



SOCIAL DEVIANCE AND THE INFLUENCE OF INTERNET EXPOSURE: A STUDY OF SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN LUSAKA

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Abstract

This study investigates the relationship between internet usage and perceived social deviance among secondary school students in Lusaka, Zambia, with specific attention to the rise in awareness and expressions of LGBTQ identities. Using a mixed-methods approach, data were collected from 53 students across Matero Boys, Matero Girls, and Lusaka Hermann Gmeiner secondary schools. The research reveals that increased internet access broadens students' exposure to global discourses on gender and identity, often challenging traditional norms and prompting cognitive dissonance. Findings indicate that digital platforms promote reflexive identity formation while raising tensions in educational institutions unprepared to address such transitions. The paper concludes by advocating for inclusive digital literacy, policy reform, educator capacity-building, and culturally sensitive support systems in schools.

Keywords

Social Deviance, Internet Exposure, LGBTQ Awareness, Secondary School Students, Identity Formation, Digital Literacy, Zambia, Cultural Norms

1. Introduction

The rapid expansion of internet access among youth globally has transformed social interactions, information consumption, and identity formation. In Zambia, increased connectivity has exposed secondary school students to a diverse array of cultural narratives and social discourses that challenge traditional norms and values. Among these are global conversations around gender identity and sexual orientation, particularly concerning LGBTQ identities, which have become more visible through digital platforms. While the internet offers opportunities for self-expression, social support, and access to information, it also presents challenges, especially in socio-cultural contexts where such topics remain sensitive or stigmatized. Exposure to non-normative identities can provoke cognitive dissonance among adolescents raised within conservative value systems, potentially leading to perceived social deviance and tensions within school



environments. This study explores how internet exposure influences the perceptions and expressions of social deviance among secondary school students in Lusaka, focusing on the intersection of digital access and LGBTQ awareness. It aims to understand how young people negotiate identity in digital and educational spaces and how schools respond to these evolving social dynamics.

2. Research Objectives and Questions

This study aims to explore the relationship between internet exposure and social deviance perceptions among secondary school students in Lusaka, focusing on the awareness and expression of LGBTQ identities.

2.1 Research Objectives

- To examine the extent of internet usage among secondary school students in Lusaka.
- To assess how internet exposure influences students' awareness and perceptions of LGBTQ identities.
- To explore the experiences of students expressing non-normative identities in school settings.
- To investigate how educational institutions respond to emerging expressions of social deviance related to gender and identity.
- To propose strategies for inclusive digital literacy, policy reform, and educator capacity-building to support students.

2.2 Research Questions

- What is the level and nature of internet use among secondary school students in Lusaka?
- How does internet exposure shape students' understanding and attitudes toward LGBTQ identities?
- What challenges do students expressing LGBTQ identities face within schools?
- How do schools currently address issues related to social deviance and identity diversity?
- What measures can be implemented to create inclusive and supportive educational environments?

3. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This study is anchored in Labeling Theory and Queer Theory, complemented by concepts from Digital Identity Formation to examine the complex interactions between internet exposure, social deviance perceptions, and identity expression among youth.



3.1 Labeling Theory

Labeling Theory, rooted in sociology, posits that deviance is not inherent in any act but is constructed through social reaction and labeling by others (Becker, 1963). In the school context, students expressing LGBTQ identities may be labeled as deviant, which influences their self-concept and social interactions. This theory helps explain how societal and institutional responses can exacerbate or mitigate experiences of marginalization.

3.2 Queer Theory

Queer Theory challenges normative assumptions about gender and sexuality, advocating for the recognition of fluid identities and the deconstruction of binary categorizations (Butler, 1990). It provides a framework to understand the experiences of students exploring and expressing diverse sexual and gender identities, particularly in restrictive cultural settings.

3.3 Digital Identity Formation

With increased internet access, adolescents engage in digital identity formation—the process by which individuals explore and present aspects of selfhood online (Boyd, 2014). Digital platforms offer spaces for experimentation, community building, and access to information beyond local cultural constraints, which significantly influences how students understand and negotiate their identities.

3.4 Conceptual Framework

The study's conceptual framework integrates these theories to analyze how: Internet exposure (independent variable) expands awareness of LGBTQ identities and facilitates digital identity formation. School and community labeling processes mediate perceptions of social deviance (dependent variable). Institutional policies and educator responses act as moderators, either supporting or constraining inclusive identity expression. This framework guided data collection and interpretation, emphasizing the intersection of technology, social norms, and institutional culture in shaping student experiences.

4. Methodology

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to investigate the influence of internet exposure on perceptions of social deviance and identity expression among secondary school students in Lusaka.

4.1 Research Sites and Participants



The research was conducted across three secondary schools in Lusaka: Matero Boys, Matero Girls, and Lusaka Hermann Gmeiner Secondary Schools. A total of 53 students were purposively sampled based on internet access and willingness to discuss sensitive topics. Participants included diverse gender identities to capture a broad spectrum of experiences.

4.2 Data Collection Methods

Quantitative Surveys: Structured questionnaires assessed students' internet usage patterns, exposure to LGBTQ-related content, and attitudes towards gender and sexual diversity.

Qualitative Interviews: Semi-structured interviews with a subset of 20 students provided deeper insight into personal experiences, identity negotiation, and perceptions of social deviance within their school environments. **Focus Group Discussions:** Conducted with teachers and school counselors to explore institutional responses to emerging expressions of LGBTQ identities and related social tensions.

