining the protections afforded by South African law.

Theoretical Approaches to Understanding Online Hate Speech

The application of various theoretical frameworks could help us to understand the dynamics and implications of online hate speeches. This study used three key theoretical approaches: Cyberpsychology, Minority Stress Theory, and Social Identity Theory. Each framework offers unique information on motivations, effects, and potential interventions related to online hate speech. Firstly, cyberpsychology describes how digital environments influence human behaviour, emotions, and interactions. This theoretical framework is particularly relevant in understanding online hate speech, as it examines the psychological effects of engaging in and being exposed to hate speech in digital spaces. One of the central concepts within cyberpsychology is the "online disinhibition effect," which posits that individuals may feel less restrained in their online interactions due to the perceived anonymity of the Internet (Wachs et al., 2021; Lupu et al., 2023). This disinhibition can increase aggression and hostility, resulting in the proliferation of hate speech. Research has shown that the online environment can alter social norms and expectations, leading individuals to express views they might suppress in face-to-face interactions (Aljasir, 2023). This shift can create a culture where hate speech is normalised, further perpetuating its occurrence. Additionally, the impact of witnessing hate speech can lead to desensitisation, where individuals become less empathetic toward the victims of such speech, thus contributing to a cycle of hostility and aggression (Gao, 2017). Understanding these dynamics through the lens of cyberpsychology can inform strategies to counter hate speech and promote more positive online interactions. In addition, the Minority Stress Theory provides a framework for understanding the unique stressors faced by individuals belonging to marginalised groups, including GSM. This theory posits that chronic stress associated with stigma, discrimination, and social exclusion can lead to significant mental health challenges (Celuch et al., 2022; Wachs and Wright, 2018). In the context of online hate speech, exposure to such discourse acts as an additional stressor that can exacerbate feelings of anxiety, depression, and isolation among targeted individuals.

Research indicates that the psychological impact of online hate speech can be profound, leading to increased rates of mental health disorders among gender and sexual minorities (Park, 2023; Ştefăniță and Buf, 2021). The theory emphasises the importance of social support and community resilience in mitigating these effects. By understanding the mechanisms through which online hate speech contributes to minority stress, interventions can be designed to provide targeted support and resources to affected individuals, fostering resilience and promoting mental well-being (Uyheng and Carley, 2021). Lastly, social identity theory posits that individuals derive part of their self-concept from group memberships, which can significantly influence their behaviours and attitudes. This framework is particularly relevant in the context of online hate speech, as it highlights how group dynamics can shape the perception and perpetuation of hate speech (ElSherief et al., 2018; Papcunová et al., 2022). When individuals identify strongly with a particular social group, they may feel compelled to defend that group against perceived threats, which can manifest as hate speech directed at out-groups. The theory also suggests that in-group favouritism and out-group derogation can lead to the justification of hate speech as a means of reinforcing group identity (Thuku, 2022; Laaksonen et al., 2020). Understanding these dynamics is crucial to address the root causes of hate speech and develop interventions that promote dialogue and understanding between groups. By fostering a sense of shared

identity and common humanity, it may be possible to reduce the prevalence of hate speech and its associated harms (Bowker and Ophoff, 2022; Kwarteng et al., 2021).

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research design, integrating a systematic literature search guided by the PRISMA framework with a thematic analysis of the resulting secondary data (Page et al., 2021). This hybrid approach was chosen to ensure both a transparent, replicable process for source selection and a rich, interpretive analysis of the final data set (Braun & Clarke, 2022). As a desktop study conducted by a single researcher, this design provides a robust framework for exploring the complex interplay between online hate speech, mental health, and social inclusion for gender and sexual minorities in South Africa.

Literature Search and Selection

A purposive sampling strategy was utilised to select relevant secondary sources for analysis. The articles were compiled through a systematic search of academic databases.

Search strategy: A comprehensive search was conducted on Google Scholar, Scopus, Sabinet, Web of Science, and AJOL and DOAJ using a combination of keywords. These included: "online hate speech", "cyberbullying", "LGBTQ+", "gender and sexual minorities", "queer", "mental health", "social inclusion", "social exclusion", and "South Africa". Boolean operators (AND/OR) were used to refine the search results.

Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria: Sources were included if they met the following criteria as shown in Table 1.

