

Online Romance Scams: Perceptions on the Risks of Victimisation of LGBTQ+ Individuals on Dating Apps

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Abstract

With the growth of technology, cybercriminals have their opportunity to target victims online. Although online dating platforms offer LGBTQ+ individuals a means to connect, they also expose users to significant risks such as fraud, assault, and other forms of victimisation. People of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) communities are no exception to this online victimisation. Although it is known that LGBTQ+ community members are frequently the target of online victimisation, little information is available on this matter related to the use of dating sites in South Africa, specifically. This study therefore explored how LGBTQ+ individuals perceive the risks of victimisation when using dating sites. The research objectives included: to identify the types of cybercrimes that occur on dating sites against LGBTQ+ people; to understand the views of LGBTQ+ individuals in using dating sites; and to examine LGBTQ+ individuals' awareness of the occurrence and prevention of victimisation against LGBTQ+ people on dating sites. Employing a qualitative methodology and exploratory case-study research design, the study recruited five participants who identify as LGBTQ+ individuals and reside in South Africa to share their perceptions on dating sites used by LGBTQ+ individuals. The semi-structured interviews yielded rich data and saturation was soon reached. These transcribed interviews were thematically analysed to identify the multiple risks that members of the LGBTQ+ communities face while engaging on dating sites and social media platforms. Additionally, it was found that perpetual stigmatisation of the LGBTQ+ community has led to the innate need for love, acceptance, and connection, which can lead to engagement in potentially risky situations for the chance at fulfilling this need. No member of a socially just society should face victimisation in the pursuit of connection, be it intimate or platonic connection. These findings highlight, once more, the

need for social inclusion to be at the forefront of societal collective consciousness. The authors believe that this lack of social inclusion could be addressed through inter-group contact and accurate media representation of members of the LGBTQ+ community to achieve familiarisation and acceptance between differing groups in society.

Keywords: LGBTQ+; dating apps; online dating; stigmatisation; victimisation

Introduction

The use of dating sites has become increasingly popular among people across the globe. The popularity of dating applications (apps) has changed people's preferences on how they meet their romantic and sexual partners (Whitty 2008). Studies have found that for LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, plus) people it can be difficult to find a partner due to stigmatisation of those communities (Baluch and Lloyd 2024). Therefore, they are more likely to use dating apps compared to heterosexual people (Gelles-Watnick 2023; Smith 2022). Before the use of the internet, LGBTQ+ people used bars, clubs, and social spaces to find relationships (Frankis and Flowers 2009; Todd 2013).

Since the beginning of the internet, LGBTQ+ people have relied on dating sites to meet their romantic partners or build friendships. According to Wang, Lu, and Wattenhofer (2022), dating apps for gay people, such as Grindr and SCRUFF, are considered the primary platforms for gay men to engage in online dating. While online dating apps make it easier for some people to find and build relationships and allows people to find companionship (Cheese 2022), it has also been reported that this comes with major risks of victimisation, particularly in the LGBTQ+ communities. According to the organisation OUT LGBT Well-being, many members of the LGBTQ+ community who identify as gay, bisexual, and men who have sex with men (MSM) have reported being targets of criminal activities on dating apps including Grindr, Tinder, Ads Africa, and others (De Barros 2022; Tshuma 2023). It is important to shed light on the unfortunate reality that members of these communities face an additional layer of discrimination in comparison to their heterosexual counterparts. Highlighting this societal issue should bring forth social change to destigmatise wrongful perceptions about the LGBTQ+ community, allowing them to more openly engage without fear of crime.

While there is a growing body of literature on the use of online platforms and the occurrence of crimes, most studies have focused on the general population of dating app users (Bouma-Sims, Kumar, and Cranor 2024). Studies specifically addressing LGBTQ+ victimisation in the South African context remain limited. Most studies that have been conducted focus on heterosexual individuals and their use of dating sites (Docherty 2019; Geldenhuys 2020; Singh and Jackson 2015). Although limited, the reports also show that there is an increasing number of crimes committed against LGBTQ+ individuals on dating sites (Bouma-Sims, Kumar, and Cranor 2024). Therefore, this study is explorative in nature and utilised primary data collection to

explore LGBTQ+ perspectives on dating sites and their perspectives on victimisation of their communities via these platforms.

The research objectives fulfilled by this study included:

1. To identify the types of cybercrimes that occur on dating sites against LGBTQ+ people.
2. To understand the views of LGBTQ+ individuals in using dating sites.
3. To examine the awareness on the occurrence and prevention of victimisation against LGBTQ+ individuals on dating sites.

The following text highlights the need for a study of this nature and provides the methodological background to how this study was conducted to address the fact that qualitative data on the experiential perceptions of LGBTQ+ South Africans relating to victimisation on dating sites is sparse. The resulting thematic analysis is presented and critically discussed with acknowledgements of the limitations presented by a study of limited size and recommendations for how this study could be expanded. Recommendations for strategies to promote social inclusion of LGBTQ+ community members are also mentioned to highlight the gravity of how dangerous it is for marginalised individuals who are seeking connection via these virtual dating sites.

