



Selected Papers of Internet Research 16:  
The 16<sup>th</sup> Annual Meeting of the  
Association of Internet Researchers  
Phoenix, AZ, USA / 21-24 October 2015

## SOCIAL MEDIA KALEIDOSCOPE

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### Introduction

This study investigates the case of Isa Shahmarli, an Azerbaijani LGBTQ activist, who committed suicide in January of 2014. Even though the subject of sexual minorities is taboo in conservative Azerbaijan (The Danish Institute of Human Rights, 2010), activist's death was covered in the mass media and resulted in debate on the rights of the sexual minorities in Azerbaijan. This study analyzes the Facebook public page of the Azerbaijan Free LGBT Organization in response to the activist's suicide.

In January of 2014, Isa Shahmarli, the 20-year-old chair of the Free LGBT non-governmental organization in Azerbaijan, committed suicide, leaving a note on his Facebook social networking site page:

I am going. This country and this world are not for me.... I am leaving to become happy," he wrote. "You are all to blame for my death. This world is not colorful enough to accept all my colours. Goodbye. (Lomsadze & Tales, 2014).

Based on speculations regarding the reasons behind Isa Shahmarli's suicide, his friends suggested that Isa's decision was due mainly to his being rejected by his family (Huffington Post, 2014). Whereas acceptance of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) gender identity has increased in Western societies (e.g., Barnhurst, 2007; Dhoest & Simons, 2012; McDermott, 2011), it is still a very thorny path in non-Western countries, such as Azerbaijan. However, the Internet technologies, in particular social media, have become an essential tool for exploring, discovering, articulating and disclosing one's own identity (Alexander & Losh, 2010; Boross & Reijnders, 2015; Duguay, 2014; Gray, 2009; Gross, 2007). For example, in an ethnographic study of rural young people's engagement with digital resources, Gray (2009) proposes that "digitally circulated representations of LGBTQ identity categories interpellate rural queer youth by laying down a basic narrative for the articulation of identity" (p. 1172). Along

Suggested Citation (APA): Hajibayova, L. & Buente, W. (2015, October 21-24). *Social Media Kaleidoscope*. Paper presented at Internet Research 16: The 16th Annual Meeting of the Association of Internet Researchers. Phoenix, AZ, USA: AoIR. Retrieved from <http://spir.aoir.org>.

these lines, Isa Shahmarli's interview on Meydan TV<sup>1</sup>, which was made accessible through the YouTube channel a few days before his suicide, and open discussion of the LGBT situation in Azerbaijan demonstrate that Isa relied on social media as a platform to express and promote awareness of LGBT issues. However, Isa Shahmarli's whimsical and playful interview hid his inner struggles with his identity and issues of its acceptance by his family and society at large. In this regard, Almeida, Johnson, Corliss, Molnar and Azrael (2009), in their study evaluating the correlation between LGBT status and emotional distress among 9th-12th grade students, found that perceived discrimination accounted for increased depressive symptomatology among LGBT males and females, and accounted for an elevated risk of self-harm and suicidal ideation among LGBT males (p. 1). Of relevance here is Durkheim's (1897) definition of suicide, which suggests that suicide can be applied to every instance of death which results directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act consciously carried out by the victim. Durkheim identifies four types of suicide: egoistic, altruistic, anomic and fatalistic. According to Durkheim, egoistic suicide depends on the individual's degree of integration into the social groups to which he or she belongs, e.g., family, religion or political party. Altruistic suicide is related to insufficient individualism wherein the individual's ego doesn't pursue its own life, for example, a mother kills herself after her child's death. Anomic suicides relate to industrial and financial crises when changes overwhelm society's capacity to regulate the lives of individuals. And the last, fatalistic suicide, which is the opposite of anomic suicide, is result of the excessive regulations, such as overpowering physical or moral despotism. Durkheim's conceptualization of suicide provides a framework for understanding the social factors that may influence the decision to take one's own life. Viewed through the lens of Durkheim's conceptualization of the suicide, Isa Shahmarli's case can be considered an egoistic suicide, i.e., a suicide caused by the weak social integration of sexual minorities into the family and society.

This study attempts to shed light on how the LGBT community of Azerbaijan perceived Isa Shahmarli death through an analysis of comments responding to related posts on the website of the Azerbaijan Free LGBT Organization.

## **Data Analysis**

This study analyzes comments posted on the Facebook public page of the Azerbaijan Free LGBT Organization in response to three postings related to the activist's suicide. The first posting presented the Radio of Azadlyg's (RFE/RL) news article, titled "Debates around gay leader's suicide," with an image of people grieving by his grave (see Figure 1). This posting received 23 likes, was shared three times, and had two comments. The first commentator shared another news article covering the activist's suicide, and the second commentator expressed his sympathy.

