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Navigating precarious visibility: Ugandan sexual minorities on Twitter

ABSTRACT

Although invisibility has historically provided a degree of protection, Lesbian, Gay, Bi-, Trans-, Queer and Intersexuals need to materialize publicly as a group to successfully advocate for their rights. Decades of systematic exclusion of the community from traditional discourse-producing sites, such as media and physical spaces, could potentially render self-controlled digital spaces an attractive alternative for human rights advocacy and self-representation. The following article explores to what degree the Ugandan sexual minority community utilizes the microblogging platform Twitter's inbuilt affordance of self-controlled visibility to counter and challenge pervasive homophobic discourses. Through a qualitative content analysis of a purposeful sample of tweets generated by the main sexual minority network (Sexual Minorities Uganda [SMUG]), during the latest general election, the study finds that the affordance of controlled visibility is not consistently exploited for disseminating alternative narratives to external audiences, but rather chooses to highlight the agency of SMUG and its network members.

KEYWORDS

LGBTQI
sexual minority
Uganda
discrimination
affordance theory
Twitter

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INTRODUCTION

Although invisibility has historically provided a degree of protection against violence and discrimination in Uganda, sexual minorities need to materialize publicly as a group, i.e., become visible to not only promote and seek support for their political and social agenda, but also become a part of and forge alliances with other groups and networks with similar aspirations and goals (Currier 2010). Trans-national advocacy networks, such as Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch and Outright International, and multi-lateral bodies, such as the European Union and United Nations, are important partners for persuading and applying pressure on local governments to refrain from political homophobia and put human rights on their agendas (Currier and Moreau 2016; Kollman and Waites 2009). In addition, external funding is often linked to organizational visibility (Currier and Moreau 2016), and with limited domestic funding available for the work of sexual minority organizations, groups have to become at least discernible to attract donor support. External funding for activism in contexts where Lesbian, Gay, Bi-, Trans-, Queer and Intersexuals (LGBTQIs) are perceived as exogenous to Africa and regarded as criminals is, however, not unproblematic as the same funding may threaten local credibility and legitimacy (Kaoma 2014).

Furthermore, it has been suggested that positive media representations are linked to more affirmative societal attitudes towards sexual minorities (Calzo and Ward 2009; Levina et al. 2000; Adamczyk 2017). Adamczyk (2017) argues that mediated representations that include positive and affirming portrayals, as seen in the American entertainment industry's inclusion of gay characters in popular TV-shows in the 1990s, open the way for greater societal tolerance by making the featured groups a part of public life (Adamczyk 2017). Popular media products resulted in viewers experiencing a sense of 'virtually' knowing a member of the LGBTQI community, which increased the likelihood of them holding favourable opinions of non-heterosexual individuals, even if the viewer did not know an LGBTQI person personally (Adamczyk 2017).

Sexual Minorities Uganda (SMUG), the main network for sexual minority organizations in Uganda, is tasked with advocating the promotion and protection of the community's human rights. SMUG acknowledges the value of selective visibility for a community that includes a range of non-heterosexual and gender-non-conforming Ugandans. One of the network's five objectives is to achieve greater 'visibility through media, literature, dialogues, debates, and drama' (SMUG 2018). But in a context where homophobia has been embraced as a public policy for decades, achieving visibility is fraught with difficulties. As will be described in greater detail in the background section, sexual minorities have limited access to both mediated and physical public spaces. They are seldom provided the opportunity to self-represent in a non-discriminatory manner in the mainstream media, even when the community is the actual story. To draw upon George Gerbner (1972) concept of symbolic annihilation, it could be argued that Ugandan sexual minorities has had no or very limited influence over the symbolic world created by mainstream media, and where presence 'signifies social existence' and 'absence means symbolic annihilation' (Gerbner 1972: 43). Indeed, lack of access to traditional discourse-producing spaces such as media platforms has significantly limited sexual minority organizations' opportunities to confront codified and practiced discrimination. Furthermore, attempts to use physical spaces as platforms for advocacy have been met with fierce and even violent resistance, putting activists at risk

(Nyanzi 2014). Constituting visually in public spaces by organizing manifestations is thus not risk-free. In short, sexual minorities' access to mediated and/or physical spaces is mostly in the hands of repressive state officials, reluctant media workers and/or an unsympathetic public.

The systematic exclusion of the Ugandan LGBTQI community from traditional discourse-producing sites could potentially render self-controlled digital spaces an attractive alternative for advocating for equal rights and greater societal acceptance. Studies inspired by affordance theory (Gibson 1977) have argued that social media offers users a new affordance, i.e., action possibility: that of controlled visibility (Leonardi and Vaast 2017; Treem and Leonardi 2013; Vaast and Kaganer 2013). Popular social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, offer users a higher degree of visibility once they have established an account and begin using the services, i.e., developing and circulating material on a select set of issues, and connecting with both like-minded users and adversaries. To put this more simply, with an active presence comes visibility and the features of visibility are determined by the account holder. Given the Ugandan media's reluctance to allow domestic sexual minorities to become visible in a non-discriminatory manner, the following article explores to what degree the Ugandan sexual minority community utilizes the microblogging platform Twitter's inbuilt affordance of self-controlled visibility to counter and challenge pervasive homophobic discourses and introduce alternative narratives, i.e., non-discriminatory and non-homophobic narratives about sexual minorities, into the Ugandan public sphere.

Methodologically this study uses tweets generated by SMUG over the course of three months, during the latest Ugandan general election. The time frame was purposefully chosen on the assumption that election periods activate a range of social actors and steer public deliberations towards discussing a society's aspirations, and what kind of society is desirable. A qualitative content analysis of a strategic sample of tweets indicates that Twitter's inbuilt affordance of visibility is only partly used to challenge the most prevalent discriminatory characterizations, sexual minorities being un-African/un-Ugandan, un-Godly and a general threat to society. Instead, SMUG chooses to emphasize the network's agency, which in the Ugandan contexts does signal opposition to assigned discriminatory descriptions and rejection of notions that the LGBTQI community has no place in the Uganda society.

The article is organized as follows: the background section describes the history of state-sanctioned homophobia, and the corresponding history of mediated homophobia, resulting in a lack of spaces for Ugandan sexual minorities to self-represent. That is, for decades the Ugandan media has had an antagonistic relation with sexual minorities, which historically has ranged from being unwilling or unable to include minority voices, to being outright hostile. As both terms *sexual minority* and *LGBTQI* refer to individuals who are not in the majority position of being heterosexual and/or gender conforming, both terms are used inter-changeably throughout the text.

The background section is followed by a presentation of affordance theory and its relevance to this particular study. The subsequent section, methodology, includes a description of SMUG, the content analysis and some methodological reflections. The results section present the results, through a quantitative overview, qualitative analysis presented through a selection of tweets. The final section discusses the results and reminds us to approach data with an open mind when exploring uncharted terrain.

HOMOPHOBIA: AN EMBRACED DISCOURSE

Although Uganda's criminalization of its sexual minorities dates back to colonial times, and is thus far from new, the country's arcane policies on sexual minorities only gained international notoriety in 2009 when Uganda attempted to introduce one of the world's harshest anti-homosexuality legislations. The proposed bill had provisions for the death penalty and life in prison, in addition to introducing a new felony in its abetting and promoting homosexuality clause (Hollander 2009). The bill's proponents endorsed it by claiming that homosexuality was a frontal attack on Uganda's moral fabric (The Ugandan Gazette 2009; Boyd 2013) and that the piece of legislation was essential to 'protect[ing] the cherished culture of the people of Uganda [...] against the attempts of sexual rights activists seeking to impose their values of sexual promiscuity on the people of Uganda' (The Ugandan Gazette 2009: 13). The bill was motivated as a necessary 'strategy to curb the infiltration, normalization and legitimization of non-heteronormative possibilities in the imagination of the Ugandan nation' (Nyanzi 2014: 37). Furthermore, the bill was seen as an important tool with which to protect Ugandan sovereignty and culture from western imperialism, which was being poorly concealed under a veil of universal human rights rhetoric (Nyanzi and Karamagi 2015). International objections were regarded as western imperialism and thus constituted a attack on African governments' hard-earned right to self-determination in domestic matters (Ibrahim 2015).