Online Dating and the LGBTQ+ Community

While there are no statistical reports on the use of dating sites by LGBTQ+ individuals in South Africa, studies show that there is an increase in the use of dating sites in South Africa (Bosch 2022). Popular dating sites for LGBTQ+ individuals in South Africa include Grindr, Tinder, HER, Koer, Lex, Feeld, OurTime, and Bumble (Gallagher 2020; Kimani 2023). Dating apps allow individuals to form romantic and non-romantic relationships. Online dating apps such as HER are specifically designated for lesbian women (Johnson, Vilceanu, and Pontes 2017). Junck (2021) states that HER is the largest dating app for LGBTQ+ women or non-binary people. A study conducted by the Pew Research Center shows that younger lesbian, gay, and bisexual adults have tried online dating (Gelles-Watnick 2023). According to Todd (2021), in a survey conducted by Match.com it was found that LGBTQ+ individuals between the ages of 18 and 70+ were using the internet for online dating. Grindr is one of the fastest-growing dating apps, reaching more than 190 countries (Statista Research Department 2024). Considering the wide use of these dating apps, there is little surprise that they are viewed by LGBTQ+ individuals as a safe space to connect with others and build relationships. While these are some of the benefits of using dating sites for LGBTQ+ individuals, they are also at risk of victimisation.

Risks of Online Dating

Crimes against LGBTQ+ community members continue to rise in South Africa. With the growth of technology, criminals have taken their crimes targeting LGBTQ+ people to the internet. These crimes include personal attacks, harassment, discriminatory behaviour, dissemination of defamatory information, misrepresentation online, invasion of privacy, social exclusion, and cyberstalking (Govender and Skea 2015; Yang 2021). Cybercriminals exploit the social isolation and marginalisation that LGBTQ+ individuals often face, using dating platforms to manipulate and harm them. In a study conducted by Lauckner et al. (2019), it was found that online dating comes with risks of victimisation such as catfishing, discrimination, racism, harassment, and sexual coercion. Other types of victimisation occurring online include sexually explicit messages sent by perpetrators, harassment, and being called offensive names (Gelles-Watnick 2023). Online scamming has been found to be one of the major crimes that occur on dating sites against LGBTQ+ individuals. In a 2022 report, Cheese elaborates on a perpetrator in Toronto who scammed members of the LGBTQ+ community, stealing in excess of \$30 000. Older LGBTQ+ individuals may face additional challenges navigating digital platforms safely, highlighting a need for more inclusive digital literacy and app safeguards (Todd 2021). Police and activists say LGBTQ+ individuals are often targeted because of hatred and intolerance (Reuters 2023). The existing literature and news reports provide evidence that LGBTQ+ community members are the target of victimisation or criminal activity.

The hatred and prejudice towards the LGBTQ+ population are strongly influenced by heteronormativity, which is the idea that heterosexuality, based on a binary gender system, is the default sexual orientation (Mkhize, Nunlall, and Gopal 2020; Piantato 2016). As a result of heteronormativity, LGBTQ+ individuals are faced with marginalisation and are perceived as “other” or “unnatural” (Kuhar and Švab 2024; Mkhize, Nunlall, and Gopal 2020). This idea already makes LGBTQ+ individuals vulnerable to victimisation in traditional society. As a result, perpetrators target LGBTQ+ individuals on online platforms, such as dating sites, to victimise individuals they find vulnerable. Studies have shown that the perpetrators of violence against LGBTQ+ individuals justify their crimes through religion and culture. Queer theorists challenge the notion that gender is binary or fixed (Piantato 2016, 10). As a result, some scholars have argued that online dating spaces also privilege heterosexuality and binary gender identity, thus making them unsafe for LGBTQ+ users. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, the “mother” of queer theory, argues that heteronormativity as a social force presumes heterosexuality to be the default, unspoken-but-always-spoken-about norm of social life (Grzanka 2016). Therefore, in online spaces, LGBTQ+ users become more vulnerable and targeted for victimisation. While there are dating sites created specifically for LGBTQ+ users, their visibility due to their sexual orientation and gender identity still makes them vulnerable to victimisation.

Gaps in South African Research

While the research focus of victimisation of LGBTQ+ individuals is growing in South Africa, particularly in traditional society, there is still a dearth of research focusing specifically on online dating platforms and the victimisation of LGBTQ+ individuals on dating platforms. Much of the work that has been done on the dangers of dating sites has focused mainly on heterosexual relationships. Most studies have focused on another important phenomenon—the targeting of single, unmarried women who are looking for love through dating sites for victimisation (Eseadi et al. 2021; Geldenhuys 2020; Thumboo and Mukherjee 2024). One of the few studies conducted on the victimisation of LGBTQ+ individuals on online dating platforms is that of Van Der Schyff (2025), which focuses on exploring how online reports construct, interpret, and contest narratives surrounding the victimisation of gay men. Hence this study aims to cover that gap by exploring the unique vulnerabilities of LGBTQ+ members on dating sites. This study is motivated by the growing number of news reports of crimes committed against LGBTQ+ individuals by perpetrators they meet on dating sites and the need for intervention.

