



ONLINE TROLLS AND THEIR ATTACKS ON THE LGBTQ COMMUNITY IN UZBEKISTAN

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Introduction

In this paper, I argue that due to the traditional, heteronormative views prevalent in Uzbek culture, as well as normalized government repression of society as a whole, members of Uzbekistan’s LGBTQ community cannot express themselves freely in public, but rather are forced to interact on social media. Increasingly, however, social media trolls have been using these same platforms to harass LGBTQ individuals and keep them on the margins of society. Employing social theories of conflict and symbolic interactionism, this paper will explain the rise of intolerance toward the LGBTQ community in Uzbekistan. It will also uncover the nuances of LGBTQ socialization in the country that most [studies](#) of Central Asia ignore, such as the presence of a large LGBTQ community outside the Uzbek capital. To understand public perceptions and narratives about the LGBTQ community, media analysis—particularly critical discourse analysis of social media posts from Telegram, Instagram, and YouTube—was undertaken. [Critical discourse analysis](#) allows one to describe how language and discourse “legitimize social inequalities.” Additionally, this paper uses semi-structured interviews conducted in 2021-2022 to support its arguments and amplify the voices of the LGBTQ community in Uzbekistan. Ultimately, this research seeks to explore queer social spaces in Uzbekistan’s online sphere and draw attention to the hostile environment that online trolls and common social media users have created, which endangers the LGBTQ community.

Ethics

Over the course of many visits to Central Asia, including while writing my book, [*Homosexuality in Central Asia: Stories of Hardship and Hope*](#), published by Barnes and Noble, I had the privilege of engaging and connecting deeply with members of the LGBTQ community. These individuals inspired me to help join the effort to bring attention to the hardships they face in the hope of finding solutions and gaining greater acceptance in the region. Leveraging the connections already solidified during my previous research was tremendously beneficial for this paper. My experience with the LGBTQ community in the region has shown me the legitimate dangers they face every day. As an “outsider,” I can leave this danger at any time; they do not have the same privilege. For this reason, protecting the identities of these individuals is imperative. All interviews were unrecorded, and those interviewed will remain anonymous. For those I knew personally, I ensured that all messages via Telegram were sent from an anonymous account and promptly deleted afterwards. While this may cause some to question the integrity of this research, it was the only way to prioritize the safety of those interviewed, who are at risk of reprisals from their communities and the government.

This research hopes to inspire an understanding of the daily struggles of the LGBTQ community in Uzbekistan and advocate for their right to exist peacefully in the larger community. LGBTQ people in Uzbekistan do not enjoy any representation in mainstream Uzbek culture or media. As such, in line with [research](#) conducted in neighboring Kazakhstan by Levitanus, “the choice and ability to regulate one’s visibility is one of the most crucial expressions of queer agency.” However, this research demonstrates the [risks of visibility](#) and highlights the dangers of being in the LGBTQ community. While this research advocates for better treatment for the LGBTQ community, starting at the social and legislative levels, it remains cognizant of the threat that increased visibility can entail. For my interviewees in the Uzbek LGBTQ community, this risk is intertwined with the potential to gain the right to equal protections (Interview B 2021; Interview D 2022).

Due to Uzbekistan’s patriarchal societal structure and traditional social norms (it is taboo for a man to be alone with a woman, especially in the rural regions of the country), this research is limited to the gay and bi sub-communities of the LGBTQ spectrum. It does, however, include testimonials from gay men across all of Uzbekistan so as to be inclusive of different backgrounds and lived experiences.

Theoretical Foundations

This paper’s theoretical framework is inspired by propositions derived from social theories of conflict and symbolic interactionism. It will build upon these concepts and further explain the rise of intolerance toward the LGBTQ community in Uzbekistan.

In relation to conflict theory, Ralf Dahrendorf views society as existing either in [conflict or consensus](#)—at any given moment, individuals will either conform to the social norms around them or rebel against them. Social norms in the country are heavily influenced by traditional cultural and spiritual—mainly Islamic—customs. These social norms affect the ways in which men and women are expected to behave, with men projecting strong, masculine qualities and women positioned as subservient to men. As such, “[individuals learn the cultural scripts of the gender role attached to their biological sex, which reinforces heterosexuality as the norm and the implications of deviating from these scripts.](#)” With Uzbekistan’s social environment structured around a strict patriarchal system, [homophobia becomes](#) “an essential tool to maintain heterosexuality.” Adding to this issue is the fact that some in Uzbekistan’s government and society [believe that the LGBTQ community is a product of the West](#), bent on destroying the traditional values of the country. Therefore, the government’s aversion to Western liberal ideals creates additional issues not only for the LGBTQ community, but also for Uzbek society, which views the LGBTQ community as opposed to the racial/ethnic identity of “Uzbekness.” The prevalence of homophobia in Uzbekistan [creates](#) “minority stress...due to the incongruence between [a] minority person’s culture, needs, and experience, and social structures.”

Religious sentiment in Uzbekistan is [increasing](#). The [religious beliefs of the nation](#) are deeply embedded within the symbolic nature of what constitutes Uzbek identity, and this religious sentiment creates a conflict for members of the LGBTQ community, as religion is frequently used to delegitimize LGBTQ rights.