Ugandan scholars have argued that the emergence of the bill also needs to be understood beyond its content and placed in its political context, where it served an important function in the internal power struggles inside the ruling party and quest to remain in power (Bompani and Valois 2017; Nyanzi and Karamagi 2015). Weiss and Bosia (2013) also caution against simplistic narratives when seeking to understand state-sponsored homophobia across contexts. They argue that contemporary state-sponsored homophobia is not always merely reflective of deep-seated religious or cultural beliefs in a society, but must be understood as a purposeful political strategy related to processes of state-building, national reconstruction and consolidation of political elites. By depicting LGBTIQ as enemies to national cohesion and traditions, political leaders and their religious and cultural allies exploit anxieties stemming from economic and cultural globalization (Weiss and Bosia 2013). LGBTIQ becomes a tangible enemy in a complex world.

Although the bill enjoyed strong public support (PEW 2014), the objections of non-homophobic legislators, documented in The Committee on Legal and Parliamentary Affairs' reports (Nyanzi and Karamagi 2015), international actors (Amnesty International 2010; Bruce-Jones and Itaborahy 2011; Human Rights Watch 2009; United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 2010) and not least, domestic human rights actors (Civil Society Coalition on Human Rights and Constitutional Law 2009a, 2009b) managed to keep the bill dormant for several years (Bruce-Jones and Itaborahy, 2011; Strand 2013). Domestic resistance played an important role in delaying the bill and highlighted that it is important to not label all Ugandans as homogenously homophobic (Epprecht 2008; Nyanzi and Karamagi 2015). However, following an ambush vote before the Parliament's Christmas break at the end of 2013, the bill was adopted and signed into law by President Museveni in 2014.

The Anti-Homosexuality Act was short-lived, however, as it was successfully challenged in the Constitutional Court by a domestic coalition of organizations, the Legal Committee of the Civil Society Coalition on

Human Rights and Constitutional Law (Nyanzi and Karamagi 2015). The legal success of 2014, however, did not change the fact that homosexuality was – and is – still a crime in Uganda and that heteronormative ideals and the social policing of these ideals remained. A systematic review of the level of repression of sexual minorities in both the *de jure* realm, i.e. the legal and constitutional realm, and *de facto* realm, i.e. level of civil and political protection, such as ensuring socio-economic rights on par with those of heterosexuals and allow for gay rights advocacy, shows that Uganda is an active persecutor (Dicklitch et al. 2012:448). Uganda state-sanctioned homophobia enjoys almost universal public support. A PEW 2014 survey concluded that since 2002 opinions in Uganda on homosexuality have been consistently and almost universally negative, with 96 per cent of the population reporting that homosexuality should not be accepted by society (PEW 2014). The overturning of the Act did not change these deeply held beliefs.

Indeed, Englander (2011) argue levels of overt discrimination increased as a consequence of the bill/act, including the number of hate crimes. Directly in the aftermath of the introduction of the bill, previously safe physical meeting points for sexual minorities, such as certain bars and cafes known to be local hang-outs, became places to identify members of the community and points of targeted attacks. A civil society report argues a similar point that although the 2014 Anti-Homosexuality Act was dismissed, persecution based on sexual orientation or gender identity remains high, and describes 264 verified cases of discrimination in healthcare, housing and community settings, and arrests, blackmail, family banishment and 48 acts of violence between May 2014 and December 2015 (Sexual Minority Uganda 2016).

Due to near-universal negative attitudes against sexual minorities, attempts to claim public spaces and manifest physically by organizing public events such as Gay Pride Parade have been challenging. In 2012, the community tried to organize its first Gay Pride Parade. It was met with violence and police brutality (Nyanzi 2014). The 2016 parade was initially stopped, but later carried out despite threats and police interference (British Broadcasting Corporation 2016). In 2017, organizers were forced to cancel the parade due to the level of threats against participants (Mugisha 2017). It would thus appear that public displays and celebration of non-binary gender identity and non-heterosexual relationships, inspired by western confrontational street-based activism with roots in 1980s AIDS activism, i.e., street theatre, political funerals, die-ins and kiss-ins, protest marches and name-and-shame public information campaigns (Shepard and Hayduk 2002), would come with real risks for Ugandan activists.

Although it is historically inaccurate to label the entire sub-African continent and its citizens as homophobic (Epprecht 2008), state-sanctioned homophobia is not unique to Uganda. State-sanctioned homophobia, i.e., both *de jure* and *de facto* persecution, is the norm on the African continent, with 36 out of 54 countries currently criminalizing their lesbian, gay, bisexual, queer, transgender and intersex communities (Amnesty International 2015; The International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans And Intersex Association [ILGA] 2017) and with discrimination prevalent even where non-heterosexual relationships and gender-non-conformity are protected by the Constitution, most notably as in the case of South Africa (Wells and Polders 2006). African sexual minorities are systematically portrayed as exogenous and un-African, and a consequence of unwanted Euro-American imperialism (Chitanda and Mateveke 2017; Epprecht 2001, 2010).

HOMOPHOBIA IN THE MEDIA SECTOR

Decades of state-sponsored homophobia and pervasive discriminatory public attitudes have impacted most social spheres, and the Ugandan media sector is no exception. The Ugandan media's coverage of sexual minorities and their human rights situation ranges from ambivalent and reluctant to antagonistic, including outright hostile in the tabloid press (Bompani and Brown 2015; Dicklitch et al. 2012; Strand 2011, 2012, 2013, 2018).

A key feature of past media coverage of sexual minorities is a reluctance to engage, resulting in sexual minorities and their community representatives only rarely being given space to draw attention to the community's plights, promote human rights for all, self-define or indeed be given the opportunity to provide a first-person narrative of their concerns (Strand 2011). This exclusion and subsequent denial of visibility appear to be most pronounced in state-owned media channels. The state-owned media institutionalized their silencing practices in 2009 by adopting an editorial policy of silence around the controversial bill in response to growing international criticism (African Media Barometer 2012).

Consequently, even paid statements from a local coalition of human rights organizations calling for human rights for all as enshrined in the Ugandan Constitution were refused (African Media Barometer 2012). Another case in point is when local human rights defenders attempted to raise awareness around the human rights implications for all Ugandans in connection with the 2009 Anti-Homosexuality Bill, their analysis of the bill only received coverage by domestic press after international partners, most notably bilateral and multi-lateral donors, had endorsed it (Strand 2011). The 2011 study also highlighted that mediated discrimination either in the form of textual discrimination or exclusion could not be attributed to the non-activity of the sexual minority community. On the contrary, the bill spurred a peak of local activism around human rights in general and sexual minority rights in particular. A more recent cross-media study indicates that the state-owned media's editorial policy of silence on Ugandan sexual minorities is still in place and guides journalistic practices (Strand 2018). Meanwhile, the privately owned media arbitrarily provides space for sexual minority voices and an opportunity to self-represent (Strand 2011, 2018). However, the two studies (Strand 2011, 2018) also appear to confirm a fairly stable journalistic practice of reluctance to engage, with ensuing invisibility as an outcome. Domestic activism often has to rely on external actors such as donors, multilateral organizations and news agencies such as the BBC and Reuters to enter the local media scene.

Systematic exclusion from text production sites, however, entails more than a mere absence from mediated spaces. In instances of visibility, it is in the hands of others, which results in being defined by other claims makers, such as religious organizations, which in turn results in mediated discourses consistently failing to reflect the Uganda sexual minority community and its concerns (Adamczyk 2017). This lack of inclusion and the corresponding lack of influence over mediated representations of the community have in the past led to frequent instances of rampant negative and stereotypical portrayals and negative othering of sexual minorities (Adamczyk 2017; Strand 2012). Discriminatory textual references to sexual minorities, especially in supposedly non-opinion oriented spaces, i.e., news sections, strengthen the overarching heteronormative societal discourse and actively contribute towards the community's vulnerability. The tabloid press generates the most discriminatory coverage by outing alleged sexual minority individuals by publicizing

head shots, home and work addresses, and actively inciting violence by calling for their public hanging (Dicklitch et al. 2012).