Considering these gaps in the literature and the severe marginalisation still faced by LGBTQ+ community members, the study explored the South African LGBTQ+ community members' perceptions of the risks of victimisation while engaging with online dating sites. This study was unique in that it specifically explored these perceptions within the context of the South African LGBTQ+ community and specifically focused on their awareness of victimisation within this sphere.

Methodology

Before the commencement of the study, ethical clearance was obtained through the Independent Institute of Education's Varsity College, Pretoria, and the authors endeavoured to avoid risk to participants. The study employed a purposive sampling strategy in collecting data. Participants self-identified as LGBTQ+ community members. The researchers opine that obtaining the perceptions from individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ has provided more insight into the risks of victimisation on dating sites and awareness of this victimisation. The researchers did not specifically recruit participants who have been victims of online victimisation on dating apps and were sensitive to the fact that those who have been victimised may experience questions of this nature as intrusive and potentially damaging to their mental health. Although no risk of sensitivity was anticipated, nor did it arise during the data collection process, the authors would have referred participants for free counselling, had it been required.

The researchers employed an exploratory research design, considering the lack of information related to this topic. The LGBTQ+ community was considered the accessible population. The researchers therefore created a recruitment advertisement that was placed on public social media groups for LGBTQ+ individuals calling for participants. Participants were informed that participation was voluntary and ensured

that their anonymity would be secure. Interested participants therefore could reach out to the researchers for voluntary participation in an interview.

Data Collection Process

Primary data was collected through semi-structured interviews that were held online using MS Teams or Zoom. Some participants opted for telephonic interviews, which was accommodated. The interview sessions took between 30–45 minutes. Collected data were subjected to Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis, and themes that emerged from interviews were organised and analysed.

Considering the exploratory nature of this study, a large sample was not required. A total of five members of the LGBTQ+ communities responded to the call for participants and took part in the interviews. Although the study used a small sample, data saturation was reached and the depth of insight supplied proved sufficient to provide exploratory information. Participants were selected based on the following criteria: they had to be part of the LGBTQ+ community; be over the age of 18; and be familiar with dating sites. Table 1 represents some brief demographic data of the five participants who contributed to this study.

Table 1: Demographic data of participants

Brief Demographic Data			
Participants	Age	Gender	Sexual Orientation
Participant 1	25	Female	Lesbian
Participant 2	28	Transgender Male	Straight
Participant 3	21	Male	Gay
Participant 4	23	Male	Gay
Participant 5	25	Non-Binary	Gay

A total of eight semi-structured interview questions were asked to participants to gauge their perceptions of the risks of victimisation for LGBTQ+ people on dating apps, to understand the views of LGBTQ+ individuals to fulfil the research objectives. Within these five interviews there were several recurring themes, which are elaborated on in the following discussion. Analysis of the data was done utilising Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step thematic analysis:

- Familiarisation of data: The researchers spent time on transcription and audio-familiarity with the five recorded interviews.
- Generation of codes: Free-coding was employed to identify answers related to the research aims and objectives. Any responses that participants gave that were deemed unique were also highlighted in the

coding process as they were considered to provide valuable insight into this area of research. More than 50 codes emerged during this step of analysis, and these could be grouped to form themes. These codes are shown in Table 2.

- **Combining codes into themes:** Combining codes assisted in creating themes that were highly relevant to the research objectives. Initially eight themes emerged and were considered important to answering the research questions. Table 2 was created by the researchers to visually present the themes and codes as they emerged from the data.
- **Reviewing themes:** Themes were reviewed to ensure they were in fact in line with what emerged from the data. It was decided at this step that some themes could be combined, at which point the final number of themes came down to four.
- **Determine significance of themes:** The final four themes were considered significant as they each provided valuable insight into the perceptions of victimisation while using dating applications of the LGBTQ+ community. They also directly linked to the objectives of the study, indicating that those objectives had been fulfilled.
- **Reporting of findings:** The findings are discussed in-depth in the next section.

Table 2: Codes and themes as they emerged from the data

Theme	Codes
Stigmatisation of LGBTQ+ community members	Sites help to be able to initiate relationships as it is not easy to find LGBTQ+ individuals in public spaces
	There are stigmas about gay men being “monied” and they are therefore the target of crime
	People are impartial and think the crime is “none of their business”
	Lack of awareness of dangers as mainstream news does not cover these stories
	People victimise LGBTQ+ individuals based on their sexuality and gender identities

Unique vulnerabilities and needs of LGBTQ+ individuals		LGBTQ+ community members tend to feel unloved
		LGBTQ+ community is stigmatised by society
		Being accepted by the general public is a surface-level idea
		The belief that this could be my “soulmate”
		Need for acceptance, love, and community
		Queer media platforms are the only spaces that validate the experiences of LGBTQ+ communities
		Dating sites help me know I am not the only one who feels this way
		Need for closeness means that they put themselves at risk
		Online dating for love
		People are open via text/virtual platforms
		Easy to meet people from the same community
		Friends and partners can be found on these sites
Risks of utilising dating sites		One can be unsure of people’s motives on dating sites
		Sites can be a source of “hook-up” culture
		Sites help to be able to initiate relationships as it is not easy to find LGBTQ+ individuals in public spaces
		Catfishing
		Rape
		Murder
		Theft/Robbery
Usage of dating sites	The dangers of dating sites	Peadophillia
		Sexual assault
		Hate crimes
		Kidnapping
		Social media is a space where LGBTQ+ community members are very open
		Aware of the risks of online dating
		Face-to-face meetings are required
		Curbing the risks is impossible
		Homophobic/transphobic individuals can use these platforms to endanger LGBTQ+ lives
		Lack of awareness of dangers as mainstream news does not cover these stories