Based on the religious symbolism and constructed social theories of conflict in Uzbek society, this paper seeks to address the ways in which LGBTQ members of Uzbek society have been pushed further toward the margins, especially to online platforms, which provide a limited means of socialization. Even within this online realm, due to the prominence of homophobia in Uzbek society and increasing intolerance toward the LGBTQ community at the behest of the Uzbek government and religious leaders, LGBTQ members in Uzbekistan have limited safe spaces for interaction.

Background: Homosexuality in Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan is situated at the crossroads of ancient empires, modern political confrontations, and the historical Silk Road. Uzbeks take great pride in their history; the colorful and enchanting cities of Samarkand, Bukhara,

and Khiva still retain their historical and magical charm. For its part, Uzbekistan’s government demonstrates an unwillingness to leave the past. Article 120 of the [Uzbek Criminal Code](#) in use until 2021 perfectly illustrates this point. A relic of the Soviet Union, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are the only post-Soviet states that still retain this law. Titled “Besoqolbozlik” (*relations with beardless boys* in the Uzbek language), it made relations between men illegal and punishable by steep fines and/or up to three years in prison. The literal meaning of “Besoqolbozlik” is vague and mischaracterizes the activity, further complicating the perception of homosexuality in the country. Likewise, this translation suggests that same-sex acts are pedophilic. As a result, the general public not only disapproved of homosexuality, but also negatively associated it with child sexual abuse and viewed gay men as perverted. In 2021, Uzbekistan updated its criminal code, but left Article 120—now referred to as Article 154—[intact](#). While it no longer has the connotation of sexual relations with underage boys, it still makes homosexuality illegal and is [now classified](#) as a crime against the family unit and the country’s morality.

Uzbekistan has a storied past with sexual relations among men and boys that [dates back to the country’s Persian roots](#). Before the Russian and Soviet conquests in the 19th and 20th centuries, Uzbek men frequently had sexual relations with young boys, an engagement known as Bacha Bazi. This Afghan-Dari term, literally meaning “boy play,” was used to denote sexual relations between boys and older men. These boys were [prepubescent](#) and danced Central Asian traditional dances (Frost 2016). This practice was legal until the Soviets outlawed it as part of an effort to [modernize](#) the “backward” ways of the local population.

In the modern context, not only do sexual relations between males continue to be illegal, but Uzbek society has also become increasingly homophobic—the two largest contributing factors being foreign influences, mainly from Russia, and arguments rooted in religion. [Uzbek society closely mimics its Russian counterpart](#)—a consequence of the former Soviet Union’s regional dominance—and as Russian society has increased its attacks on the LGBTQ community, so has Uzbekistan. Anti-gay propaganda on Uzbek state TV and social media sites resembles the anti-gay messages seen throughout Russia. At the core of this messaging is a warning that Western ideas, particularly homosexuality, are negatively influencing society, a message also espoused in Russia. While Russian anti-gay influence continues to foment hatred toward gay people in Uzbekistan, this situation is exacerbated by the influence of conservative Islam. In Uzbekistan, Islam is taught as adamantly opposing same-sex sexual relations. With 80 percent of Uzbeks identifying as Muslim, this religious perspective has produced homophobia that has saturated the highest levels of society, including the law and law enforcement agencies. Police often do not fully investigate crimes with gay victims, instead seeking to extract bribes from them through blackmail. The government claims that only 40 gay men have been arrested in the last few years, but countless others have had to undergo [torture and harassment](#) at the hands of police, including forced anal examinations. This unwillingness to help gay victims of crime leads to greater insecurity for the gay community.

Current Government and Religious Narratives about the LGBTQ Community

Homosexuality has been a controversial topic for Uzbekistan since its independence in 1991. Former President Islam Karimov frequently [called](#) homosexuality inappropriate for Uzbekistan’s social and cultural values and saw it as a “vulgar’ Western habit.” Even under [reform-minded president](#) Shavkat Mirziyoyev, and despite the [election of Uzbekistan](#) to the United Nations’ Human Rights Council for 2021-2023, human rights in the country, especially LGBTQ rights, remain deplorable. In an [authoritarian country like Uzbekistan](#), all decisions and social agendas are made at the political center; those in positions of power craft the narratives). Due to years of state-sponsored repression, citizens of the country look to government officials for cues regarding acceptance or condemnation of controversial topics. This was especially true for LGBTQ rights in 2021, when some from the younger generation and international rights groups [called](#) on the Uzbek government to change the controversial Article 120 as part of the planned update to the country’s criminal codes. As previously mentioned, Article 120 was retained in the criminal code, but reclassified as Article 154 and a crime against the

morality of the country. Not only did this classification further push the subject of sexuality into legal conflict with the Uzbek social system, but it also created conflicts within the social realm. In early 2021, Alisher Kadyrov, a top lawmaker and former presidential candidate, [proposed](#) stripping members of the LGBTQ community of their Uzbek citizenships and sending them to countries that would give them refuge. These comments [sparked widespread condemnation](#) from international organizations, but many Uzbeks—especially religious ones—[agreed with his comments](#). That many people sympathized with Kadyrov’s comments comes as no surprise, considering that the Uzbek government has largely ignored—and at times even instigated—intolerance against LGBTQ individuals. The government’s position is unwavering because it would otherwise result in [“strong public opposition.”](#)

The Uzbek government has merged national identity with traditional and religious values, thereby rejecting anything that is at odds with the heteronormative structure, such as homosexuality. It has done this not only through the words of government officials, but also by demonizing the LGBTQ community. For example, Jahongir Ortiqkhojaev, the mayor of Tashkent (the capital of Uzbekistan), had a meeting in 2019 with journalists who negatively portrayed him in media stories. Due to this criticism, he [threatened](#) to falsely portray the journalists as engaging with gay people and in gay acts. Not only was this an attack on the media’s already limited freedom, but it also demonstrated the way homosexuality is perceived in the country. If one is even rumored to have links to the LGBTQ community, this individual becomes a pariah in business and social circles.