<p align="center">Table 1: Selection criteria for the study</p>

Criteria	Inclusion	Exclusion
Publication Status	Published Qualitative, quantitative, mixed methods, systematic review studies, government reports/policy documents and Editorials.	Unpublished Studies like Preprints, theses and Dissertations
Population	Focussing on Gender and Sexual Minorities (GSM)	Focussing on other populations excluding GSM
Language	Published in English	Not Published in English
Research Setting	South Africa or including South Africa	Not Focussing on South Africa
Publication Date	2014-2024	Published before 2014

This study adhered strictly to the four-phase process of the identification, screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion of studies prescribed by the PRISMA guidelines, as shown in Figure 1, which ensured methodological rigour, transparency, and reproducibility (Mishra and Mishra, 2023). Initial search results of 682 records were screened for duplicates, and titles and abstracts were reviewed to determine eligibility based on inclusion and exclusion criteria. After removing 556 duplicates, the titles and abstracts of 126 records were screened for relevance against the inclusion criteria. 74 records were excluded at this stage. The full texts of the remaining 52 articles were retrieved and assessed for eligibility. 43 articles were excluded during this phase for the following reasons: Not focusing on South Africa (n=18), no direct focus on GSM (n=13) and not focusing on ate speech and mental health (n=5). A final nine sources were included in the thematic synthesis. As this review was conducted by a single author, a rigorous and reflexive approach to screening was maintained. Each eligibility decision was explicitly justified and documented against the pre-defined criteria to ensure consistency and minimise selection bias. Furthermore, two independent reviewers reviewed the selection process based on the inclusion criteria. The differences or disagreements during the

study selection were resolved through discussion and consensus between the author and the reviewers, leading to Table 2 showing the final selected articles for the study.

Figure 1: PRISMA Flow chart for the selection process
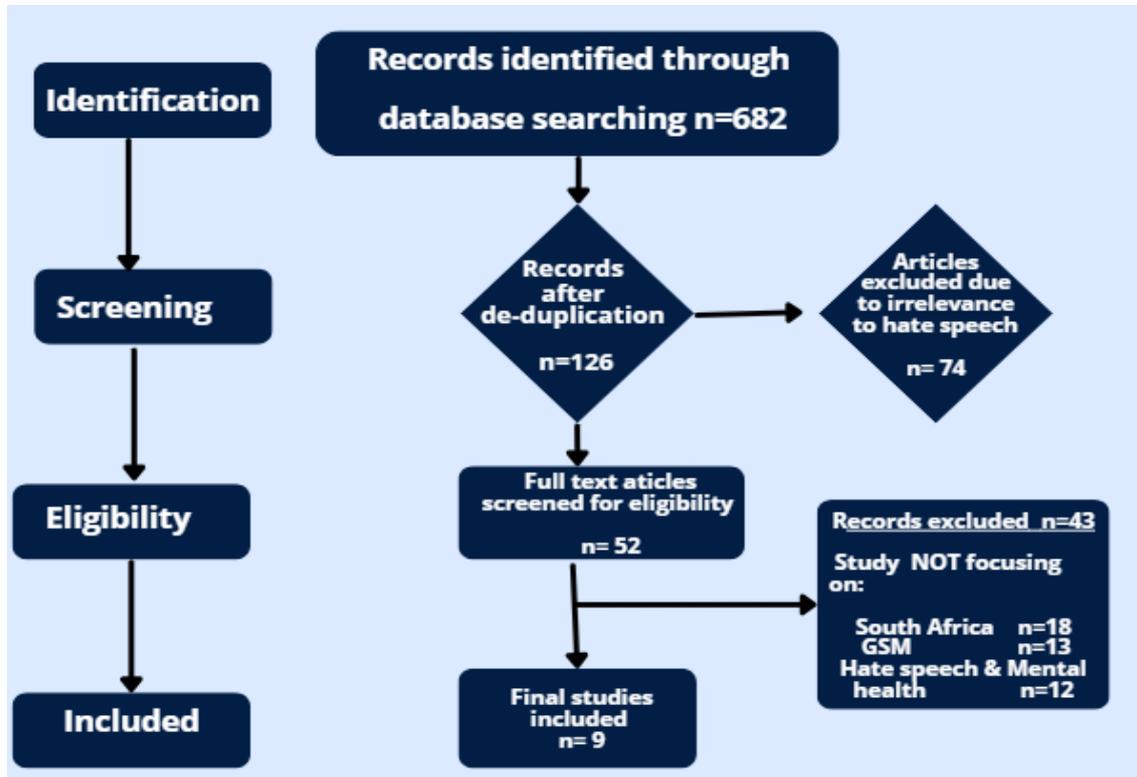
Results

The results of the article selection process are shown in Table 2.