The difficulties in accessing Ugandan media space can be attributed to a range of factors, such as a prolonged and consistent history of state-supported legal and institutionalized discrimination against sexual minorities (Dicklitch et al. 2012; Human Rights Watch, 2008; Tamale 2009), combined with repeated incidences of sanctions against media outlets that provided sexual minorities with a platform for human rights advocacy (British Broadcasting Corporation 2004; Human Rights Watch 2010; Johnson and Cameron 2007). In particular, journalists based outside Uganda's capital, Kampala, face multiple hurdles in the form of local government sanctions and undue pressure, repercussions from media owners and negative audience reactions (Borlase 2011). As a consequence of public opinion and the institutionalized intimidation of media workers, a culture of journalistic and editorial self-censorship has emerged (Borlase 2011). It has also been suggested that the space for oppositional expression and self-representations in the mainstream media is shrinking in general because it is interpreted as a threat to the ruling party's grip on power (Chibita 2016).

In conclusion, it appears that the Ugandan media, with some notable differences between privately owned media and state-controlled media, displays variations of exclusion and textual discrimination. Discrimination materializes through silencing practices, resulting in a denial of visibility, and/or discrimination through manifest language. The discriminatory media climate limits the community's ability to influence the narratives by which they become visible outside the LGBTQI community. It also cripples their participation in mediated debates on social policies, with a direct impact on the sexual minority community (Strand 2018). Given these historical media biases including exclusion from discourse production processes, an exploration of self-controlled digital platforms that offers new opportunities to self-represent and pursue human rights advocacy, would make a lot of sense.

AFFORDANCE THEORY

This study is inspired by affordance theory (Gaver 1991; Gibson 1977), which is often used to theorize around the bi-directional interaction between a user and a technology's interface, or, to use Gibson's wording, the reciprocity between an organism's exploration and its environment. Affordance theory focuses on the relationship between perception and action, and one of the most often-used examples to explain the gist of the theory is a chair. An individual can use a chair to sit on or stand on, depending on the user's perception of the chair's utility for one or multiple needs. An affordance is the action possibility a piece of the environment offers the user. There are two school of thoughts on affordances, i.e., whether an affordance exists independently of the users' perception of it *or* only in the encounter with a user that acknowledges a particular action possibility. Affordances, in the latter school of thought, can only exist if perceived by a user. This text subscribes to the former, i.e., that an affordance can exist irrespective of whether or not a user sees a particular action possibility and realizes it through actual use. That is, this study views the affordance of self-controlled visibility as innate to Twitter and existing irrespective of whether or not a particular user perceives it or finds it useful and realizes this affordance through corresponding action.

As people tend not to interact with an object without first perceiving what it is good for (Gibson 1977), most information and communication

technology's interfaces try to offer *perceptible affordances*, i.e., offer information about the properties of the object that is compatible with the users' perceptual system, and provide socioculturally relevant cues of what type of action is possible. For example, by assigning digital touch screen buttons signs that are commonly understood to correlate with a specific type of action, design features both invite and guide behaviour. But even if a platform's design features can facilitate the perception of an affordance and invite exploration, a user is more likely to explore if the affordance corresponds with a conceived need. The framework argues that 'people come to materiality with diverse goals' and subsequently 'perceive a technology as affording distinct possibilities for action' (Treem and Leonardi 2013: 46). For example, if a user perceives no need for self-controlled visibility, but rather a need to organize joint action, the platform is unlikely to be explored as a platform for enhancing visibility. Affordance theory is often lauded for its attempt to balance the materiality of technologies, without allowing technological determinism to overshadow the centrality of users' understanding and needs. Affordance theory offers a theoretical framework for understanding how the specific needs of the user, which may be an individual or an organization, appear to guide the exploration of the interface of the platform, and the social practices that emerge out of the interaction. Affordance theory has become a popular point of departure for social media researchers to explore how the materiality of hardware and software interfaces guides users' perception of affordance, i.e., action possibilities, and later actual usage.

Treem and Leonardi (2013) provide an extensive literature review of social media inside organizations and identify four relatively consistent social media affordances: *Visibility*; *persistence*; or permanence of information, i.e., user-generated content remains accessible; *editability*, i.e., editing of a communicative act is possible before *and* after it is viewed by others; and *association* between individuals and/or individuals and content. Combined, these four affordances characterize what is 'new and, quite possibly, consequential about social media for organizational communication processes' (Treem and Leonardi 2013: 150).

In this particular study, the affordance of self-controlled visibility is of special interest. According to Treem and Leonardi, social media appears to provide users with an enhanced ability to make 'behaviours, knowledge, preferences, and communication network connections [...] visible to others' (2013: 150). Social media offers its users a means to control the presentation of a public self both internally and externally. Furthermore, organizational use of social media allows members of the organization to better see what Treem and Leonardi call the *Organizational Activity Streams*, which relates to the argument that social media 'afford individuals the ability to see information related to the status of ongoing activities in the organization' (2013: 154). Besides these four frequently occurring affordances for organizations, other studies have found additional affordances, such as *connective action*, which is characterized by multiple actors coming together to collaborate and coproduce and circulate content based upon an issue of mutual interest (Vaast et al. 2017), and *knowledge creation* (Wagner et al. 2014). As it is beyond the scope of this article to present a complete review of social media affordances, the interested reader is recommended to explore Wagner et al.'s (2014) comprehensive list of potential affordances.

Obar's (2013) study of 63 Canadian advocacy groups' understanding of social media affordances is one of the few studies to explore affordances

in relation to activism. The primary affordance ascribed to social media was the improved ability to reach and connect with a broader public on a limited budget (Obar 2013). It was also found that social media enables feedback loops between advocacy organizations and their supporters. Social media thus appears to enable the strengthening of ties between advocacy organizations and their supporters, in addition to allowing organizations to stay better tuned in to supporters' changing needs and expectations.

On a more general note, the reviewed studies appear to fall on a continuum of whether social media really presents users with new action possibilities, that is, allow them to perform entirely new type of actions, or merely support conventional practices. That is, does the simplicity, speed, affordability and the offer to anonymously engage in few-to-many interactions allow users to perform entirely new communicative actions? Or does digitalization essentially offer nothing new, as argued by Morozov (2011). Evans et al. (2016) also caution against a liberal use of the term affordance, and call for a more consistent and theoretically informed approach to exploring affordances in communication research.

EXPLORING THE AFFORDANCE OF CONTROLLED VISIBILITY IN RELATION TO SEXUAL MINORITIES IN UGANDA

As illustrated in the background section, Ugandan sexual minorities have historically had limited access to media spaces to self-represent, and have had few opportunities to influence the visibility of their community. Their public representation is primarily controlled by other claims makers with a subsequent re-production of homophobic discourses as a recurring outcome, which further bolsters existing discriminatory discourses that label the community as un-African/un-Ugandan, un-Godly and a threat to society. Consequently, the community could be served by platforms where they are in better control of their visibility and that would allow them to challenge discriminatory and heteronormative discourses. Social media platforms could thus in theory at least provide this community with a new affordance: that of self-controlled visibility and be important even if their counter narratives might have limited circulation.

To date there are only a handful of studies on the use of social media platforms as spaces of sexual minorities' self-controlled visibility and human rights advocacy. Valois's (2015) study of bloggers, to date the only study on Uganda, finds that the Internet provides self-identifying LGBTQI individuals with a safe space, where they are free to express resistance to dominant heteronormative discourses. The blog platform is a space to argue for a recognition of LGBTQIs as part of the Ugandan citizenry, and thus resisting the discourse of queer identity as being incompatible with citizenship in an African nation and being African. Blogs are thus used as platforms to claim 'sameness' with the broader Ugandan public and demand equal rights in accordance with Ugandan citizenship, and that a sexual minority status is not a cause for disqualification from societal inclusion and is no different to other self-assigned identity labels (Valois 2015).