		Meet in public to avoid danger
		Queer education and destigmatisation will aid in avoiding harm
		It is the individual's responsibility to stay safe
		Dating sites do not prioritise safety
		Grindr is an unsafe platform
		LGBTQ+ community is very aware of dangers of dating platforms
		LGBTQ+ community must know their worth
		Verification processes
	Dating Sites	Badoo
		Grindr
		HER
		Tinder
		Facebook
		TikTok

Table 2 is a visual representation of the codes that emerged from the data and the themes that emerged to encompass those codes. These themes are discussed in-depth in the results section.

Results

The analysis of the participants' responses suggests that while the use of dating sites provides ease in forming relationships and connecting with people, it also creates a high risk for victimisation. The themes that emerged painted an important picture of the unique lived experiences of members of the LGBTQ+ communities. These themes are discussed here and aim to shed light on the three objectives of the study, i.e., to identify the types of cybercrimes that occur on dating sites against LGBTQ+ people, to understand the views of LGBTQ+ individuals in using dating sites, and to examine the awareness on the occurrence and prevention of victimisation against LGBTQ+ on dating sites. Participants' identities are protected, and they are therefore referred to as participants, numbered as follows: P1, P2, P3, P4, and P5. Four final themes were identified: usage of dating sites, risks of dating sites, unique vulnerabilities and needs of LGBTQ+ individuals, and awareness of victimisation on dating sites.

Usage of Dating Sites

Multiple apps were mentioned by participants as the most well-known dating sites that are used by LGBTQ+ individuals to form romantic and non-romantic relationships. The apps and dating sites mentioned by this sample were Badoo, Grindr, and HER; however, participants noted that LGBTQ+ individuals also use platforms such as Facebook and

TikTok to interact and build relationships even though these platforms are not traditionally made for dating. All participants mentioned that dating sites make it easier for people who identify as LGBTQ+ to build romantic and non-romantic relationships while also placing emphasis on the risks this comes with. The findings emphasise that LGBTQ+ individuals find online dating apps to be a safe space for them to show their true identities, share their unique experiences, and also build romantic and non-romantic relationships. Excerpts from interviews with participants 2 and 3 emphasise how finding connection in person is not simple, but that online platforms offer a potential solution:

All these platforms may be beneficial for LGBTQ+ individuals, because you know that for us it is sometimes not easy to identify our own in person and go for dates. But much easier online. (P2)

We need to remember that as gay people, it's hard for us to ask each other out on the streets wide open just like how heterosexual people do. So, for us homosexual people it is benefiting to use dating sites, cause that's when we're gonna see people around us that identify just as us. (P3)

Participants concurred that although dating sites provide benefits to LGBTQ+ individuals, they also put them at risk of being a target for online victimisation. The risks of victimisation are discussed under the following theme.

Risks of Dating Sites

All participants mentioned the risks and dangers of dating sites including being targeted for victimisation due to their sexual orientation or gender identities. Such risks include being a victim of catfishing and scamming and being targeted for homophobic and transphobic victimisation. Catfishing and scamming lead to crimes such as rape, murder, theft or robbery, paedophilia, sexual assault, and kidnapping.

Catfishing and Scamming

Participants cited scamming and catfishing as a tactic leading to serious crimes such as rape, robbery, and murder. They further mentioned that the perpetrators of these crimes use fake profiles on dating sites to target specifically individuals of the LGBTQ+ communities. Participant 5 describes this deceit:

On dating sites, they will say everything you want to hear under that fake profile and once you meet them you become the victim. It's really scary; that is why I have chosen to stay away from meeting people on dating sites, and even on Facebook which I still use even today. (P5)

The perpetrators initiate a date with the victim and ask to meet at a certain place; and once the victim arrives at the arranged date they are restrained, beaten, threatened, and robbed or held for ransom. Although catfishing is not legally classified as a crime, it is a form of victimisation that participants identified as a risk.