Table2: Charting Table: Analysis of Key Literature

Author(s) & Year	Journal/Source Type	Methodology Used	Relevant Key Focus
Judge, M, Nel, J. (2017)	South African Journal of Psychology	Critical analysis; review of legal and policy frameworks; engagement with restorative justice	Examines the psychological dimensions of hate speech, especially its impact on LGBT people; highlights the entanglement of hate speech and violence, and the need for restorative approaches to address psychological harm.
Marais, A, Nel, J, Govender, R. (2021)	South African Journal of Psychology	Quantitative survey (n=409); analysis of self-reported emotional, mental, economic, and physical changes	Investigates the emotional and psychological consequences of hate incidents, showing that hate-motivated acts inflict deeper psychological harm, especially when targeting unchangeable identity characteristics.
Marnell, J, Oliveira, E, Khan,	Sexualities	Qualitative, arts-based participatory research; visual and narrative	Explores the lived experiences of queer migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers, focusing on identity negotiation, resistance to oppression, and the search for belonging

G. (2020)		artefacts from queer migrants	amid structural discrimination and online/offline vulnerabilities.
Müller, A. (2017)	BMC International Health and Human Rights	Qualitative interviews (16 individuals, 2 focus groups with LGBT users; 14 with LGBT org reps); thematic analysis.	Assesses healthcare access for LGBT people, focusing on availability, accessibility, acceptability, and quality; highlights systemic barriers and discrimination, including those exacerbated by online hate.
Müller, A., Hughes, T. (2016)	BMC Public Health	Systematic review (PRISMA guidelines) of empirical studies (2000–2015)	Synthesizes evidence on sexual minority women's health in Southern Africa, identifying health disparities, violence, and the impact of criminalizing laws; notes gaps in population-level data and the effects of stigma, including online.
Nkrumah, B. (2018)	Alternation Interdisciplinary Journal for the Study of the Arts and Humanities in Southern Africa	Legal, technological, and political analysis; review of case studies and policy	Analyses the rise of online hate speech in South Africa, its psychological harms, and the challenges of regulation; discusses the need for urgent legal frameworks to address digital hate targeting minorities.
Reygan, F. (2018)	Perspectives in Education	Policy and literature analysis; critical reflection on education sector responses	Examines sexual and gender diversity in schools, focusing on inclusion/exclusion, policy gaps, and the need for teacher preparedness to address homophobia and transphobia, including online forms.
Saunderson, I, Roeloefse, C, Gumbi, C. (2019)	Alternation Interdisciplinary Journal for the Study of the Arts and Humanities in Southern Africa	Criminological and communicological investigation; review of social media cases	Investigates hate speech crimes in cyberspace, analysing the "cyber-mind" and the criminological aspects of online hate, with a focus on South African social media.
Victor, C, Nel, J, Lynch, I, Mbatha, K. (2014)	South African Journal of Psychology	Policy position statement; synthesis of research and professional guidelines	Outlines the Psychological Society of South Africa's stance on sexual and gender diversity, advocating for non-discrimination, self-determination, and awareness of intersecting forms of oppression, including those perpetuated online.

Data Analysis

A qualitative thematic analysis of the findings was conducted to identify common themes and patterns across the included studies. This analysis was guided by the research questions focusing on the impacts of online hate speech on mental health and the social inclusion of GSM. The included studies were analysed thematically, as described by Braun and Clarke (2022). The researcher read and re-read the selected articles several times to gain a deep understanding. This was followed by identifying and labelling the relevant data points and initial codes capturing useful concepts relevant to the research questions and focus were generated. To further enhance the rigour of the review, Atlas.ti (v24) was used to code the selected studies, with the generated themes from the coding compared with the codes obtained from the manual analysis. Furthermore, after reviewing and refining the compared themes, two independent coders analysed the selected articles independently and came up with independent tables of themes. The ensuing comparison with the researcher's table of themes led to a final table of six themes, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: The emergent themes from the thematic analysis of the selected articles

Theme	Description	Relevant Articles
1. Prevalence and Patterns of Online Hate Speech	The trend and recurring forms of online hate speech against GSM in South Africa include verbal abuse, threats, and derogatory remarks.	Nkrumah (2018); Saunderson, Roeloefse, and Gumbi (2019); Judge and Nel (2017
2. Mental Health Outcomes	Significant psychological impacts of online hate speech, including depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation among GSM.	Marais, Nel, and Govender (2021); Müller (2017); Victor, Nel, Lynch and Mbatha (2014)
3. Social Exclusion and Marginalisation	Contributions of online hate speech to social isolation, marginalisation, and reduced sense of belonging for GSM.	Marnell, Oliveira, and Khan (2020); Reygan (2018); Victor, Nel, Lynch, and Mbatha (2014)
4. Healthcare Access Barriers	Challenges in accessing equitable and non-discriminatory healthcare due to hate speech and systemic exclusion.	Müller (2017); Müller and Hughes (2016)
5. Inadequacies in Policy and Legal Frameworks	Gaps in policies addressing hate speech and their enforcement to protect GSM rights in online and offline spaces.	Nkrumah (2018); Saunderson, Roeloefse, and Gumbi (2019); Victor, Nel, Lynch, and Mbatha (2014)
6. Educational and Advocacy Initiatives	Role of education and advocacy in countering hate speech and fostering social inclusion for GSM.	Reygan (2018); Victor, Nel, Lynch, and Mbatha (2014); Judge and Nel (2017)