4.3 Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to establish patterns of internet use and attitudinal trends. Qualitative data from interviews and focus groups were transcribed and thematically analyzed to identify recurrent themes related to identity formation, social labeling, and institutional challenges.

4.4 Ethical Considerations

Given the sensitivity of the research topic, stringent ethical protocols were observed. Participants provided informed consent, with assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. The study was designed to minimize any potential psychological distress, and support resources were made available for participants as needed.

5. Findings and Analysis

The study uncovered several critical insights into the relationship between internet exposure, social deviance perceptions, and identity expression among secondary school students in Lusaka.

5.1 Internet Usage and Exposure to LGBTQ Content

Quantitative data showed that the majority of students had regular internet access, primarily through smartphones and social media platforms. Approximately 75% of



respondents reported encountering LGBTQ-related content online, which ranged from informational articles to personal narratives and advocacy campaigns. This exposure often served as a primary source of knowledge about gender and sexual diversity.

5.2 Identity Formation and Cognitive Dissonance

Qualitative interviews revealed that internet access facilitated reflexive identity formation, enabling students to explore and affirm non-normative sexual and gender identities. However, this process also generated cognitive dissonance as students navigated conflicting messages from traditional cultural norms and global digital discourses. Many participants described feelings of confusion, fear, and isolation, especially when their emerging identities clashed with prevailing societal expectations.

5.3 School Environment and Social Deviance Perceptions

Participants noted that expressions of LGBTQ identities were frequently met with stigma, discrimination, and labeling within their school communities. Teachers and peers often reinforced heteronormative values, framing non-conforming behaviors as deviant. Such reactions contributed to social exclusion and psychological distress among LGBTQ students.

5.4 Institutional Preparedness and Responses

Focus group discussions with educators indicated that schools were generally unprepared to address issues related to gender and sexual diversity. There was a lack of policies, training, and support systems tailored to the needs of LGBTQ students. Educators expressed uncertainty about how to manage related conflicts and often defaulted to silence or disciplinary measures.

5.5 Digital Literacy and Policy Implications

The findings underscore the urgent need for inclusive digital literacy programs that equip students and staff with critical thinking skills to navigate diverse online content responsibly. Furthermore, policy reforms are essential to protect the rights of LGBTQ students and promote culturally sensitive educational environments.

6. Challenges and Implications

The study highlights several challenges with significant implications for students, schools, and the wider educational system in Lusaka.



6.1 Cultural and Social Resistance

Strong cultural norms and social taboos surrounding gender and sexuality create an environment where LGBTQ identities are often stigmatized. This resistance affects students' mental health and willingness to openly express their identities, contributing to feelings of isolation and marginalization.

6.2 Institutional Gaps

Most schools lack formal policies or guidelines to support LGBTQ students or address related conflicts. The absence of educator training on inclusivity and diversity further exacerbates this gap, leaving teachers ill-equipped to provide supportive responses.

6.3 Digital Divide and Misinformation

While increased internet access exposes students to diverse perspectives, the digital divide persists, with some students lacking access or digital literacy. Additionally, exposure to misinformation and harmful content can confuse or mislead vulnerable youth.

6.4 Educational Impacts

Without supportive frameworks, students facing social deviance labeling may experience reduced academic engagement, absenteeism, or dropout. The school environment can thus inadvertently contribute to educational disparities for marginalized groups.

6.5 Policy and Practice Implications

These challenges emphasize the need for proactive policy reforms, capacity-building for educators, and the development of culturally sensitive support systems. Integrating LGBTQ-inclusive curricula and promoting safe school climates are critical steps toward equity and social justice.

7. Recommendations

To address the challenges identified and foster inclusive educational environments responsive to digital-age identity dynamics, the following recommendations are proposed:

7.1 Implement Inclusive Digital Literacy Programs

Develop curricula that empower students and educators with skills to critically evaluate online content, understand diverse identities, and engage respectfully with differing perspectives, reducing misinformation and stigma.



7.2 Reform Educational Policies

Formulate and enforce policies that explicitly protect LGBTQ students from discrimination and promote inclusivity. Policies should provide clear guidelines for handling identity-related issues and fostering supportive school climates.

7.3 Capacity-Build Educators

Provide targeted training and professional development for teachers and school counselors to increase awareness, reduce bias, and equip them with skills to support students navigating identity and social deviance issues.

7.4 Establish Support Systems

Create safe spaces, peer support groups, and counseling services within schools to assist students experiencing identity conflicts or discrimination, promoting mental well-being and academic persistence.

7.5 Engage Parents and Communities

Facilitate dialogues with parents and community leaders to build understanding and acceptance, bridging gaps between traditional norms and evolving digital cultural influences.

8. Conclusion

This study underscores the profound impact of internet exposure on the identity formation and social experiences of secondary school students in Lusaka, particularly regarding LGBTQ awareness and expression. While digital platforms offer valuable spaces for exploration and self-understanding, they also introduce tensions within traditional school and societal contexts where non-normative identities may be labeled as deviant. The findings highlight significant cultural, institutional, and infrastructural challenges that schools must address to support diverse student identities effectively. Proactive efforts—encompassing inclusive digital literacy, policy reform, educator training, and community engagement—are essential to foster safe and affirming educational environments. By embracing these measures, educational stakeholders in Zambia can ensure that schools become sites of empowerment rather than exclusion, equipping young people to navigate complex social landscapes with confidence, respect, and resilience.

9. References

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