Miraziz Bazarov saw this firsthand in early 2021. A popular online blogger who became known for challenging the country’s traditional Islamic values, he [advocated](#) for the decriminalization of homosexuality. As a result, he was violently attacked in the capital and later [arrested](#) for slander because he posted videos that the authorities deemed against Uzbek culture. Among the videos were criticisms of the government and Islam, particularly relating to systemic abuses of human rights and the LGBTQ community. While the causes and sources of his brutal attack [remain in question](#), it is clear that the government’s narrative about the LGBTQ community has caused the community immense harm.

This narrative also has ramifications in the healthcare sector. The Uzbek government has taken steps to craft an Uzbek identity based on traditional values, which it insists cannot include LGBTQ rights. This has extended to [include the illegality of sex education](#), especially the HIV/AIDS epidemics, as these diseases are negatively associated with the LGBTQ community and at odds with the national culture. Not only has this imposed additional stigma and hardship on the LGBTQ community, which is experiencing an increase in transmission rates of HIV, but it also has social ramifications for any LGBTQ health advocates in the country. This was the experience of Maxim Popov, who was jailed for HIV activism, which the government [deemed](#) “against the national culture.” A sense of traditionalism has become intimately entwined in the collective social agenda of the Uzbek government’s nation-building process, and the government has sought to invoke “Uzbek identity” as a means to combat any perceived threat to this “traditional” culture. By declaring LGBTQ individuals incompatible with Uzbek identity, this harmful rhetoric has placed the LGBTQ community at odds with the government-led social structure.

Conservatives in the religious community have also influenced society’s perception of the LGBTQ community. Some [believe](#) homosexuality is caused by demons and that a trip to the local mosque can “cure” this “illness.” Myths about homosexuality abound in the country, and religious leaders perpetuate these harmful views. This is particularly concerning given that over 90 percent of Uzbekistan’s public [identifies as religious](#) and the country is becoming [increasingly religious](#). To give one example, a leader in the religious community, Imam Rahmatulloh Saifutdinov, has [claimed](#) that if a woman fantasizes about other men during sex with her husband, “she could become pregnant with a homosexual baby boy.” These beliefs demonize the LGBTQ community and further ostracize them from mainstream society. Furthermore, this harmful rhetoric physically endangers

the LGBTQ community. Some in the country [believe](#) that “killing a homosexual brings a promise of Paradise, as a good deed and reward.” Radical religious views have [steadily increased](#) and religious leaders [preach](#) that “there can be no mercy for homosexuals.” Additionally, former President Karimov [stated](#), “When God wants to reveal someone’s vulgarity, He first takes his reason away.” In other words, using a religious standpoint, prominent government leaders have linked queerness with mental illness. In a social environment comprised of these views, the LGBTQ community must be cautious in their interactions. One way they are doing so is by shifting their socialization to online platforms; however, even these online spheres have become unsafe places.

LGBTQ Culture Online

With [limited physical spaces](#) specifically designated for the LGBTQ community, such as bars or clubs, in addition to [increased homophobia and physical abuse](#) toward members of the LGBTQ community, gay individuals must seek safe spaces for free interaction elsewhere. This space is online. This is not to say that Uzbekistan’s LGBTQ community is completely devoid of spaces to meet offline, but for the purposes of this paper, online interactions are the focus. There are also other factors that contribute to increased internet usage among the LGBTQ community. Under the leadership of President Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan has seen an [increase](#) in Internet access and a decrease in its cost, which has allowed many more individuals to use the Internet. Additionally, the president has encouraged online journalism and blogging, [opening up](#) a sector of society that was historically off-limits. However, it should be noted that certain topics, like LGBTQ rights and criticism of the government, [can still not be touched](#). Despite this lack of media freedom, the online environment for the general public has improved. The unblocking of social media sites like Facebook and access to increased data speeds for video downloads has resulted in increased usage of online platforms by LGBTQ and heterosexual individuals alike. For the LGBTQ community, these online platforms have become host to a limited gay culture in Uzbekistan.