The analysis of the nine articles revealed six key themes regarding the impact of online hate speech on GSM in South Africa. First, the prevalence and patterns of online hate speech highlighted recurring forms of verbal abuse, threats, and derogatory remarks targeting GSM individuals, reflecting a disturbing trend in digital spaces. This was closely linked to mental health outcomes, as exposure to such hate speech significantly increased rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. Furthermore, the findings underscored the role of online hate speech in social exclusion and marginalisation, which diminished the sense of belonging and community participation among GSM individuals. These challenges were exacerbated by healthcare access barriers, where discriminatory practices and systemic exclusion hindered equitable care for GSM populations. The analysis also exposed inadequacies in policy and legal frameworks, with gaps in addressing and enforcing protections against online hate speech, leaving GSM individuals vulnerable. Finally, the importance of educational and advocacy initiatives emerged as a critical theme, emphasising the need for inclusive education, awareness campaigns, and advocacy efforts to counter hate speech and promote social inclusion for GSM. These interconnected themes collectively illustrate the multifaceted impact of online hate speech and the need for holistic solutions.

Discussion

The study shed light on the prevalence and patterns of online hate speech directed at GSM individuals in South Africa. This is characterised by recurring forms of verbal abuse, threats, and derogatory remarks, reflecting a disturbing trend in digital interactions. Research indicates that online hate speech is not merely an isolated issue but part of a broader societal problem where marginalised groups face systemic discrimination. For instance, Deligianni and Horne's (2023) analysis of hate speech on platforms like Reddit reveals similar patterns of derogatory language targeting women, which can be extrapolated to understand the experiences of GSM individuals. Furthermore, the work of Leo and Russo (2023) emphasises that hate speech often stems from deep-seated cultural prejudices, which perpetuate stereotypes and increase the risk

of abuse against marginalised populations. This aligns with the findings of the current study, which illustrates how such verbal assaults contribute to a hostile online environment for GSM individuals in South Africa. In addition, the review highlights that exposure to online hate speech is associated with increased levels of anxiety, depression, and trauma among GSM in South Africa. This aligns with existing literature that emphasises the psychological toll of hate speech on marginalised communities (Windisch et al., 2022; Bilewicz et al., 2015). The analysis further indicates that individuals who encounter hate speech are at a higher risk of experiencing depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation. This finding is corroborated by existing literature, which consistently demonstrates the detrimental effects of hate speech on mental health. For example, Keighley (2021) highlights the psychological toll that online hate can take on LGBTQ+ youth, noting that such experiences can lead to feelings of isolation and despair. Similarly, the work of Wachs et al. (2022) suggests that witnessing online hate can exacerbate mental health issues among adolescents, further emphasising the need for supportive interventions. The cumulative evidence underscores the urgent need to allocate mental health resources tailored to GSM individuals' unique challenges in the digital space in South Africa.

The study shows that exposure to hate speech diminishes GSM individuals' sense of belonging and community participation. This aligns with the research conducted by Bilewicz and Soral (2020), which illustrates how derogatory language can foster an environment of intolerance, leading to the social isolation of targeted groups. Additionally, the work of Costello et al. (2019) highlights how social group identity influences perceptions of online hate, suggesting that marginalised individuals may internalise negative stereotypes, further alienating them from their communities. The interconnectedness of these findings illustrates the profound impact of hate speech on social cohesion and the importance of fostering inclusive environments for GSM individuals in South Africa. Similarly, the compounded effects of minority stress suggest that the chronic stressors faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals, including discrimination and social exclusion, are exacerbated by online hate speech (Costello et al., 2018; Lupu et al., 2023). Furthermore, the findings indicate that the fear of online hostility can lead to the digital exclusion of GSM in the country, limiting access to vital resources and support networks. This is consistent with earlier research that underscores marginalised groups' barriers to engaging with digital spaces (Kansok-Dusche et al., 2022; Uyheng and Carley, 2020). The intersectionality of identity, where individuals belong to multiple marginalised groups, further complicates these dynamics, leading to heightened vulnerability and mental health disparities (Palapah, 2023; Wachs and Wright, 2018).