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<sup>1</sup> Meydan TV - <http://www.meydan.tv/en>

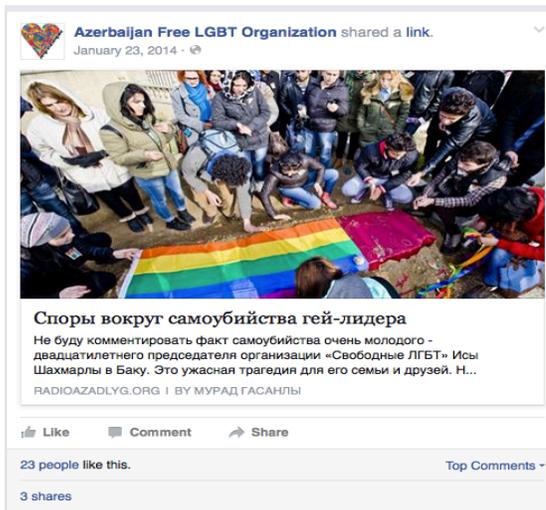


Figure 1. A screenshot of the first Facebook posting related to Isa Shahmarli 's suicide.

The second posting (see Figure 2) was a depiction of Isa Shahmarli's grave, which received 117 likes, was shared three times, and was commented on by 32 Facebook users.



Figure 2. The Facebook posting depicting the grave of Isa Shahmarli.

And the third posting shared the Yagg.com<sup>2</sup> coverage of Isa Shahmarli's suicide, which received 26 likes (See Figure 3).

<sup>2</sup> <http://yagg.com/2014/01/23/azerbaidjan-le-president-dune-association-lgbt-se-suicide/>



Figure 3. The Yogg.com news story about Isa Shahmarli.

This study utilized Glaser and Strauss's (1967) grounded theory to analyze 32 Facebook comments. Analysis revealed the following three major variables: gender of user, types of addressee, and expressed attitude toward the deceased/ LGBTQs.

The following coding scheme was defined for the three thematic constructs:

A. Gender of user

Female (0), Male (1), NA (2)

Facebook users' profiles, such as profile name and picture, were analyzed to identify users' gender.

B. Types of addressee

Deceased/ LGBT community (0), Other User (Reply) (1), All Users/Public (2), Other (3)

Types of addressee were identified based on analysis of each comment.

C. Expressed attitude toward deceased/LGBTs

Hostile (0), Acceptance/Understanding (1), Sympathy (2)

Overall, 32 analyzed comments were posted by 11 male and 14 female users.

Analysis of the types of addressee revealed that most of the comments were addressed to the deceased (23, 71.9%), followed by the LGBT community (5, 15.6%), another Facebook user (2, 6.3%), and Other (1, 3.1%).

Analysis of expressed attitude toward the deceased revealed that most of the postings were expressing sympathy (23, 71.9%), followed by hostile negative comments ( 8, 25%), and acceptance/understanding (1, 3.1%).

Analysis of correlation between attitude and gender of commentators revealed that females tended to express more sympathetic (40.6%) than negative attitudes (15.6%), whereas comments expressed by male users equally expressed sympathetic and negative attitudes (21.9%)

## Results and Discussions

Analysis of comments posted on the Facebook public page of the Azerbaijan Free LGBT Organization in response to the activist's suicide revealed that most of the users were sympathetic with Isa Shahmarli's struggles which led to his decision to take his life. In particular female users were very vocal in expressing their sadness, for example, one of the users posted:

*"Rest in the peace Isa, we will never forget you"*

However some of the sympathetic comments suggested that he could have changed himself and lived life as a straight male:

*" Very sad... it was not worth it, he could have changed. Male cannot have female characteristics. He was young, he could have devoted his life to better things. Rest in peace. His grave was vandalized. Very sad. God forgive him."*

A number of Facebook users also provided very critical comments: cursing gender minorities and applauding Shahmarli's decision to take his life:

*"The world released from one sinner ... God will take all their lives one day"*

This study also analyzed gender disparities in users' attitudes toward the deceased. Apart from the fact that comments were posted predominantly by female users, analysis of differences in expressed attitudes by gender revealed that women tended to express more understanding and sympathy than men. This observation echoes findings of previous studies suggesting distinctive gender patterns in online communications (e.g., Guiller & Durndell, 2006; Thompson & Murachver, 2001). This study's findings also echoes the findings of Hajibayova and Buente's (2015) analysis of YouTube comments related to Isa Shahmarli in that they demonstrate that females are more understanding and tolerant to the LGBT concerns. However, there are significant differences in the audiences: YouTube comments are from a wide and diverse community, whereas the Facebook page of the LGBT community is accessed by a particular group of users, who are more likely related to the LGBT community. Therefore, while findings of the current study demonstrate some understanding of LGBT concerns, understanding of how identity is perceived should be considered in the context of the larger construct of societal, cultural, social and political values.

## Conclusions

This study suggests that the consequences of living as an openly gay person can be profound, including rejection, verbal abuse, and lack of protection, all of which could be the cause of the tragic end of a life. This study argues that online representation of sexual identity should be considered as a part of people's physical world to better understand how society affects their online world.

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