

Queer Silence and Public Morality: Identity Politics in Contemporary Ghana

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Abstract

In recent years, discussions surrounding LGBTQ+ identities in Ghana have intensified, particularly within digital platforms and political discourse. While global movements advocate visibility and open expression, the Ghanaian context reveals a contrasting dynamic in which silence becomes a central mode of negotiating identity. This study introduces the concept of queer silence to examine how public morality, religious ideology, and cultural nationalism regulate LGBTQ+ identities. Drawing on data from online news articles, social media commentaries, TikTok videos, and protest imagery collected between 2023 and 2026, the study employs Critical Discourse Analysis to explore how meanings of sexuality are constructed and contested.

The findings demonstrate that LGBTQ+ identities are frequently framed as foreign, immoral, and incompatible with national values. Digital platforms, rather than functioning solely as spaces of empowerment, operate as arenas of moral policing where dominant narratives are reinforced through collective participation. Silence, therefore, is not merely the absence of speech but a socially produced condition shaped by intersecting systems of power. It functions both

as a constraint imposed through moral surveillance and as a strategic response to social risk.

By situating queer silence within broader debates on discourse, power, and identity, this study contributes to scholarship on sexuality, digital media, and postcolonial social dynamics. It further underscores the need to rethink assumptions about visibility, agency, and resistance in contexts where expression is heavily regulated.

Keywords: *public morality, LGBTQ+ identity, digital media discourse, cultural nationalism, moral panic, Ghana*

Introduction

Queer identities are often rendered invisible not as a matter of personal choice but as a consequence of silence structured through social power, institutional norms, and moral regulation. Across diverse cultural contexts, dominant discourses on sexuality define what is considered legitimate by establishing boundaries of normalcy, morality, and belonging. These discourses typically privilege heterosexuality while marginalizing non-heteronormative identities, thereby rendering them unspeakable or socially unintelligible. Silence, in this regard, is not simply an absence of expression but a condition actively produced through systems of power that regulate visibility and identity formation.

Michel Foucault argues that discourse does not merely repress sexuality but actively produces it by organizing knowledge, categorizing identities, and attaching moral significance to them (*The History of Sexuality*). Through institutions such as the state, religion, law, media, and education, these discursive systems establish the parameters within which identities can be expressed and recognized. Consequently, certain identities are legitimized while others

are constructed as deviant, immoral, or threatening to social order. Individuals who fall outside dominant norms often navigate these conditions through self-regulation, carefully managing visibility to avoid stigma, exclusion, or violence.

In the Ghanaian context, public discourse surrounding LGBTQ+ identities has become increasingly polarized, particularly within political debates and digital media spaces. Narratives frequently position non-heteronormative identities as incompatible with cultural values, invoking themes of national sovereignty, religious morality, and social protection (Epprecht; Tamale). Sexuality thus becomes politicized, shifting from a private matter to a contested site of national identity and moral authority. These discourses often obscure the historical complexity of African sexualities, where diverse practices existed prior to colonial intervention, thereby reinforcing the misconception that homosexuality is a foreign imposition (Epprecht).

Contemporary debates are further shaped by colonial legacies embedded in legal and moral frameworks, which are often rearticulated as “traditional values” (Tamale). This produces a paradox in which queer identities are simultaneously erased from historical narratives and constructed as threats to cultural authenticity. At the same time, the expansion of digital media has transformed the nature of public discourse. Social media platforms function as accelerated spaces of communication where narratives are produced, circulated, and contested in real time. While these platforms create opportunities for visibility and alternative expression, they also amplify dominant ideologies through algorithmic visibility, public commentary, and viral dissemination (Papacharissi).

Within these digital environments, audiences increasingly participate in what can be understood as forms of moral surveillance. Users actively engage in reinforcing social norms through practices of judgment, ridicule, and exclusion. Consequently, digital spaces do not merely reflect existing societal attitudes but play an active role in shaping and intensifying them. It is within this context that this study introduces the concept of *queer silence*.

Queer silence refers to a socially produced condition in which visibility and expression are regulated through the intersection of religious morality, cultural nationalism, and digital discourse. Rather than signifying absence, silence operates as both a mechanism of control and a strategy of survival. It reflects the constraints imposed by external structures while also representing the adaptive responses of individuals navigating environments characterized by moral scrutiny and social risk.