Rape and Sexual Assault

While the focus of the study aimed to not include participants who have been victims of crimes on dating sites, it was found that one participant had experienced direct victimisation on a dating site. Participant 4 was open about their experience. This indicates the extent of the risks of victimisation on dating sites. Participant 4 opened up about this harrowing experience and how they shouldered the blame for this instance:

So, my first interaction with a person I met from Grindr was not the best. I was sexually assaulted by the person, and I actually blamed myself, I blamed myself for putting myself in that situation. (P4)

Other participants shared that they were not direct victims of crimes, but they described their awareness of these targeted crimes:

I heard of one in the news where a gay gentleman met someone on Grindr and this person deceived him and got him to agree to meet up where he was raped and murdered. (P2)

I have never been a victim myself, but I have read many cases where people were scammed, catfished, and even robbed by the people who were pretending to be their dates. More serious cases I have heard of were those of people who were assaulted, some were kidnapped and sexually assaulted. I know a transgender woman who was kidnapped and assaulted by a person she thought was her lover. (P5)

The challenges that we face most of the time are mostly, we get catfished. And end up being raped or something, by being told lies. (P1)

Robbery

Perpetrators commit online fraud, where they communicate with online users and initiate romantic relationships under false pretences. Participants of this study shared the same sentiments that scamming and robbery are some of the crimes that occur on dating sites, where perpetrators form romantic relationships pretending to be romantically interested in them and then later victimise them. Participants 3 and 5 demonstrate a deep awareness of the risk of robbery when wanting to meet up with someone they have engaged with on a dating site:

Because I've heard a lot of stories where a person is mentioning that "I've been talking to this person for a whole like six months, chatting back and forth. Everything was fine. I invited a person to my place, he came and robbed me out of nothing, I have nothing now because the person took my stuff, took my money, took everything, now I'm left with nothing." (P5)

Participant 3 added to this idea by saying that:

Some of them you're gonna invite a person whom you have met on the dating site to your home and that person drugs you and takes all of your stuff. (P3)

The participants demonstrate a clear awareness of the potential risks of using dating sites. These risks are often seen as unique and are a result of their being part of the LGBTQ+ communities.

Awareness of Victimisation on Dating Sites

While some individuals are well-informed of the risks of online victimisation, participants indicated that there is still lack of awareness of the risks of victimisation on online dating apps, in general, amongst the LGBTQ+ communities. The findings indicate that this lack of awareness could be, among others, due to limited media coverage as well as lack of access to information. Participant 2 and participant 5 elaborate on limited reporting of LGBTQ+ targeted crimes:

I believe a lot of us don't know of these stories because news outlets don't cover them. A lot of us have to rely on queer curated social media spaces to follow LGBTQ+ news and even then, not a lot of people know that some of these spaces exist and so stay in the dark. (P2)

A lot of us do not know. Some of these cases are not shown in the news, only if the case becomes a big case you will see it on the news, but that does not mean these crimes on these apps are not occurring. But as the community, many of us are not aware. (P5)

The "risks of dating sites" theme led the researchers to believe that LGBTQ+ individuals are well aware of these risks; however, these participants emphasise that this is not true for the LGBTQ+ communities in general. Participants explain that the lack of awareness may be due to the fact that individuals are solely focused on finding love on dating platforms. Participant 3 further emphasised that:

It [being on dating sites] has actually opened a door for criminals to explore that side of things and people are not aware. Some of them are not aware, cause they are thinking "no man, I started talking to this person and me and him are okay, I'm gonna go see him today," at which you do not know what this person is all about; he's a criminal, hiding. (P3)

Participants suggested that the lack of awareness of crimes occurring on online dating sites by LGBTQ+ individuals as well as their need for love and acceptance makes them vulnerable to being lured by perpetrators whose usual modus operandi is to pretend to be in a love interest with their targeted victim and later victimise them. This explanation brought forth the final theme, which emphasises how members of LGBTQ+ communities still face societal stigmatisation, which forces them to engage in the use of dating sites and potentially risky situations as a result.

Unique Vulnerabilities and Needs of LGBTQ+ Individuals

Participants' narratives indicated that due to societal exclusion and difficulty in building traditional connections, LGBTQ+ individuals may get into dating sites because of the need for love, acceptance, and connection. Participants believe that LGBTQ+ individuals may internalise this social exclusion and find online spaces where they might feel "safe." Participants described intense emotional vulnerability, often linked to social exclusion:

Okay, we're mostly not loved. Their way into our lives is that we tend to take our personal lives to social media most of the time. We are too open, and we hide nothing about our sexuality. (P1)

Our need for community and acceptance is our most vulnerable point because it hinders us from seeing people's true intentions all because they've shown a drop in the ocean amount of kindness or just mere human decency. (P4)

They feel like maybe if they go on these dating apps, they might be able to find some sort of desirability or love. And in turn, they just get taken advantage of. (P6)

As I've mentioned, our desire for closeness is literally putting us in these situations. (P7)

Participants emphasised the desire for love and closeness that is perceived to be achievable through online dating platforms, making this a prominent theme. They explained that this need for connection is often difficult to meet in conventional relationships due to experiences of social exclusion, making online dating platforms a viable option for LGBTQ+ individuals. However, participants expressed concerns that this desire may put individuals of LGBTQ+ communities at a high risk of being lured by perpetrators under false pretences. This may be due to the lack of awareness among some victims, along with manipulative tactics used by perpetrators who deliberately target individuals based on their gender and sexual orientation. Other participants shared the same sentiments:

Each and every individual desires closeness, you know. So, even with us, we all desire closeness. So, with queer people is that their desire is to a point whereby they put themselves in situations where they know that it's very dangerous. (P3)