Venzo and Hess (2013: 1539) argue that social media, at least in the case of Australia are increasingly becoming 'a space in which the nominally marginal in society may acquire "social artillery"'. The term attempts to capture activists proactive use of social media and its networking possibilities, as well as 'how gay minorities draw on readily available social and cultural resources to fight instances of symbolic violence exerted via traditional media' (Venzo and Hess 2013: 1540).

However, research from other countries highlights that increased visibility is not unproblematic in repressive contexts where physical and mediated spaces are also sites of control and persecution (Pearce 2015). When bypassing state-sanctioned silencing practices or policies banning sexual minorities from self-representing and conducting human rights advocacy, sexual minorities effectively challenge existing power relations. Gays and Lesbians in Zimbabwe (GALZ) turned to Facebook with the hope of bypassing existing media silencing practices, anticipating that social media would function as an interface connecting them to the heteronormative majority and a way to 'reach out to the dominant majority and appeal for acceptance, compassion and understanding' (Mhiripiri and Moyo 2016: 264). Although GALZ Facebook initially and with continuous monitoring functioned as an alternative sphere for representation and debate around human rights, it also suffered from non-community members' abuse, i.e., hate speech, and as a consequence was eventually abandoned (Mhiripiri and Moyo 2016). Individual GALZ members opted to use other social media channels that they could manage more easily on their own, such as private Facebook accounts. Similarly, Currier and Moreau (2016) find in their study of Ivory Coast that increased visibility following the receiving of a large grant led to significant backlash. Currier and Moreau conclude, 'where previously there had been little political homophobia, increased attention to same-sex sexuality prompted a governmental response that ultimately made life worse for LGBTI people locally' (2016: 236). Currier and Moreau (2016: 240) also raise concerns around the potential long-term and unintended consequences of African sexual minority organizations' use of 'digital strategies and sensationalist images of LGBTI Africans as vulnerable victims' to put pressure on governments to take their demands seriously and appeal to international actors and funders. Such strategies may feed into a broader narrative that positions the entire continent as homophobic and the west as the saviour of African sexual minorities (Wahab 2016). This approach may not only fortify resistance locally, but could also disempower local actors. Nevertheless, despite the foreseen and unforeseen drawbacks of increased visibility, SMUG has given itself the task of increasing its visibility.

Affordance theory argues that even if a piece of hardware or software offers a particular type of affordance, such as the opportunity to control its visibility, this does not automatically mean that users perceive this affordance and find it useful in a particular context and subsequently realize the affordance through use. So, although the microblogging platform Twitter is said to offer previously unrepresented groups new opportunities to participate in various agenda-building processes (Jungherr 2015), SMUG may have a very different interpretation of the platform's usefulness for social change in Uganda. Indeed, a decade of Twitter research has highlighted some key limitations with the platform as a tool for social change. Social media does make it easier for actors to express themselves and reach further than through analogue means, and yet it is 'harder for that expression to have any impact' (Gladwell 2010: 49). Gladwell (2010) argues that challenging the status quo also requires coming together and claiming physical space to have real political or social impact. Fuchs argues a similar position, highlighting the need for spatio-temporal presence to challenge the status quo: 'co-presence and physicality matter also in a networked world' (2013: 186). Several studies argue that the success of online or digital activism, i.e., the use of digital technologies to enable and facilitate social and political change (Joyce 2010) is dependent on the level of coordination with offline activities (Fuchs 2013; Mutsvairo 2016). Indeed,

online advocacy and activism that stays only online 'is harmless [...] and can simply be ignored by the powerful' (Fuchs 2013: 186–87). Morozov (2011) argues that the notion that social media, including Twitter, can empower the previously powerless, and challenge existing power structures, is entirely naive.

Another barrier preventing previously unrepresented and unheard voices from being noticed is the political economy of Twitter (Fuchs 2013). Twitter's reality is one of 'asymmetric visibility', where social, cultural and political elites are more likely to trend, i.e., get noticed and have impact. Furthermore, Twitter's business model privileges its advertising clients and economically powerful actors over less powerful users. So, if you lack an advertising budget, and fail to drum up traffic or get re-tweeted by an elite account holder, you are unlikely to be noticed outside your existing group of followers (Fuchs 2013). Furthermore, human homophily tends to create online echo-chambers, i.e., communities of like-minded individuals as users often have a preference for consuming material that reinforces their own beliefs and opinions as opposed to consuming material that challenges them (Garrett 2009). A large network, such as Twitter, which hosts diverse opinions, thus tends to display a pattern whereby groups are segregated into small like-minded communities (Williams et al. 2015). In short, although Twitter technically provides an inexpensive and safe place to self-represent, express minority or controversial opinions behind self-chosen anonymity, minorities often appear to be unable to break out of their echo-chambers and reach larger audiences and thus significantly influence debates. Poorly networked citizens and minority groups with minority opinions continue to be at a clear disadvantage in the Twitter-scape, unless they can pay for visibility.

Despite these caveats concerning Twitter as a communicative tool, SMUG uses Twitter to perform one or several communicative tasks. Gerbaudo (2012: 9) urges us to bear in mind that activists have always tried to benefit from technological advancement, be it pamphlets, posters, megaphones or tweets, and rather than becoming pre-occupied with the efficiency of various platforms, researchers should pay close attention to 'what activists actually do with them' (Gerbaudo 2012: 9). Researchers should engage in a situated analysis of the immense range of networked communicative practices across contexts, as opposed to evaluating the proficiency and efficiency of use. In this way, techno-deterministic accounts can be kept in check (Gerbaudo 2012). Twitter theoretically could support a range of actions, such as self-controlled visibility, dialogue, coordination, mobilization and organization but actual usage is determined by the social actors' understanding of the platform's affordances, given its contextual constraints and opportunities.

METHODOLOGY

As presented earlier, not all affordances are recognized and realized by intentional use. An initial quantitative mapping of the time period's Twitter activity established regular and at times intense activity, which makes it reasonable to assume that the channel is perceived to be useful, and thus perceived as offering one or several affordances. Although it is possible that Twitter use is a reflection of several types of affordances, this study is primarily interested in the affordance of self-controlled visibility and its potential to challenge prevalent homophobic discourses. As a point of departure for the qualitative content analysis, three dominant discriminatory characterizations often

used to legitimize the legal and social discrimination of sexual minorities in Uganda guided the exploration: sexual minorities as un-African/un-Ugandan, un-Godly and a threat to Ugandan society/culture.

The methodological section commences with a description of SMUG, followed by a presentation of the purposeful sampling. The last section introduces the study's qualitative content analysis.

SMUG: AN UMBRELLA NON-GOVERNMENTAL ORGANIZATION

SMUG is a non-governmental and umbrella organization based in Kampala, Uganda. SMUG functions both as an independent advocacy group and supports the member non-governmental organizations to advocate for equal human rights for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender Ugandans as enshrined in the Ugandan constitution. SMUG was established in 2004 and was instrumental to the establishment of LGBTQI activism in Uganda (Valois 2015). As an advocacy network, it seeks to influence policy-makers, but has no formal powers besides the fact that it has the mandate of the network's member organizations. The advocacy network has professionalized over the years and its work is currently organized around five objectives (Sexual Minorities Uganda [SMUG] 2018):

1. To advocate and lobby through the coordination of efforts by local and international bodies for the equality of all Ugandans irrespective of gender, age, sexual orientation, tribe, religion and social status.
2. To build and strengthen visibility through media, literature, dialogues, debates and drama.
3. To advocate and lobby for the social and judicial inclusion of people with diverse backgrounds.
4. To fight against HIV/AIDS in the LGBTI, Men who have sex with Men (MSM) and Women who have Sex with Women (WSW) communities.
5. To generate data and information, and knowledge about LGBTI human rights abuses and provide remedies.