The most popular apps for the LGBTQ community in Uzbekistan are Hornet, a gay dating site; Instagram, a photo- and video-sharing platform; VK, a Russia-based social networking site similar to Facebook; and Telegram, an encrypted messaging service similar to WhatsApp (Interview A 2021). Initial contact typically occurs on Hornet, where members exchange contact information before moving to Telegram for further contact (Interview A 2021). Even with the Hornet app’s popularity, the majority of the LGBTQ community relies on Telegram for subsequent connection via group chats, video calls, and message sharing (Interview A 2021). However, [risks abound on these sites](#) due to the presence of government security services like police and heterosexual individuals with ulterior motives, including blackmail, extortion, harassment, and even death. Members of the LGBTQ community face extreme pressure, abuse, and extortion from these individuals, yet [cannot go](#) to the police or use other legal means for protection. Cyber-protection laws, including from cyber-bullying and harassment, are [limited](#). In addition, the popular social networking sites mentioned above cannot guarantee user protection beyond simple mechanisms such as blocking or reporting harassers. Even then, companies must review reports, which takes time, and blocks can be circumvented by creating new accounts. Most harassment occurs through group chats composed of entirely anonymous people and profiles. Most users of these apps do not post their real pictures and use temporary phone numbers to protect their identities (Interview B 2021). Harassment, physical violence, and other similar risks associated with meeting individuals from online are a familiar story in the country. In 2019, Shokir Shavkatov, a gay man, was found [nearly beheaded](#) in his apartment. The circumstances are unclear: his friends say he was attacked and taken away by men claiming to be “morals police,” while the police claim Shokir was attacked by someone he met online. While there is disagreement about what really happened, both scenarios demonstrate the immense dangers LGBTQ individuals face online from the public and the police, all of whom are influenced by the harmful government and religious-led social narratives that oppose LGBTQ individuals to culture, morals, and society.

Anti-LGBTQ Rhetoric and Online Trolls

Social media platforms in Uzbekistan are [filled with online trolls](#)—people who [harass and bully](#) individuals on online platforms through hateful and divisive comments. Uzbek Internet users are no strangers to people who post harmful content—examples of this have been seen many times, particularly directed at activists and journalists. Uzbekistan’s government has even been known to pay individuals to harass or troll political critics, as [most recently seen](#) during the 2021 presidential election. For the LGBTQ community, these attacks by online trolls are commonplace and [not only harmful, but also threatening](#). In addition, online trolls are not held accountable for their actions because they usually [rely on](#) anonymous burner accounts that cannot be traced. Between anonymity and few legal protections for online activity, [online harassment goes unpunished](#).

Attacks by online trolls increased after the attack on Miraziz Bazarov, the journalist mentioned above who advocated for LGBTQ rights. Individuals who agreed with Bazarov or advocated on his behalf after his arrest were targeted for online attacks; it is now evident that some of these trolling attacks occurred at the [behest](#) of the State Security Services. These online attacks against the LGBTQ community usually contain derogatory language, including slurs, threats of violence, and blackmail. One social media user stated, “As a member of the LGBTQ community, I cannot freely be myself online because I am afraid of the hateful comments. I do not want my family and friends to see them” (Interview C 2022). The individual interviewed has since deactivated his accounts, but now feels isolated from his friends (Interview C 2022).

One example of online toxicity following the Bazarov situation came from “Ali Kaxxorov,”¹ an online blogger and self-proclaimed online troll who posts criticism of private citizens and ironic memes of the government. However, this criticism typically comes at the expense of minority groups, including the LGBTQ community, which is apparently why the government has not interfered. In a Telegram group post in 2021, “Ali Kaxxorov” posted that half of Uzbekistan will now identify as gay after a government representative, Alisher Kadyrov, [called](#) for all members of the LGBTQ community to be deported (see Figure 1). The post—seen thousands of times—contained many comments from assumed heterosexual individuals now claiming to be gay as a way to get to countries like Switzerland (see Figures 2 and 3). While the commentators attempt to joke at the situation, this type of discourse worsens the situation for members of the LGBTQ community, as their sexual orientations are viewed as a choice that can be joked about.

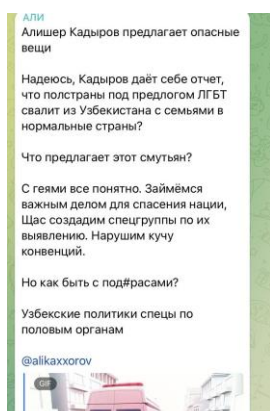
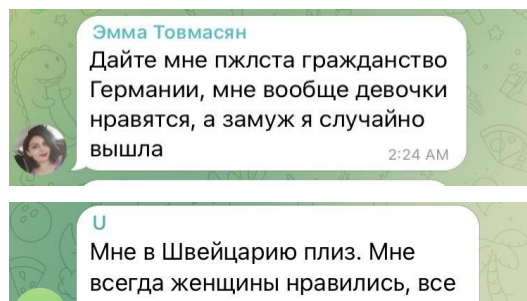


Figure 1: Post from “Ali Kaxxorov.”



Figures 2 and 3 (above): Responses to the post.

¹ An assumed name.