This study addresses four central questions: How are LGBTQ+ identities constructed within Ghanaian public discourse? In what ways does public morality regulate behavior and identity? How do digital platforms reproduce and amplify these dynamics? And how does silence function simultaneously as a form of social control and a strategy of survival?

By situating queer silence within broader theoretical debates on discourse, power, and identity, this research contributes to emerging scholarship on sexuality, digital media, and postcolonial social formations. It offers critical insights into how visibility, belonging, and citizenship are negotiated in contemporary Ghana, where the decision to speak or remain silent is deeply shaped by intersecting structures of power.

Literature Review: Discourse, Morality, and the Regulation of Sexuality

The study of sexuality within the social sciences has long emphasized the role of discourse, power, and institutional regulation in shaping identity. One of the most influential contributions comes from Michel Foucault, who argues that sexuality is not merely repressed but actively produced through discursive systems that define, categorize, and regulate bodies and desires. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault asserts that modern societies generate knowledge about sexuality in ways that simultaneously enable and constrain expression, embedding moral judgments within institutional frameworks (Foucault). This perspective shifts the understanding of sexuality from a private, biological phenomenon to a socially constructed domain governed by power relations.

Building on this foundation, Judith Butler introduces the concept of performativity, arguing that gender and sexuality are not fixed identities but are continuously produced through repeated social practices. In *Gender Trouble*, Butler contends that heteronormative systems are maintained through performative acts that reinforce dominant expectations, thereby marginalizing identities that deviate from these norms (Butler). Similarly, Michael Warner conceptualizes heteronormativity as a pervasive cultural system that privileges heterosexuality while rendering alternative sexualities invisible or deviant (Warner). Within such frameworks, silence emerges not merely as absence but as a strategic and imposed condition, where individuals navigate visibility and concealment in response to social pressures.

In African contexts, debates on sexuality are deeply entangled with questions of culture, nationalism, and historical legitimacy. Marc Epprecht challenges the widely held belief that homosexuality is “un-African,” demonstrating through historical evidence that diverse sexual practices existed across precolonial African societies (Epprecht). Sylvia Tamale further argues that contemporary homophobic attitudes are largely shaped by colonial legal systems and missionary moral frameworks, rather than indigenous cultural traditions (Tamale). These arguments complicate dominant narratives that position non-heteronormative identities as external impositions, revealing instead how colonial legacies continue to inform present-day moral discourses. Despite this scholarship, political and religious rhetoric in many African societies continues to frame LGBTQ+ identities as threats to cultural authenticity and social cohesion (Awondo, Geschiere, and Reid).

The role of media in shaping public perceptions of sexuality has also received considerable scholarly attention. Framing theory provides a useful lens for understanding how media representations construct meaning by selecting certain aspects of reality while excluding others. Robert Entman explains that frames define problems, assign causality, and suggest moral evaluations, thereby influencing how audiences interpret social issues (Entman). In the context of sexuality, media framing often emphasizes themes of morality, deviance, and threat, contributing to the stigmatization of marginalized identities. Complementing this perspective, Stanley Cohen’s theory of moral panic illustrates how societies periodically construct “folk devils” who are portrayed as dangers to social order, leading to heightened fear, hostility, and calls for regulation (Cohen). These processes are particularly relevant in discussions of LGBTQ+ identities, where exaggerated

narratives of threat are frequently mobilized to justify exclusionary practices.

With the rise of digital technologies, the dynamics of discourse production and dissemination have undergone significant transformation. Zizi Papacharissi highlights how online platforms function as hybrid spaces that enable both democratic participation and the reinforcement of dominant ideologies (Papacharissi). While digital media offers opportunities for visibility and alternative narratives, it also amplifies existing power structures through algorithms, virality, and user interactions. In such environments, public discourse is shaped not only by institutional actors but also by everyday users who participate in the construction and policing of social norms. This participatory dimension complicates traditional understandings of media influence, revealing how audiences actively engage in reinforcing or contesting dominant narratives.