Valois (2015) argues that SMUG's work is particularly challenging as it has to juggle competing considerations and loyalties: on the one hand local notions that sexuality is part of the private sphere and should remain concealed, and on the other, international human rights discourses and practices around advocacy that are explicitly visible and public. Translating international universal human rights discourses into the Ugandan context is undeniably challenging and has at times led to backlashes (Valois 2015). Organizationally, SMUG is an umbrella organization, which in 2018 consisted of the following member organizations: Fem Alliance Uganda, Freedom and Roam Uganda, Icebreakers Uganda, Most At Risk Populations, St Paul's Reconciliation And Equality Centre, Kampus Liberty Uganda, Forum For Minority Rights, Youth On Rock Foundation, Spectrum Uganda Corporate Initiative, Trans Support Initiative Uganda and Rainbow Health Foundation Mbarara (SMUG 2018).

TWITTER AND SAMPLING PROCEDURE

Twitter was chosen after careful consideration. First, the SMUG Twitter account was opened in 2012, a year before the group opened its Facebook account, and has over 6000 followers. Furthermore, Twitter was the most frequently used platform by SMUG during the time period under study: the 2016 general

election. The official election campaign period in Uganda ran from 9 November 2015 to 16 February 2016, with campaigning suspended two days before the election, which took place on 18 February. The time frame was chosen on the assumption that election times in general are opportune moments for mediated critical debate on social concerns and possible social policy responses, which include SMUG-initiated advocacy for equality, inclusion and human rights for people with non-heteronormative sexual orientations. Election times are moments when minorities need to materialize publicly as a group, i.e., become visible, to push their political and social agenda. Second, although there is a shortage of reliable social media user statistics publicly available for Uganda, Twitter was reported to be the second most used social media platform in Uganda between November 2015 and February 2016 after Facebook, which dominates the social media scene in Uganda (Global Stats 2016). Furthermore, Twitter was seen as important enough for the government to restrict access to it on two separate occasions. On one occasion, the government instructed telecom providers to block Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp on the pretext of protecting national security on the day before the election (British Broadcasting Corporation 2016). This also happened when President Museveni was sworn in for the fifth time in May 2016 (Reporters without Borders 2016).

PURPOSEFUL SAMPLING OF TWITTER

Social media research is often approached through content analysis of large data sets and/or social network analysis (Postill and Pink 2012). However, social network analysis and quantitative content analysis are unable to provide input into ‘understanding how, why and with what consequences’ social media is used by social actors (Postill and Pink 2012: 125). Gerbaudo argues strongly for a more grounded theory-inspired openness to locally situated communicative practices, i.e., ‘what activists actually do’ with their social media channels (2012: 9). Guo and Saxton (2014), on the other hand, argue for combining methods when studying advocacy organizations’ social media use, where an analysis can both draw on the existing literature’s broad categories, such as *information*, *community* and *action* (Lovejoy and Saxton 2012), as entry points and use qualitative approaches to texts to explore new and unique features.

An initial and exploratory scan of all collected tweets from the purposefully selected time period revealed a pronounced uneven usage of Twitter. Consequently, a quantitative mapping, i.e., a manual mapping of the frequency of tweeting along a chronological date axis, was conducted using Excel. This exercise confirmed the impression that SMUG’s network activity was unevenly distributed and had distinct peaks. Postill and Pink (2012: 125) suggest that ‘intensities of social media activity’ can be an indicator of a channel’s perceived significance. Indeed, a closer inspection of the clearly discernible peaks revealed that the level of activity was event-driven. The existence of distinct peaks indicated that Twitter was used strategically to communicate to audiences around key events that were important to SMUG and thus formed instances where Twitter provided one or several affordances. A rudimentary analysis of the peak data showed that tweets at times bore the characteristics of a live narration of events as they unfolded, with some tweets being published only minutes apart. Peaks, as opposed to low-intensity activity, were thus selected for the subsequent qualitative exploration of the material. Low-intensity tweeting can be

described as mostly single tweets on diverse topics, followed by little, delayed or no follow-up. This low-grade usage of Twitter was not selected for further analysis as low activity may be a sign that other platforms, digital or non-digital, offered more valued affordances and that only a trickle is reflected on Twitter.

QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS OF PEAK TWEETS

As described above, moments of intense use of Twitter, i.e., peaks, are considered as moments where the platform afforded its users one or several valued affordances, or action possibilities. However, a peak in Twitter activity cannot automatically be assumed to represent a realization of the platform's inbuilt affordance of controlled visibility, i.e. intense use may be a result of users realizing one or several other offered affordances, such as networking/association, deliberation and connective action, as has been suggested by other studies.

Although peak data were purposefully selected for further analysis to explore whether the inbuilt affordance of controlled visibility was used to counter pervasive homophobic discourses in Ugandan society, a qualitative content analysis must remain open to capturing additional and even novel types of affordances, in particular as previous studies have analysed affordances in relation to formal organizations. Methodologically, this entailed remaining open to the material including the possibilities that self-representations could be absent in the material, or have no discernible connection to discriminatory discourses. Furthermore, it is important to make a distinction between the affordances that Twitter offers such as controlled visibility, networking, coordination, etc. and the content that inhabits these functions. In short, it is important to be mindful of these two entities.

This dual exploration was pursued by conducting numerous readings and re-readings, followed by an elaborate grouping exercise. Each tweet was printed out and assigned a chronological number and Roman number ranging from one to four to indicate the tweet's peak-origin. The labelling was followed by a grouping exercise that entailed organizing the printouts of each tweet into categories or affordances and later into themes within the identified affordances. Tweets carried their unique identification number and code for peak origin throughout the process of categorization and thematization. The following hierarchy emerged from the process (Figure 1).

After identifying affordances and related themes, each tweet was colour-coded to indicate its belonging to a particular category of affordance, and sorted back into its peak chronologically. Quite fittingly, the four peaks each resembled a rainbow, but often with a dominant colour.

Before presenting the results, a word on qualitative Twitter analysis is in order. First, the minimalistic format of Twitter relies on the receivers' previous and contextual knowledge so that they decode both abbreviations and the compressed narrative in each unit, i.e. tweet appropriately. Subsequently, this study draws heavily upon the researcher's previous contextual understanding of the Ugandan context. Furthermore, it is important to note that digital artefacts, such as tweets, do not offer a direct view of phenomena or events, i.e. they are not a window into what really happened (Jungherr 2015). That is, tweets, with their very limited space, force the sender to condense the content down to its core message using only 140 characters and therefore only provide a selective glimpse of events 'mediated through the interests and behaviour of users moving in constricted, semi-public communication spaces' (Jungherr 2015: 26).

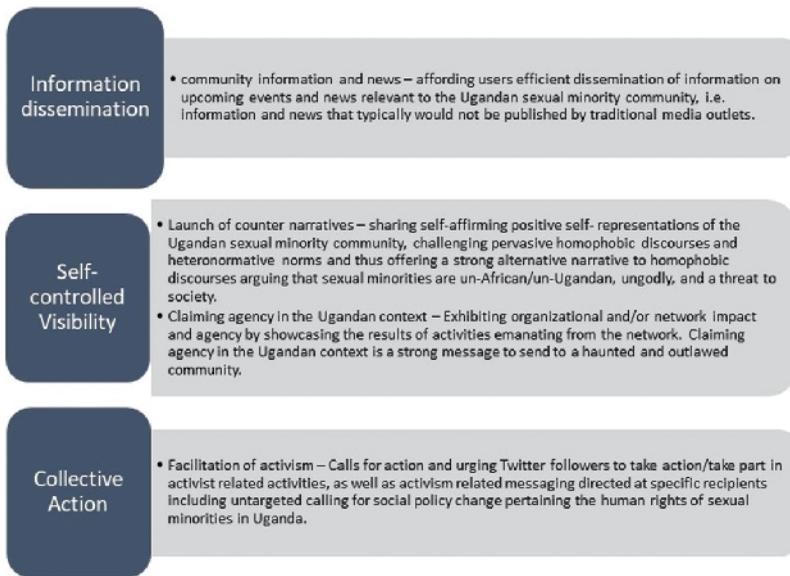


Figure 1: Affordances and related themes in Twitter data.