Our desire for love. I feel like, you know, it's not easy, especially for queer people to date socially, so we use social media apps. And sometimes they can take our vulnerability and desire for love and use it against us to victimise us or to even perpetrate crimes against us, which is unfortunate that it's our only way of connecting with our people, for some of us, you know. (P4)

Us being desperate for love also puts us at a very high risk. Because we find a space for us to meet people like us but that also makes us vulnerable to being lured by these criminals. (P5)

LGBTQ+ individuals' own emotional needs or behaviours make them more vulnerable, and as a result, they partially internalise blame for their victimisation. The findings indicate internalised stigma experienced by LGBTQ+ individuals, which is often rooted in heteronormative and homophobic societal norms. For this reason, they opt for online dating platforms as their "safe" space. Considering the openness of online spaces and how online users can share their life experiences and needs, perpetrators utilise this as their platform to learn about their targeted victim and ultimately victimise them. This internalised stigma also often leads to a lack of reporting of such victimisation, because victims do not feel encouraged to report as they believe they will not be accepted or supported because of their sexual orientation.

The need fulfilment experienced through online platforms is said by participants to create a sense of safety with those they engage with. Hope for love and belonging is also a major motivator for using these sites, according to three of the participants in this study. They have heard success stories of people who have met online and remain in functional and committed relationships thereafter. Therefore, they continue to pursue the idea of finding love online. At times, the idealistic views of those engaged in positive virtual interactions appears to outweigh the possible negatives and safety concerns that come with these platforms. Participant 3 explained that he realises the possible safety concerns of engagement on these sites, but that the hope to fulfil his need for love and acceptance means that he puts himself at risk by choosing to meet people he knows virtually in person. He mentioned that a relationship is unsustainable online, but that he is fully aware of the risks that come with choosing to meet a virtual acquaintance in public.

Participants shared their concerns over the societal attitudes towards the LGBTQ+ communities and how that might have an impact on their inability to connect with others in person, therefore motivating them to use online dating apps. Additionally, these stigmas contribute to victimisation of individuals based on their sexual orientation or gender identities. Participants expressed that the hatred and prejudice from society continue to be perpetuated in online spaces. They argued that the victimisation of LGBTQ+ people on online dating platforms is due to the existing homophobia, resulting in perpetrators targeting LGBTQ+ individuals. Two participants expressed their thoughts on societal stigmatisation:

Their hate towards us and the tendency to invalidate any issue raised within our community. Stigmas that are created by society also play a huge role. (P2)

Just us being gay in a very homophobic society makes us vulnerable to these crimes. I think that there is so much hatred for gay, lesbian, transgender, bisexual people and other identities from the society that they just want to harm us. (P4)

Another participant mentioned the stereotype that society has towards the LGBTQ+ communities that they are perceived as people with money. This prejudice encourages

perpetrators to commit crimes such as robbery against targeted individuals. The verbatim response from participant 3 is as follows:

The society perceives us as money people and these criminals they know that these people are money people. So, they use these dating sites to link themselves to us, and because of our desire for closeness, we allow them into our lives not knowing what can happen, what are these people's intentions. (P3)

Participants' responses suggested that the impact of societal hate and negative attitudes towards individuals who identify as LGBTQ+ results in them being a target for online victimisation. Participants also raised the issue of underreporting, emphasising the need for the criminal justice system to take such cases seriously. Participant 5 plainly explains how societal stigmas have an impact:

Well, the society is very homophobic. You would find that these people who are victims of these crimes don't even report because already the society doesn't accept them. So even with these perpetrators, they have this hatred towards the LGBTQ community that all they think about are ways to harm us. (P5)

Discussion

The victimisation of LGBTQ+ individuals stems from individual vulnerabilities, platform-specific risks, and societal stigmas. While individuals of the LGBTQ+ community find solace in the use of online spaces, there is a high risk of becoming targets of victimisation. The findings indicate that while dating apps may be beneficial for LGBTQ+ users in easily meeting other people and building relationships, they may also be a platform for perpetrators to target these individuals. The findings suggest that scamming and catfishing are some of the methods perpetrators use to lure their victims and ultimately commit crimes such as rape, sexual assault, robbery, and kidnapping. They do this by pretending to be romantically interested in the targeted victim. These findings concur with that of the study conducted by Lauckner et al. (2019) in which the authors found that one of the common dangers of using online dating is catfishing, and that multiple individuals have experienced it themselves and some have noticed that other online users have experienced similar incidents. The authors also suggest that catfishing occurs with perpetrators scamming other online users by pretending to be interested in someone and building a romantic and trusting relationship with a potential victim under deception (Lauckner et al. 2019). Sexual assault is one of the serious crimes that occur as a result of the use of online dating apps against LGBTQ+ individuals. Dills, Fowler, and Payne (2016) argue that there is a lack of preventive efforts when it comes to addressing the risks of sexual assault occurring because of the use of dating sites. While most research studies focus on heterosexual online dating app users, the findings of this study show the risks of victimisation for LGBTQ+ individuals. Some of the reasons this victimisation occurs, according to participants, include stigmatisation, homophobia, and hatred for LGBTQ+ people. As a result, perpetrators go on dating sites with the purpose to victimise LGBTQ+ individuals.