To fully understand the complexity of marginalization, intersectionality provides an essential analytical framework. Kimberlé Crenshaw's concept of intersectionality emphasizes how multiple forms of oppression – such as race, gender, class, and sexuality – interact to produce unique experiences of disadvantage (Crenshaw). In the context of LGBTQ+ identities in Ghana, sexuality intersects with religion, cultural identity, and nationalism, creating layered forms of exclusion that cannot be understood in isolation. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's notion of the "closet" further illuminates how knowledge and ignorance about sexuality are socially organized, structuring the conditions under which individuals disclose or conceal their identities (Sedgwick). Together, these perspectives highlight how silence operates within broader systems of power, functioning as both a constraint and a mode of negotiation.

Although existing scholarship provides valuable insights into discourse, power, and sexuality, there remains a gap in understanding how silence itself functions as a socially produced condition within contemporary African contexts. Much of the literature focuses on visibility, resistance, and rights-based activism, often overlooking the ways in which individuals navigate environments where visibility carries significant risks. This study addresses this gap by introducing the concept of “queer silence” as an analytical framework for examining how public morality, digital media, and institutional power shape the conditions of expression and concealment. By situating silence within broader discursive and intersectional processes, the research contributes to ongoing debates on sexuality, identity, and postcolonial social dynamics.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative research design to explore how queer silence appears in Ghana’s digital public discussions. The research focuses on understanding how language, power, and social norms shape the way LGBTQ+ identities are talked about. To achieve this, the study applies Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), drawing on the work of Norman Fairclough and Teun A. van Dijk. CDA is useful because it helps examine how language reflects power relations and social inequalities, especially in sensitive topics like sexuality.

Critical Discourse Analysis is appropriate for this study because it does not treat language as neutral. Instead, it looks at how words, phrases, and narratives are used to support certain beliefs while excluding others. In the Ghanaian context, CDA helps explain how discussions about LGBTQ+ identities are shaped by ideas of morality, religion,

and culture. It also shows how these ideas are repeated and strengthened in everyday communication, especially on digital platforms.

The data for this study were collected from three main sources: online news articles, social media comments, and TikTok videos. In addition, visual materials such as protest images and public demonstrations were included to support the analysis. The researcher selected content that focused on LGBTQ+ issues, morality, or national identity. A purposive sampling method was used to ensure that only relevant data were included. In total, the dataset consisted of about 50 news articles, 400–500 social media comments, 25 TikTok videos, and 20 visual materials.

The sampling process continued until no new ideas or patterns were found in the data. This point is known as saturation, where additional data no longer adds new insights. Using different sources helped strengthen the study because it allowed comparison across platforms. News articles reflected institutional viewpoints, while social media comments and TikTok videos showed how ordinary people respond to and reproduce these ideas.

The analysis was carried out in three main stages. First, the researcher carefully read and reviewed all the data to become familiar with it. During this stage, common words and phrases such as “immoral,” “unnatural,” “foreign,” and “against our culture” were identified. Second, these repeated expressions were grouped into themes. The main themes included cultural nationalism, religious moral authority, protectionist discourse, digital moral policing, moral panic, and strategic silence. These themes helped organize the data and show patterns across different sources.

In the final stage, the themes were interpreted within the broader social context of Ghana. This involved linking the findings to ideas about religion, nationalism, and public morality. For example, statements about “protecting children” were understood as part of a wider moral narrative that presents LGBTQ+ identities as a threat to society. Similarly, the absence of openly LGBTQ+ voices was interpreted as strategic silence, showing how people avoid visibility due to fear of backlash or social risk.

Ethical considerations were taken into account throughout the study. All the data used were publicly available, and no private information was accessed. The identities of users were kept anonymous, and any personal details were removed. The study followed ethical guidelines for internet research, ensuring that the data were used responsibly and respectfully.

However, the study has some limitations. Since it relies on publicly available digital data, it may not fully capture private experiences or offline realities. Some individuals may choose silence both online and offline, which cannot be observed in this dataset. Also, while Critical Discourse Analysis is effective for studying language and power, it does not directly capture personal experiences. Future research could include interviews or ethnographic methods to better understand how individuals experience and manage silence in their daily lives.

Overall, this methodology provides a clear and effective way to understand how queer silence is produced and maintained in Ghana’s digital public space. By combining Critical Discourse Analysis with multiple data sources, the study shows how language, power, and social norms work together to shape identity, visibility, and silence.