Another example in 2021 also comes from “Ali Kaxxorov.” After the United States Department of State released its Investment Climate Statements, “Ali Kaxxorov” made posts criticizing the U.S. report (see Figure 4). However, the post was not typical criticism; instead, it contained baseless and harmful rhetoric against human rights, including the LGBTQ community. The post, written in Russian, claimed that the United States was being hypocritical and attempting to prevent a “revival” of Uzbek society. The fact that minority groups, including African Americans and members of the LGBTQ community, were mentioned as part of the bloggers’ argument is an example of the disparaging way in which the LGBTQ community is discussed in Uzbek society. Additionally, posts like this, which are directed not at a particular person but rather at an entire group, demonstrate how bloggers and trolls perpetuate toxic, homophobic narratives in the country. This is especially true when the post is made by a blogger with thousands of followers and who receives advertising revenue from private companies.²

Bloggers who utilize troll-like tactics, including posting and re-posting videos intended to humiliate an individual or show graphic content as a “shock factor” to garner more views, are popular in Uzbek Telegram groups. Most of the content comprises jokes at the expense of women and members of the LGBTQ community. One notorious group is titled “tashGangs;” it has over 140,000 subscribers and hundreds of thousands of post views. One example of the content posted in the group is a video of a comedy skit where a firefighter at a call center answers a call concerning a gay club reportedly on fire. The firefighter then proceeds to call his friend and ask if he has any coal so that he can throw coal at the gay club to make the fire stronger (see Figure 5).

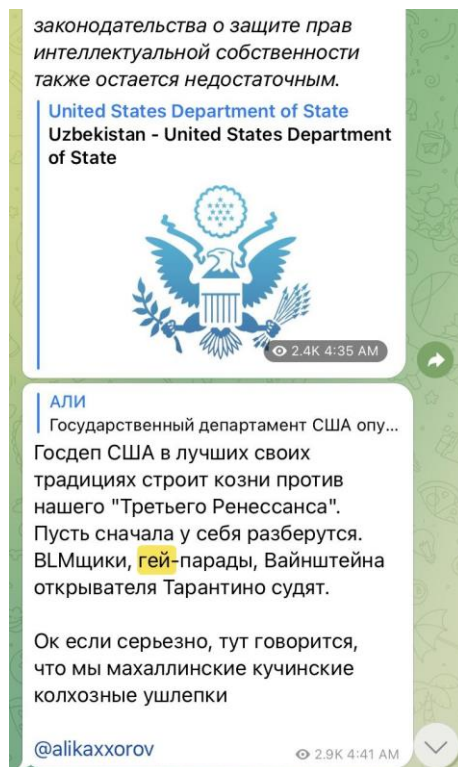


Figure 4 (left): Post from a blogger/online troll.

Figure 5 (above): Screenshot of a video from a popular blog.

The video has thousands of views, and with view numbers so high, negative content like this only continues. The owners of the blog remain anonymous to the public but have recently received ad revenue from sports

² On the “Ali Kaxxorov” Telegram account, there is a link to a bot to contact him for advertisements. His account contains multiple promotions that companies paid for.

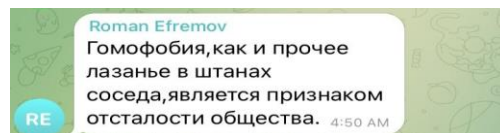
betting companies like 1XBET and MOSTBET.³ The Telegram group is supposed to be 18+, but without any way of managing or checking the age credentials of subscribers and viewers, one can assume that the videos are likely to reach impressionable minors; with this in mind, it is worrisome that such content reinforces a harmful social narrative and might cause it to become further entrenched in the discourse of younger generations.

In recent years, international rights groups have flagged the “tashGangs” group for posting videos glorifying violence against members of the LGBTQ community. In 2017, a particularly graphic video of a nude male being attacked physically and verbally circulated in the “tashGangs” group. In the video, individuals hurl punches at the young man, while simultaneously using slurs and asking him about his sexuality. After he admits to being gay and being from Margilon, a city in the Ferghana Valley, individuals in the video can be heard saying that it is not possible to be gay and from the Ferghana region, and that if it is true, then he is bringing great shame to the city. At the end of the video, [the man is forced to sit upon a glass wine bottle to humiliate and physically punish him](#). The video (see Figure 6) was viewed in “tashGangs” thousands of times, with no individuals in the group condemning the violence. While this video was posted in 2017, it still receives many views today, which ultimately encourages and incentivizes other individuals to make similar content.

Videos portraying violence against gay people are typical in the aforementioned “Ali Kaxxorov” Telegram group. In 2021, a comedy sketch was posted that portrayed a call between a police officer and citizen involved in a traffic accident. The citizen says that he hit an ass (donkey). The police officer proceeds to tell him to just take it off the road and drive away. The video then pans to what the citizen actually hit—a man with an LGBTQ pride flag (see Figure 7). The video has been seen thousands of times; while most commenters have applauded the video and this type of humor, a few commenters have taken issue with it. One critical comment sarcastically stated that next Uzbekistan will ban colored pencils and other rainbow colors, while another commenter said that homophobia is a sign of a backward culture (see Figures 8 and 9).



Figure 6: Screenshot of a comedy-styled video about killing a member of the LGBTQ community that was posted in a Telegram group.



Figures 7 and 8: [Comments defending the LGBTQ community](#).

³ Based on information posted in the “tashGangs” Telegram group.

Comments defending the LGBTQ community are rare in these Telegram groups and many of those who do make supportive comments are ridiculed. As one interviewee mentioned, “I used to post pro-LGBTQ comments, but the group’s administrators almost always delete these comments or I would receive threatening messages from other users” (Interview D 2022). While it is reassuring to know that some users in these groups support the LGBTQ community, they are the minority and their comments cannot outweigh the amount of negative, toxic posts.