RESULTS

This study departed from a tentative assumption that given the documented history of mainstream media’s symbolic annihilation through institution-alised homophobia and exclusion of sexual minority voices, Twitter, with its inbuilt affordance of controlled visibility, could function as an attractive platform from which to communicate counter narratives on sexual minorities and ultimately offer a way of challenging pervasive homophobic discourses. The results section will begin by presenting the quantitative mapping, followed by the qualitative content analysis of the four peaks, and ends with a discussion of the results.

QUANTITATIVE MAPPING OF THE TWEETS

The mapping of the tweets on a chronological axis confirmed a previous presumption that activity was unevenly distributed and had distinct peaks. Four distinct peaks in the Twitter material emerged, which, when combined, constituted 44 per cent of the total tweets generated by SMUG or one of the affiliated network organizations (Figure 2). Although intensified social media activity cannot automatically be assumed to be a signifier of the importance of an event, a closer inspection of the four peaks did suggest that intensified activity, in this case, was closely correlated with importance. Indeed, the almost live narration during the peaks indicated a wish to bring the event to the non-present audience and prevent it from going unnoticed. The intense use of Twitter also suggested that the platform was perceived to offer one or several affordances. Identified events in rising order of tweet frequency were as follows: the first TV-broadcast live presidential debate (21 tweets), World Aids Day 2015 (22 tweets over two days), the David Kato Memorial (54 tweets) and finally the inaugural SMUG gala (86 tweets).

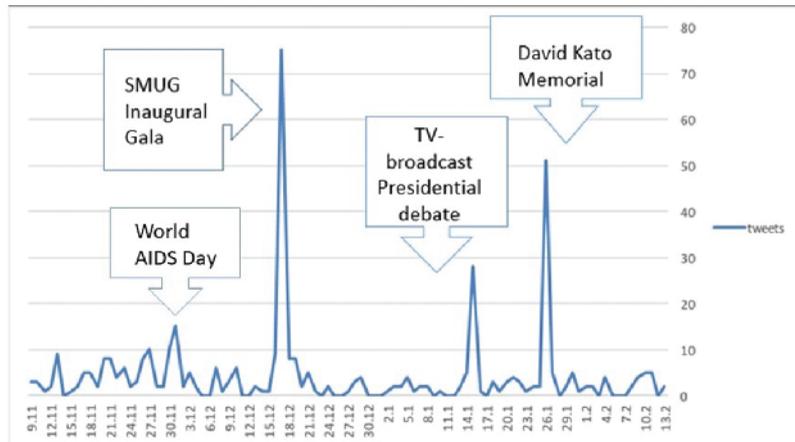


Figure 2: Quantitative mapping of SMUG tweets November 2015 to February 2016.

QUALITATIVE CONTENT ANALYSIS

The four peaks are first presented with a brief introduction, followed by a selection of representative tweets where most @responses and hyperlinks have been removed to increase readability. Each Twitter peak is also discussed.

THE FIRST TV-BROADCAST PRESIDENTIAL DEBATE, 15 JANUARY 2016

On 15 January 2016, Uganda held its first ever televised presidential debate, which followed a US-style format with tough questions and exchanges between the seven candidates who attended. The event did not include the incumbent President Museveni, whose absence, according to unofficial media reports, was consistent with his general reluctance to give any interviews and engage with non-favourable media entities (Reuters 2016).

The event was kicked off on SMUG's Twitter account with SMUG's director highlighting the event's importance by re-tweeting '7:35pm #UGDebate16 yet to kick-off' quickly, followed by his own prompt 'Over 27m Ugandans waiting, start already'. These pre-event tweets are meant to sensitize and alert SMUG followers of the importance of the upcoming debate.

The majority of the subsequent tweets, which consist of narrations of the ongoing debate combined with some minor commentary, are surprising as they essentially entail re-broadcasting homophobia. 'Presidential Candidate Mabiriizi asks @AmamaMbabazi whether he supports homosexuality. #UGDebate16'. The tweet is followed by the candidate's emphasis of his heterosexual status; 'I've heard these stories (about homosexuality) making rounds, I'm not gay. I'm married to a woman', and his retaliation in challenging his accusers. 'I've heard rumors that I'm gay and I put Minister Amongin to the test to prove that I'm gay – Amama Mbabazi #UGDebate16'.

These tweets are followed by the other candidates' rejection of homosexuality as a natural part of human sexuality and affirmation of their heterosexual credentials, as well as hurling accusations at the other candidates. 'We have heard that you support "the gays", what do you say about that? Mabiriizi to Mbabazi #UGDebate16', followed by 'I'm a married man, my wife is a woman, we have children and incredibly beautiful grandchildren and I'm not

gay – Mbabazi #UGDebate16'. The SMUG Twitter platform also provided a space for outlining the candidates' intended policy direction on the matter if elected President. 'While I'm the President of Uganda, the country will never be a homosexual country – Abed Bwanika #UGDebate16'; 'There's no proof that there are people who are born gay – Abed Bwanika #UGDebate16'; 'I will ensure that the gays are brought back to normal through rehabilitation – Abed Bwanika #UGDebate16'. The SMUG Director even assists by providing a summary of one of the candidate's words. 'Uganda Presidential candidate Abed Bwanika, homosexuals are not normal, he will fight them & rehabilitate them #UGDebate16'. The SMUG account only signals its distance from the presidential candidates' nonsensical exchange in two tweets: 'that's why u are not President 3 times and you still talk about homosexuality yet we have more pressing issues' and 'Pure Nonsense. Publicity Stunt'.

This event on Twitter is primarily functioning as a platform for the dissemination of information and news relevant to the community, even if the information did not necessarily represent the community's interests. Indeed, at a manifest level, the account could even appear to have been hijacked as the majority of the tweets simply re-broadcast homophobic statements and make no attempt to explicitly reject the usage of sexual minority status as a derogatory debate tool. But by contextualizing the lack of engagement with the debaters' discriminatory rhetoric, another interpretation is more likely. The lack of rebuttal may simply mirror SMUG's understanding of the political landscape, an understanding that is shared by most followers of the account. That is, elections are about securing votes and a seat in the executive branch of government, and with 96 per cent of the population stating that homosexuality should not be accepted by society when polled (PEW 2014), there are virtually no votes to be gained by pushing sexual minority rights. In fact, taking into account the almost universally negative public opinion held on sexual minorities, it constitutes political suicide for a candidate to come across as a human rights champion for this particular group. Furthermore, an accusation of homosexuality is an established way of identifying the accused as a threat to Ugandan society as homosexuality is intimately interlinked with notions of being un-African, un-Godly and disconnected from Christian morals, and part of a western imperialist project. By accusing an opponent of homosexuality, the accuser thus also questions the opponent's right to represent the people of Uganda. In short, it is a powerful tool with which to discredit political opponents. SMUG's re-broadcasting of blatant homophobia should thus not be seen as acceptance, but merely indicative of how normalized the discourse is and how no one expected anything else of individuals seeking the highest office. The lack of rejection of homosexuality as a negative subject position may also be an indication that SMUG's tweets are primarily intended for an internal audience of followers, as opposed to the broader Twitter universe. A combative rejection is superfluous in the case of this shared contextual understanding.

Yet it could still be argued that it constitutes a missed opportunity for SMUG, when it fails to critically engage with a topic that undeniably is part of the network's mission. Furthermore, with the frequent use of the #UGDebate16 hashtag, tweets are more likely to spread outside SMUG's network of community followers. Twitter as a platform offers account holders a unique opportunity to agree or oppose other viewpoints, and to surrender this and unwittingly become a megaphone of homophobic rhetoric may leave non-Ugandan audiences slightly bewildered. It may even be interpreted as a sign of resignation by the Twittersphere outside the Ugandan context.

WORLD AIDS DAY 2015, 30 NOVEMBER AND 1 DECEMBER

World AIDS Day, which was held for the first time in 1988, is commemorated every year on December 1. The day was instituted to raise awareness of HIV/AIDS and mobilize people around the effort to fight the epidemic, and show support for people living with HIV and to commemorate people who have died.