Other findings of the analysis reveal that discriminatory practices and systemic exclusion hinder equitable care for GSM populations in South Africa. This issue is echoed in the literature, where researchers have documented the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals in accessing healthcare services. For example, Henry and Powell (2016) discuss how technology-facilitated violence, including hate speech, can create barriers to seeking help, thereby exacerbating health disparities among marginalised groups. Furthermore, Obermaier et al. (2023) highlight the role of bystander intervention in combating hate speech, suggesting that community support is crucial in addressing healthcare access issues for GSM individuals. The evidence points to a pressing need for healthcare systems in South Africa to adopt inclusive practices that address the unique needs of GSM populations. The review also sheds light on inadequate policy enforcement and legal frameworks regarding online hate speech in South Africa. The analysis reveals gaps in addressing and enforcing protections for GSM individuals, leaving them vulnerable to ongoing harassment. This concern is alluded to by Gelber and McNamara (2015), who argue for the necessity of robust legal frameworks to combat hate speech effectively. Additionally, the work of Sękowska-Kozłowska (2022) emphasises the need for international recognition of sexist hate speech, advocating for legal protections that extend to all forms of discrimination. The current findings underscore the urgency of reforming policy frameworks and enforcement to ensure that GSM individuals are adequately protected from online hate. Finally, the study emphasises the need for inclusive education, awareness campaigns and advocacy efforts to counter hate speech and promote social inclusion for GSM individuals in South Africa. This aligns with the research conducted by Wachs et al. (2023), which highlights the positive impact of educational programmes on adolescents' empathy and self-efficacy in addressing hate speech. Furthermore, Lai (2024) underscores the need for comprehensive strategies to combat misinformation and hate speech targeting LGBTQ+

communities. The findings suggest that proactive educational initiatives are essential in fostering a culture of respect and inclusion for GSM individuals.

Multi-theoretical implications for policy and practice

The experiences of GSM individuals in South Africa are profoundly impacted by societal stigma, discrimination, and victimisation, as highlighted by the Minority Stress Theory. Online environments, in particular, play a significant role in perpetuating hate speech, as explained by Cyberpsychology. This toxic online culture undermines GSM groups' social cohesion and identity, leading to feelings of exclusion and marginalisation, as noted by Social Identity Theory. To address these issues, there is an urgent need for comprehensive policies and interventions, including accessible mental health services, robust digital policies, inclusive education, and anti-bias initiatives, to promote social inclusion and challenge harmful stereotypes. The strategies should involve strengthening digital governance to curb online hate speech by the government and promoting inclusive education among young people by the Department of Basic Education to challenge harmful stereotypes and foster diversity. In addition, in all government tiers, the Department of Health should provide accessible mental health services to support GSM individuals, including training for healthcare workers and implementing community engagement awareness programmes.

Limitations of the Study

While this study provides valuable insights, the focus on South Africa may reduce the generalisability of the findings to other contexts, particularly those with different socio-political and legal landscapes. Furthermore, the reliance on existing literature might have been influenced by publication bias, as studies with significant findings are more likely to be published than those with null results. The rapidly evolving nature of online platforms and hate speech dynamics necessitates ongoing research to capture emerging trends and challenges. The review's focus on studies published between 2014 and 2024 might not fully account for the impact of recent developments in online hate speech in the digital space as more recent studies might be undergoing peer review pending publication.

Conclusion

This study showed the pervasive and damaging effects of online hate speech on GSM in South Africa. The findings reveal the pattern of mental health challenges, social exclusion, and systemic barriers to inclusion. By applying the frameworks of Minority Stress Theory, Cyberpsychology, and Social Identity Theory, this research demonstrates how hate speech exacerbates psychological distress, perpetuates marginalisation, and erodes social cohesion. Recommendations to address the online hate speech targeted against GSM in South Africa were made. Therefore, by adopting a holistic and intersectional approach to policymaking and implementation, South Africa can take a critical step towards protecting the rights and well-being of GSM individuals, thus fostering a more equitable, inclusive, and just society. Future research should aim to conduct longitudinal studies on the long-term effects of online hate speech on the mental health and social inclusion of GSM. Qualitative research capturing lived experiences across diverse contexts could provide deeper insights into how individuals navigate online spaces. Additionally, studies should assess the effectiveness of interventions designed to mitigate the impact of online hate speech and build resilience among marginalised communities, including evaluating community-based programs and online support networks to inform best practices.

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Data Availability

The author confirms that the data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article [and/or] its supplementary materials.

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