The themes highlight that LGBTQ+ members may opt for dating sites as building relationships in the traditional way may be difficult. A study by Rosenfeld and Thomas (2012) found that due to the stigmatisation and discrimination of some individuals in society, some prefer the online environment because it provides a safer space for their identities, coming out, and building romantic relationships or finding sexual partners. According to Rosenfeld and Thomas (2012), people of LGBTQ+ communities are more active on dating sites in comparison to their heterosexual or gender normative counterparts. They feel safe to explore their identities and form sexual or non-sexual relationships (Albury and Byron 2016; Pingel et al. 2013). The main reason for this is that most same-sex couples or those with different gender identities are isolated from society in many countries (Albury and Byron 2016). Loneliness and the desire to form relationships lead to the vulnerability of some individuals who may not be aware of being targeted by predators on dating sites. As Scannell (2019) mentions, online predators search for lonely people and build relationships with them under false pretences and exploit them thereafter. Individuals are often targeted because of hatred and intolerance. Sexual minorities or those who express alternative gender identities who are stigmatised offline use online platforms to seek support and build social and sexual relationships (Cui et al. 2022; Garrett et al. 2016; Miles-Johnson and Wang 2018; Young, Szekeres, and Coates 2013). The way in which society views LGBTQ+ individuals and the stigma attached to members of these communities play a huge role in their victimisation. The social exclusion and stigma make it difficult for LGBTQ+ individuals to form relationships in person; as a result, they opt for dating apps to build these relationships.

This study found that individuals of the LGBTQ+ community experience treatment from the general population that further marginalises them and causes them to feel unsafe in initiating conversations or intimate relationships with others in their own community in public spaces. This concurs with the assertion by Rege (2009) that participants can remain anonymous on the internet, which allows them to form relationships without the fear of being stigmatised. Participants explained that they often resort to utilising virtual dating apps or social media to try to initiate these interactions. The belief is that by using these platforms they would not be the target of scrutiny from the general population and can “safely” get to know individuals on these sites. Although not all of the platforms used by participants are traditionally dating sites, they are used in non-traditional ways to seek a sense of community within online spaces, according to the participants, exemplifying the intense need to find non-traditional ways to connect with others, due to the severe stigmatisation that they face.

Heteronormative relationships are considered the default and morally acceptable. The idea that there are two sexes which are biologically determined, and which govern gender expression as either masculine or feminine and sexuality as an attraction to the opposite sex (Cramwinckel et al. 2021) has an impact on the victimisation of LGBTQ+ people. The findings of this study suggest that due to the stigmatisation by a heteronormative society, LGBTQ+ individuals not only face victimisation but also

experience victim-blaming as well as lack of support due to being viewed as shameful. Researchers argue that dating sites are created with heterosexual users in mind and for this reason there is a lack of attention paid to the needs and safety of LGBTQ+ individuals. Using queer theory, the findings suggest that while apps such as Grindr and HER are created for LGBTQ+ users (Parry, Filice, and Johnson 2023), they are still more visible and vulnerable to victimisation by perpetrators who perceive them as immoral or unnatural—providing an unintentional layer of further marginalisation. Queer theory challenges the binary way of thinking (that is, the idea that there is only a man and a woman) and expectations regarding gender and sexuality (Manning and Adams 2021). As a form of resistance to binary ideas and heteronormativity, apps such as Grindr are designed in such a way that users are not required to identify the gender of their object of desire upon sign up, allowing for more fluidity of sexual desire (Parry, Filice, and Johnson 2023). However, it can be argued that LGBTQ+ online users become more exposed to perpetrators who get on these dating sites with the intention to victimise LGBTQ+ individuals due to their lack of acceptance and heteronormative ideas. An article by Mamba Writer (2024) concurs with the findings of the study by arguing that while dating sites created specifically for LGBTQ+ individuals are designed for safety and inclusivity, the risk of victimisation of LGBTQ+ members due to their sexual orientation or gender identity continues as they become targeted by perpetrators. Van Der Schyff (2025) also argues that heteronormative societal norms and structures perpetuate violence against gay men due to their sexual orientation. This lack of acceptance in societies is also evident in social media platforms. As participant 5 mentioned:

This unacceptance of LGBTQ community in the society makes us an easy target for victimisation, and even after we have been victimised no one is willing to support us because they already see us as a sin, they already see us as people who deserve to be hurt.

Studies support this argument by stating that unsuspecting LGBTQ+ individuals are lured by perpetrators who create fake profiles and form relationships with their potential victim under false pretences. The present findings correspond with the findings from De Barros (2022) who explains that perpetrators create a profile on an LGBTQ+ dating site and deceive the person they are interacting with by providing false information and deliberately target individuals they believe are unlikely to report them.