On SMUG's Twitter, the World AIDS Day (WAD) 2015 is also dominated by news and information sharing, ranging from simple reminders of the day to reminders of services available to the community. 'World Aids Day is tomorrow & we are ready! Are you? Drop by Icebreakers Uganda offices for HIV & Hepatitis testing'. The Twitter flow also contains traditional public health messages relevant to the community, such as reminders about condom and appropriate use of lubricant, and the importance of taking anti-retroviral medication as directed. 'People with HIV virus encouraged to take their medication as directed if they want to live longer #WorldAIDSDay'. The need for compassion and psychosocial support is highlighted by referring to Princess Diana, who in the 1990s, used her status to launch appeals to the world to do more to combat the epidemic and who was often photographed caring for HIV-positive individuals at a time where effective anti-retroviral was still being developed: 'HIV does not make people dangerous to know, so you can shake their hands and give them a hug: Heaven knows they need it. Princess Diana' (National AIDS Trust 1991: n.pag.).

Although WAD is dominated by the straightforward sharing of HIV-related news and information, Twitter is also used for becoming visible in a positive manner. Twitter functions as a tool to showcase the Network's agency. A number of tweets highlight the SMUG network's activities, such as having completed and published reports and analyses, attending conferences, and having their work acknowledged by external actors through awards. 'Passed NGO Bill to affect organisations working on issues of sexual minorities- HRAPF analysis'; '#SHARP today shares good services & experiences of getting good services 2 #MSM in Africa @ICASA2015' International Conference on AIDS and STIs in Africa 2015, 'Satellite session happening right now on strategies for #MSM programing in restrictive and hostile environment'. The WAD 2015 coverage on Twitter also included a video of an acceptance speech made by a network member when receiving an award. Tweets appear to matter-of-factly notify followers, without much fanfare, that despite the restrictive Ugandan context the community still manages to deliver important services and for that it is acknowledged by actors outside the community. Tweets showcasing agency could be argued to represent attempts to utilize Twitter's inbuilt affordance of controlled visibility to oppose a prevalent negative images of the community. By highlighting external validation of the community's work, the community becomes visible as an agent as opposed to passive victims of a deadly disease. On the other hand, SMUG does so inconspicuously. The opportunity to influence the community's visibility in relation to World Aids Day, surfing on the well-recognized #WAD, is for the most part under-utilized. Finally, none of the tweets engage actively with the three most prevalent Ugandan homophobic discourses.

DAVID KATO FIVE-YEAR MEMORIAL 26 JANUARY 2016

Openly gay human rights activist and SMUG advocacy officer David Kato was murdered in 2011. He was beaten to death shortly after he had secured a high court injunction against the Ugandan tabloid, *Rolling Stone*, ordering them to cease outing alleged sexual minorities and calling for public hangings (Anon. 2011).

Similar to previous peaks, audiences were notified through a set of tweets about the upcoming event. 'Tomorrow @SMUG2004 will hold a memorial service in honor of David Kato, also Premier our first Documentary *And Still We Rise*. Join us'.

The main part of the Twitter flow is a rich recount in words and pictures of the memorial service led by the Ugandan sexual minority community's religious leader, Bishop Christopher Ssenyonjo, who himself has paid a high personal and professional price for standing up for his belief that his God embraces all human beings. 'Bishop Christopher Ssenyonjo leads memorial service for David Kato #WeCelebrateYourLegacy'; 'I pray that God could bring more people to work for the good of others who are being oppressed – Bishop Christopher Ssenyonjo'. By highlighting the Bishop's, a man of God, presence both verbally and visually, the tweets directly challenge a pervasive homophobic frame that sexual minorities are rejected by God.

A significant part of the subsequent tweets also tries to evoke pride in the community and contextualise Ugandan society's constant rejection of the group. Discrimination is explained through a lens of Ugandans lacking understanding of the teachings of God. 'People are ignorant about the purpose of human sexuality Bishop Ssenyonjo', 'People are who they are, accept them – Bishop Ssenyonjo'; 'God loves you as you are, some have tried to change but it's difficult – Bishop Ssenyonga', 'If you are heterosexual and they tell you to change to homosexual you can't, why do you want others to change? – Bp Ssenyonjo'; 'Respect each other in spite of our differences – Bishop Christopher Ssenyonjo'; 'Anything anti-love is anti-God, Bishop Ssenyonjo'; 'Bishop Ssenyonjo: many people are using Religion to condemn Homosexuality instead of preaching love. God is love'.

Even if the next to live re-dissemination of speakers' quotes and visuals of the venue as well as attendees, make the Twitter flow resemble a news broadcast, the tweets are clearly oppositional in character. The majority of the tweets directly challenges prevalent homophobic representations of the community, and thus directly relates to the community's visibility in the Ugandan society. Tweets generated during the memorial service led by Bishop Christopher Ssenyonjo engage directly with the Ugandan discriminatory discourse of sexual minorities as un-Godly and alienated from faith communities. By taking a Biblical passage as a point of departure, the Bishop's statement that sexual minorities are part of God's large and diverse flock, he conveys a message of divine acceptance, irrespective of who you choose to love. The tweets signal a rejection of the common claim that God's love is conditional and dependent on a heterosexual status. This message of divine acceptance activates a powerful moral discourse in the Ugandan context and produces a powerful counter-narrative on Ugandan sexual minorities, countering claims that non-heterosexual status is a cause for disqualification from divine grace. The tweets thus engage directly with unnamed religious and political claims makers who depict same-sex-loving individuals as sinners with no place in the Christian community unless they alter their ways and seek redemption from past sins. Furthermore, this counter-narrative of equality before God implicitly frames sexual minorities as being the same as heterosexual individuals.

The memorial also included another event- the premier viewing of a new documentary film *And Still We Rise*, co-directed by Nancy Nicol and Richard Lusimbo which chronicles the community's resistance to the Anti-Homosexual

Act of 2009. The fact that the Ugandan sexual minority community successfully produced a 70-minute long documentary on the community's struggle to overthrow the controversial Anti-Homosexuality Bill is in itself a bold move to exercise some control of the community's visibility. Most tweets generated in connection with the premier were coded as claiming agency. The premier at the memorial also highlights that even if a key member of the community is killed the community's struggle will and must continue. With persistence, change is possible, even if it at times comes at a high price. By textually and visually highlighting the accomplishment of producing a documentary on the community's successful struggle against a draconian piece of legislation, the tweets communicate a strong narrative of community agency and indeed resilience.

Tweets generated in connection with David Kato's memorial are clearly oppositional in nature as the majority explicitly challenges pervasive homophobic discourses or highlights the community's agency despite a repressive context. Twitter's in-built affordance of controlled visibility is used to directly challenge one of the most pervasive homophobic discourses: that of LGBTQIs are living lives contrary to God's rules, and thus should be rejected by morally upright citizens.

THE SMUG GALA, 17 DECEMBER 2015

In 2015, SMUG held its inaugural gala to celebrate and present awards to individuals who in various capacities have provided health services to the community, particularly in the area of HIV/AIDS. Providing health services is one of SMUG's goals, and by far the most tangible benefit for individual members. The Ugandan government's ambivalence about health services for sexual minorities makes non-governmental service providers indispensable for many members.

If number of tweets, including visuals and time between tweets, is indicative of importance, the 2015 SMUG Inaugural Gala, with the tag #SMUGGala2015, is the most important event of the analysed period. The gala is launched with characteristic pre-tweets and a notification that the event will be livestreamed.

The actual event is kicked off with welcoming tweets naming several distinguished guests and a hint of the preferred outcome of the event: 'SMUG ED @frankmugisha calls for partnership with Uganda Government and partners to end stigma and discrimination'. 'Tonight I call upon the government to continue to work with us to achieve success in fighting Hiv@dr frank mugisha @SMUG2004 #SMUGGala2015'. The welcome segment also includes the presentation of a number of high-level guests, which carries a special meaning, beyond merely introducing invited speakers. The presentation of prominent guests to Twitter followers effectively forms a launch-pad to suggest that their presence is also an endorsement of the community's human rights claims. 'Dr Uchenna from UN Human Rights Commission says introduction of #AHA led to an increase in LGBTI persecution', 'All human beings are equal and should be treated equal -uchenna emolonye UNOHR rep #SMUGGala2015'. 'Mr Wade McMullen from @RFKHumanRights thanks Dr Uchenna from UN human rights commission for support towards LGBT identifying Ugandans'.