As seen in the above posts and comments, homophobia is rampant in these Telegram groups and the typical argument against the LGBTQ community relates to Uzbek identity or culture. One post that shows this dynamic was posted in the “Ali Kaxxorov” Telegram group. On Instagram, U.S.-based Mariam Tillyaeva, the granddaughter of former authoritarian leader Islam Karimov, posted a photo in support of gay pride. The “Ali Kaxxorov” Telegram group reposted the photo (Figure 10) with a mocking rebuttal asking, “What happened to high spirituality and invincible strength?”

The Telegram group’s post was viewed thousands of times, garnering support because of the criticism of gay individuals and the mockery of strongman Islam Karimov’s ideas. The phrase in the post is a play on words from Karimov’s [self-written play](#), “High Spirituality is an Invincible Force.” In this work, the former president covers the role of spirituality in the nation and identity formation of Uzbekistan and lays out what he considers [threats](#) to the Uzbek nation—including alleged “Western ways of living, but contrary to Uzbek mentality,” such as tattoos, homosexuality, and the Internet. The arguments against the LGBTQ community made in this play are the same ones that are used today by the general public and politicians. This rhetoric has shaped the ideals of many in the nation, who use anti-Western and anti-LGBTQ discourse in their online posts and comments. As such, these social media platforms and trolls, particularly on Telegram, perpetuate the heteronormative status quo in Uzbek society and have made the online sphere an unsafe space for the LGBTQ community.

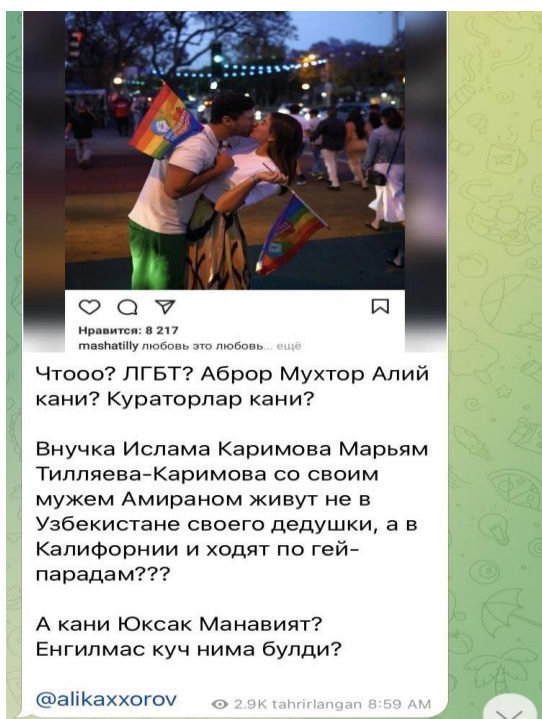


Figure 9: A Telegram post mocking the former president’s granddaughter’s support of gay pride.



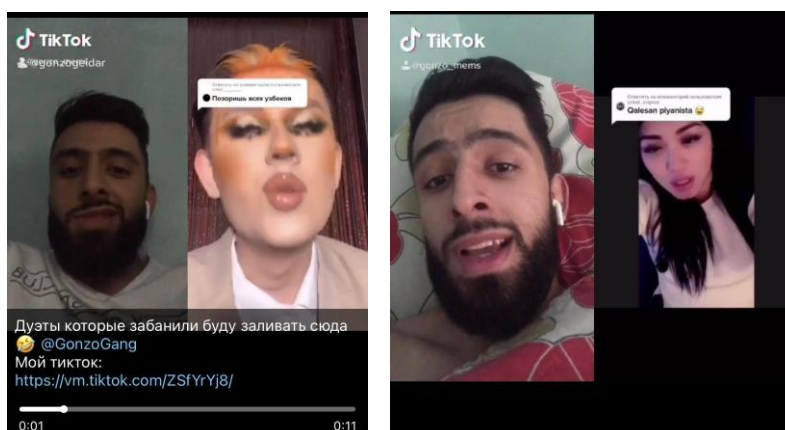
Figure 10: Tweets from a journalist in Uzbekistan concerning security services extorting information from the LGBTQ community.

Online Trolls Publicly “Outing” LGBTQ Individuals

While online trolls continue the harmful rhetoric propagated by the Uzbek government and religious leaders, some trolls also create the potential for members of the LGBTQ community to experience physical and emotional trauma through online “outings.” The process of outing involves [publicly revealing](#) the sexuality of an individual who has not revealed it himself. In any country, the process of choosing to come out, or reveal one’s own sexuality, is a difficult and deeply personal one—[outing takes away the autonomy of deciding if and when to reveal this part of one’s identity, and can leave lasting psychological, emotional, and physical trauma](#). Given the social and legal ramifications of being queer, particularly homosexual, in Uzbekistan, the “outed” individual can experience harassment, physical, and emotional violence, prison, and death.

The harmful practice of outing has become very popular among online trolls, especially conservative and religious individuals on Telegram and Instagram (Interview B 2021). After the attack on blogger Miraziz Bazarov in 2021, there were reports that the Uzbek State Security Services were publicly outing suspected gay men to extort information about the LGBTQ community (see Figure 11 above).