The findings of the present study suggest that some LGBTQ+ individuals are unaware of the risks of victimisation on dating sites. This may be due to a number of factors, including their focus on finding and building a new relationship, feelings of safety in online spaces as compared to the traditional world, as well as the tactics used by perpetrators such as pretending to be looking for love and forming relationships with their targeted victim. To deter the risks of victimisation, some articles offer tips on safety for individuals who use dating sites (De Barros 2024; Mamba Writer 2022). While South Africa has cybercrime laws such as the Cybercrimes Act 19 of 2020, which

criminalises activities such as the disclosure of personal data and fraud, there is still lack of specific focus in addressing the crimes targeting LGBTQ+ individuals. Section 16 of the Act criminalises the unlawful and intentional disclosure, by means of an electronic communications service, of a data message of an intimate image of a person without their consent. The Act also prohibits the incitation of violence and threats online. However, this seems not to be the case in the commission of these crimes targeting victims who identify as LGBTQ+. The perpetrators use deceptive methods to make their targeted victim form a relationship with them and without any online threat lure their victim and later victimise them. This calls for a more focused intervention on such crimes targeting LGBTQ+ individuals.

Limitations and Future Research

The authors upheld every effort to ensure that this is a trustworthy and rigorous study. Despite these efforts, some limitations must be acknowledged. The sample size was small and therefore the study lacks generalisability. The reader is therefore reminded to see the findings in this study as exploratory insights.

Considering the exploratory nature of this study, it also lacked randomisation. Participants were self-selected and it must be acknowledged that this poses a limitation of “self-selection bias.” Key insights may be absent from these findings due to the lack of randomisation in this study.

In an effort to address these limitations, some recommendations in terms of potential applications of these findings as well as recommendations for further study of these findings are explored. The present study highlights the importance of destigmatisation of members of LGBTQ+ communities. Cramwinckel et al. (2021) and Lim, Neel, and Hehman (2024) report on intergroup-contact and the benefits of eradicating existing harmful stereotypes between heteronormative groups and the LGBTQ+ communities. Cramwinckel et al. (2021) elaborate on how participants from heteronormative groups were more empathetic to LGBTQ+ stories of “coming out.” The authors explain that after some contact and interaction, responses to “out-group” individuals were more positive (Cramwinckel et al. 2021). Another possible step towards destigmatisation may be media representation. According to a 2023 study by Sawansukha and Tushir, media exposure of the heteronormative community to representations of members of the LGBTQ+ community was received with “friendliness and curiosity.” This is in line with social psychological theories that state that individuals who are more exposed to something become more familiar with it and therefore more accepting (Branscombe and Baron 2018). These are some existing possibilities to combat misinformation and negative societal attitudes. However, the researchers recommend further studies on this topic to expand on findings for possible generalisability to the broader LGBTQ+ population. Additionally, engagement with LGBTQ+ activist organisations may assist in raising awareness of the issue at hand: Members of LGBTQ+ communities would not need to expose themselves to risky scenarios if they were socially included. Participant 2 summed it up well when he said:

It's more of a groundwork issue. The reason there are violent crimes in the first place is because homophobia exists, and the media perpetuates that. Queer education and destigmatisation of queerness in the media and in communities would do well to stop the problem completely. (P2)

In order to enhance the rigour of a study of this nature, the authors recommend that a larger study be conducted to get greater qualitative data or data from a mixed-method design. This may provide more generalisable findings to elaborate on this exploratory study. Representation of all communities within the LGBTQ+ banner in a study of this nature would be beneficial. LGBTQ+ communities are considered marginalised, and it must be acknowledged that experiences of these individuals based on their sexual orientations and preferred gender identities would be unique and should be elevated.

Although the present study explored perceived risks of dating sites, rigorous longitudinal data on dating site or dating app use and the risks associated with such use would be helpful in deepening societal understanding of these phenomena. Additionally, such data may contribute to further destigmatisation of the LGBTQ+ communities.

Conclusion

This exploratory study included the perceptions of five participants from LGBTQ+ communities who shed light on the perceived risks of victimisation of LGBTQ+ people on dating apps. They extensively described their awareness of the victimisation of LGBTQ+ individuals in crimes such as sexual assault and rape, and their vulnerability to catfishing, which is not considered criminal, but leads to criminal acts, and scamming and robbery. The participants furthermore provided understanding of the views of LGBTQ+ individuals in using dating sites. This study uncovered that the marginalisation of LGBTQ+ members has led to them engaging on online platforms to seek a sense of love, acceptance, and community. The difficulty in making those connections publicly, due to stigmatisation, leads to seeking this out in safer ways. It is tragic, however, that the “safe space” that is experienced online is frequently violated through targeted victimisation of these community members. Lastly, this study determined the awareness of the occurrence and prevention of victimisation against LGBTQ+ individuals on dating sites.

Although the LGBTQ+ community experiences the online space as a “safe space” to share unique experiences, they are aware of the dangers of taking these virtual interactions to the “real world,” as reports on crimes are many. However, knowing that sustainable relationships cannot continue online indefinitely means that they take the chance to meet virtual acquaintances with the hope of finding lasting love or commitment. The findings of this study relate to Smith's (2022) and Baluch and Lloyd's (2024) findings that members of the LGBTQ+ communities seek out connection via virtual platforms due to their awareness of how they are marginalised within public settings. The unfortunate part of this is that it creates a cycle in which these individuals

utilise platforms to find connection, and, in some instances, this allows them to be further victimised or marginalised.

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