Dr Wandera Specioza Kazibwe, United Nations Special Envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa, is one of the high-level guests. 'We are here to honor the people who are not afraid to speak out Dr Specioza Wandera Kazibwe.

#SMUGGala2015 #HonoringOurHealthChampions', 'I represent the ministry of health at this gathering today. Dr Specioza Wandera Kazibwe #SMUGGala2015 #HonoringOurHealthChampions'. 'What you are doing as sexual minorities in the fight against HIV/AIDs is commendable, own it. Dr Specioza Wandera Kazibwe #SMUGGala2015', 'Let us come back home to a constitution that is non-discriminative, I want you to be familiar with the constitution of Uganda. Dr Specioza', 'SMUG must stand with their heads high because you are making tremendous progress in health Specioza Wandera Kazibwe@Far_Uganda'. SMUGS contribution as a health service provider is repeatedly highlighted. 'As sexual minorities the work you are doing in fighting HIV/AIDS is phenomenal-VP dr. Specioza wandera kazi-bwe #SMUGGala2015'.

A significant portion of the gala tweets are devoted to presenting the names of award recipients and responses to awards. 'Today we are here 2 honor persons like dr sylvia tamale for having é guts 2 fight 4 policies that benefit people. -#SMUGGala2015'. 'Tonight we honor heroes in the work of access to health for LGBTI persons in Uganda -Dennis Wamala #SMUGGala2015'. A majority of the tweets fall under the second theme, claiming of agency: Twitter's inbuilt affordance of controlled visibility is thus used to showcase the community not only as an agent, but an agent with powerful allies.

A significant part of the Twitter feed also documents another aspect of the gala – the entertainment. Tweets referring to the entertainment sandwiched between speeches and awards are accompanied by glitzy images. 'Lovely performance by Lillian Mbabazi at #SMUGGala2015 #HonoringOurHealthChampions', 'Lovely performance by Maurice Kirya, he says the first song he performed was written today! #SMUGGala2015'.

Even if the actual gala evening comes to an end with this tweet: 'The SMUG Gala and equality awards event comes to an end without incident. We appreciate all that made the event successful. #SMUGGala2015', the gala-related tweeting continues well into the next day with more images of the presentations and party pictures of guests.

The content analysis found that thematically, *claiming agency* dominated in terms of number of tweets. Yet, this event on Twitter is different from the other peaks. At a superficial level the Twitter flow – with its script of a classic gala, with welcome addresses and distinguished speakers, presentation of awards sandwiched with thank you speeches and entertainment in the form of live music performances – represents nothing out of the ordinary. Only when these tweets are fully contextualized and placed into the Ugandan context does the SMUG network's use of Twitter fully emerge. Holding a glamorous gala to celebrate the community and its accomplishments, and inviting high-level guests to take part in the celebrations, as well as broadcasting it all on Twitter is a bold move. It is crucial to bear in mind that the community has periodically feared to congregate in public following the introduction of the controversial Anti-Homosexuality Bill. The gala itself and its online representation seem to signal an active choice to not only claim public space, but a desire to ensure that the audacity gets notice beyond the actual event.

Furthermore, there is a clear rejection of the homophobic discourse of LGBTQIs as a threat to society. By portraying Ugandan sexual minorities as health champions and award recipients, who also enjoy the support of elite members of Ugandan society, the community is presented as valuable members of society. The presence of distinguished and publicly well-known guests coming from outside the sexual minority community also lends

legitimacy to the claims. This is a powerful oppositional narrative of a stigmatized minority group that has endured repeated public condemnation from many elite institutions, such as the country's president, members of parliament and public officials, and church leaders.

DISCUSSION

The analysis indicates that SMUG uses Twitter both strategically and purposefully in connection with events important to the network and utilizes the platform's inbuilt affordance of controlled visibility. However, SMUG does not consistently exploit Twitter's inbuilt affordance of controlled visibility to actively challenge the dominant homophobic discourses portraying sexual minorities as un-Ugandan/un-African, un-Godly and/or a threat to Ugandan culture and society. Instead, the opportunity of controlled visibility appears to be used for showcasing agency. That is, showing (off) that despite the many structural barriers, SMUG's intentional and strategic actions contribute towards shaping and improving the circumstances in which sexual minorities live in Uganda.

An ensuing question is, however, why does SMUG not exploit Twitter's inbuilt affordance of controlled visibility and take advantage of opportunities to challenge prevalent discriminatory representations? Although a content analysis may not be able to fully capture SMUG's understanding of Twitter, the results do provide us with some potentially important insights. SMUG appears to deviate from the common interpretation of Twitter. That is, Twitter is, unlike other social media platforms, an externally oriented platform as tweets are publicly available instantly and require no prior relationship. Access to tweets requires no reciprocity as users can follow any other user, without being followed back. SMUG's overall use, however, implies that Twitter is approached as an intra-community platform. The shared frame of reference during the presidential debate strongly suggests that SMUG regards Twitter as a tool to reach and communicate with community members, as opposed to audiences outside the SMUGs network. Furthermore, the strong emphasis on network agency in three out of four events lends further support to this tentative hypothesis. Highlighting the network's resilience and agency is a very powerful message for a community that suffers daily hardship as a consequence of their non-conformity to heteronormative norms and thus are desperate for change. In short, Twitter, somewhat counter-intuitively in the Ugandan context, where the sexual minority community has limited opportunities to self-represent in a non-discriminatory manner, appears to be an intra-community space, rather than a tool for reaching external or more periphery audiences.

This is as far as the results of this study take us. To fully answer questions on the SMUG network's understanding of Twitter's affordances, extensive qualitative and multi-site research of both the off-line and online life of SMUG is necessary, as suggested by Postill and Pink (2012). Future studies should explore SMUG's understanding of Twitter affordances in more detail and the network's view of commonly referred to factors limiting the platform's impact, such as human homophily and the need to combine digital activism with spatial conquests to achieve social change.

Another factor to explore is fear. SMUG's particular use of Twitter could be a result of fear of a backlash as experienced in 2009 and seen in Tanzania more recently. The observed Twitter use could thus be a reflection of the LGBTQI

community's attempt to balance the need to increase visibility, against the potential repercussions of becoming too conspicuous for religious and political elites to allow to go on un-challenged. Indeed, a more obviously and brazen visible community could be interpreted as a direct challenge of conservative forces and proof of aggressive western-backed marketing of liberal ideals. It could thus re-invigorate the forces that proposed the Anti-Homosexuality Bill and trigger renewed attempts to have a revised bill passed.

Future research should also explore the organizational and strategic value of internal visibility. By becoming visually and textually constituted, the community's contours undeniably becomes more tangible, which in turn could strengthen the network's ability to act collectively through online and offline activism. Gerbaudo argues that a sense of common identity and shared emotions are key to the 'symbolic construction of a sense of togetherness among activists' (2012: 9). A strong sense of self and agency is essential for the type of activism that, on the one hand, actively draws upon international human rights organizations' experiences and support, and on the other has the confidence to be community-led and local in its expression. Activism that continues to be community owned and led, and local in its expression, is also more likely to successfully navigate the idiosyncrasies of Ugandan homophobia. Furthermore, a strong sense of common identity and ability to achieve change is essential to the capacity to stay the course even in times of adversity. Because, irrespective of strategies, digital and non-digital, human right for sexual minorities takes time, an aspect that often appears to be forgotten by countries that today self-identify as progressive (Kollman and Waites 2009). But if there is anything that decades of western LGBTQI organization, advocacy and advancement of sexual minority rights has taught us, it is that social change is possible, but hard-earned.

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