Around the same time, one of Uzbekistan’s biggest online trolls, “Gonzo Prokuror,” also known as “Gonzo Memes” or “Gonzo G,”⁴ started publicly outing individuals on his popular Instagram and Telegram accounts. Gonzo’s social media accounts gained many followers after he posted reactive videos on TikTok, a video-sharing application, that contained homophobic and sexist social commentary (see Figures 12 and 13).



Figures 11 and 12: Screenshots from videos by blogger and online troll Gonzo G containing hate-filled rhetoric against LGBTQ people and women.

Gaining a larger following emboldened Gonzo to post even more similar videos and photos (Interview B 2021). In 2019, Gonzo created and encouraged his followers to print out a sticker with an anti-LGBTQ message (see Figure 14 above) and put it around Tashkent; according to one source, these stickers can still be seen around the city (Interview B 2021).

⁴ While he uses many different names online, his real name is Aliev Gonzo Geidar.

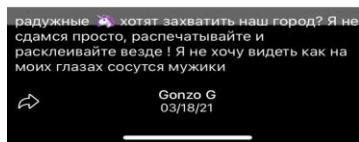


Figure 13: Anti-LGBT sticker that online troll Gonzo G created.

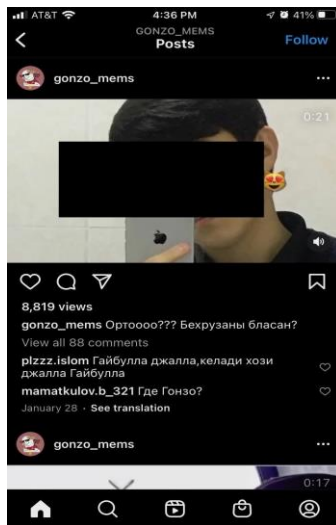


Figure 14: A typical “outing” post from Gonzo G on Instagram. Black bar added by the author to protect the individual.

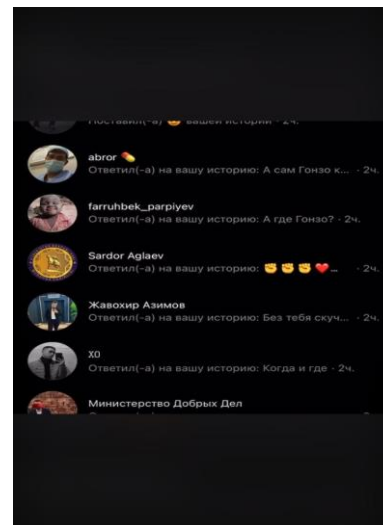


Figure 15: A screenshot that Gonzo G posted on his Instagram account, showing people direct messaging him with information of suspected LGBTQ members.

Gonzo’s social media accounts also feature weekly “outing” and harassment of Uzbek LGBTQ individuals, which he and his followers call “AYE”⁵ (Interview B 2021). Users submit photos and social media account information of individuals they assume or know are LGBTQ, typically men (see Figures 15 and 16 above). The posts also occasionally contain personal information: address, phone number, age, etc. Gonzo and his followers show no mercy toward anyone they perceive to be a member of the LGBTQ community and often promote violence toward these individuals on the basis of conservative and religious views (see Figure 17 below).

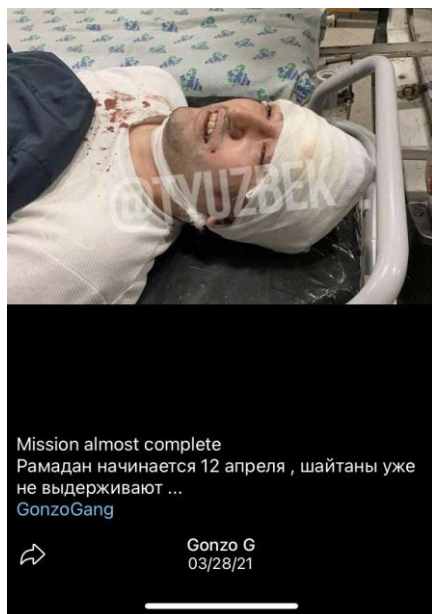


Figure 16: A photo of Miraziz Bazarov after his attack in 2021, reposted by Gonzo G on Telegram with the caption “Mission Almost Complete” (he has advocated for the violent destruction of the LGBTQ community in Uzbekistan) and invoking religious sentiment with a few sentences about Ramadan and comparisons of the LGBTQ community to Satan.

⁵ The word has no meaning in this context, but his followers also shout it in the street if they see someone they perceive as gay (Interview B 2021).

“Outing” posts like Gonzo’s have become another threat to the LGBTQ community. Currently, there are no legal protections for the LGBTQ community in Uzbekistan, including when posts threaten and harass them (Interview D 2021). The Telegram group “С***** Uzbekii”⁶ also circulates “outing” posts of minor boys (see Figure 18), while the Telegram group “Р***** Uzbekistana”⁷ posts the locations of young men assumed to be a part of the LGBTQ community and advocates physical and emotional harm against them (see Figure 19).

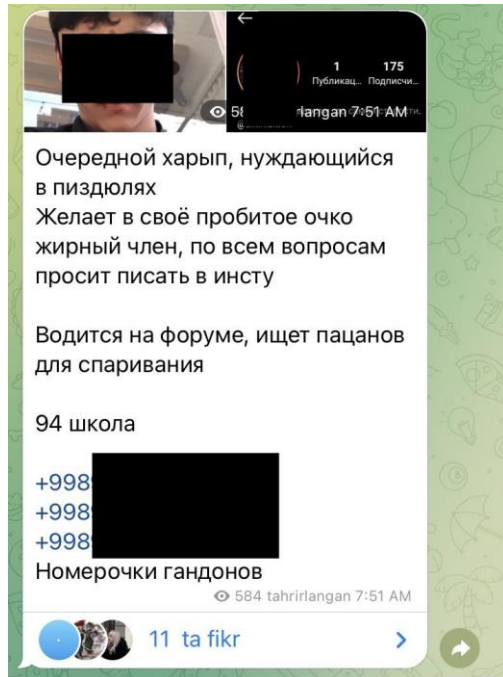


Figure 17: Post from Telegram account “С***** Uzbekii” “outing” a minor boy suspected of being a part of the LGBTQ community Black boxes added by the author to protect the identity of the boy and to cover the racist slur used in the name of the group.

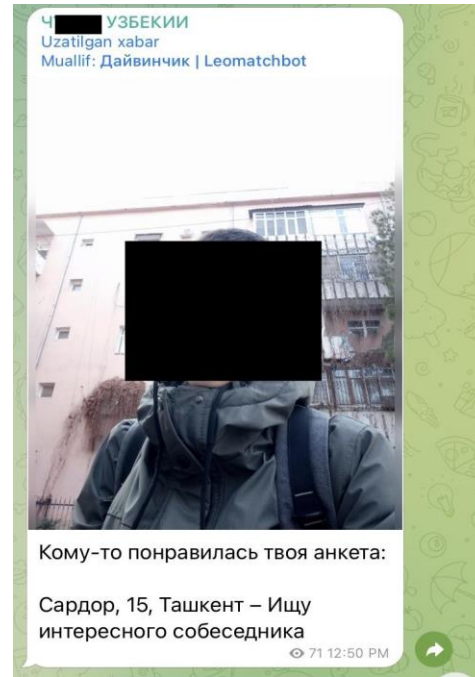


Figure 18: Post from Telegram group “Р***** Uzbekistana” outing a suspected LGBTQ member. The post contains photos, as well as the target’s Instagram username, phone numbers, and school. Black boxes added by the author to protect this information.

Even though pages on social media sites like Twitter and Telegram contain sexually explicit messages directed toward LGBTQ users below [Uzbekistan’s age of consent](#) and occasionally contain nude photos of minors, these social media pages and bloggers continue to act without any repercussions. Rarely, with enough reporting of harmful content, social media administrators will delete the offending posts or accounts, but for the majority of accounts with harmful messaging and content, there is no punishment. This is also indicative of the environment that LGBTQ members in Uzbekistan must withstand, as they are unable to report crimes due to [fear of government and police retaliation](#) for their sexuality.

⁶ The Telegram group name contains a racist slur in the Russian language, hence the insertion of *****.

⁷ The Telegram group name contains a racist slur in the Russian language, hence the insertion of *****.

Conclusion and Discussion

This paper examines the ways in which the Uzbek government and religious leaders have propagated an anti-LGBTQ narrative that has influenced the LGBTQ community's socialization process. As social media has become more popular in Uzbekistan, the ability of individuals to launch attacks, isolate, and harm minority groups like the LGBTQ community has increased. Using Dahrendorf's theory of conflict and the symbolic role religion plays in Uzbek society, this paper aims to fill parts of the knowledge gap in LGBTQ socialization in Uzbekistan. The narratives of Uzbek LGBTQ individuals relied upon in this paper further illuminate the harmful ways in which traditional-minded rhetoric manifests online.

The Uzbek government continues to offer no legal recourse for LGBTQ individuals who face harassment. Indeed, it is not that their rights are violated; rather, it is the very lack of rights and protections that allows for the perpetuation of harm against the LGBTQ community. Cyber-crimes, harassment, threats of physical harm, extortion, death, and so forth are all common. These abhorrent actions come at the behest of online trolls and are perpetuated by the general public—a public influenced by the homophobic social discourse found in all facets of Uzbek life.

With limited physical social spaces to meet in the country, LGBTQ individuals use the Internet to converse and interact. However, the ability of online trolls to freely ridicule and abuse members of the LGBTQ community, including minors, risks eliminating one of the only safe spaces for queer socialization in the country. Since those in power control the social rhetoric and norms within Uzbek society and culture, they are the ones who decide the fate and treatment of the LGBTQ community. Until laws that punish members of the LGBTQ community, like Article 154, are repealed and elected officials openly respect the rights of LGBTQ people, the situation in the country will remain unchanged. In addition, the poor regulation of online conduct will only serve to perpetuate problematic tirades from homophobic trolls, which inspire vulnerable youth and religious and conservative fanatics to attack LGBTQ individuals and their supporters. The social conditions that LGBTQ individuals experience daily in Uzbekistan are manifesting in the same harmful ways online. Hence, the impact of the government and religious leadership on social discourse is an important factor in understanding how online trolls behave and why their behavior has thus far gone unpunished.