Findings

Cultural Nationalism and the Construction of “Foreignness”

A dominant and recurring theme across the dataset is the construction of LGBTQ+ identities as fundamentally “foreign” and incompatible with national culture. This framing operates as a central discursive strategy through which non-heteronormative identities are positioned outside the boundaries of legitimate belonging in Ghana. Rather than engaging sexuality as a dimension of individual identity, public discourse consistently rearticulates it as a question of national integrity and cultural preservation.

This narrative is particularly evident in media representations and political rhetoric, where LGBTQ+ identities are frequently associated with external influence, often framed as a “Western agenda.” Such constructions rely on a binary opposition between an “authentic” Ghanaian identity and a perceived foreign intrusion. Statements such as “this is not our culture” or “these practices are imported from the West” exemplify how sexuality is discursively linked to questions of origin, thereby delegitimizing non-heteronormative identities through their alleged lack of cultural authenticity.

From a theoretical perspective, this pattern reflects the intersection of discourse and nationalism, where identity is regulated through narratives of belonging and exclusion. As Stuart Hall argues, cultural identity is not fixed but constructed through representation. In this context, the repeated association of queerness with foreignness produces a symbolic boundary that separates the “national self” from the “deviant other.” This process is further reinforced through what Robert Entman conceptualizes as framing, whereby selective emphasis on certain interpretations shapes public

perception and narrows the range of acceptable meanings. Importantly, this discourse obscures historical evidence of sexual diversity within African societies, as highlighted by Marc Epprecht. By erasing these histories, the narrative of foreignness functions as a tool of exclusion that legitimizes contemporary forms of marginalization while presenting them as acts of cultural defence. In doing so, it transforms sexuality into a site of ideological struggle where national identity is both asserted and policed.

The persistence and frequency of this theme within the dataset indicate that cultural nationalism serves as a foundational mechanism in the production of queer silence. By positioning LGBTQ+ identities as inherently external and illegitimate, this discourse not only restricts visibility but also renders self-identification socially risky. Silence, in this context, emerges as a response to a discursive environment in which recognition is contingent upon conformity to narrowly defined notions of cultural authenticity.

Religious Moral Authority and the Spiritual Regulation of Sexuality

Religious discourse emerges as a central and highly influential mechanism in the regulation of LGBTQ+ identities within Ghanaian public discourse. Across the dataset, references to religion—particularly Christianity and, to a lesser extent, Islam—are consistently mobilized to frame non-heteronormative identities as morally deviant, spiritually dangerous, and fundamentally incompatible with divine order. In this context, sexuality is not merely constructed as a social or cultural issue but is elevated to a matter of spiritual legitimacy, where acceptance or rejection is justified through appeals to sacred authority.

A recurring pattern within media narratives and user-generated content is the use of explicitly moralizing language, including terms such as “sin,” “abomination,” “evil,” and “against God’s will.” These linguistic choices function not only as descriptors but as powerful discursive tools that assign moral value and reinforce hierarchical distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable identities. By grounding such judgments in religious doctrine, these discourses acquire an aura of unquestionable authority, making them particularly resistant to critique or contestation

From a theoretical standpoint, this dynamic aligns with Michel Foucault’s conception of power as productive and diffuse, operating through institutions and forms of knowledge that shape subjectivity. Religion, in this sense, functions as a key site of discursive power, producing norms that regulate both behaviour and self-perception. Individuals are not only subjected to external judgment but may also internalize these moral frameworks, leading to self-regulation and the suppression of non-conforming identities.

Protectionist Narratives and the Politics of Fear

Another prominent theme within the dataset is the deployment of protectionist narratives that frame LGBTQ+ identities as threats to children, family structures, and the moral future of society. Unlike explicitly religious condemnations, these discourses operate through affective appeals, mobilizing fear, anxiety, and a sense of urgency to justify exclusionary attitudes and practices. In this context, the regulation of sexuality is articulated not only as a moral or cultural imperative but as a protective necessity.

Across media texts and user-generated content, LGBTQ+ identities are frequently associated with the corruption of youth, the breakdown of traditional family

systems, and the erosion of social values. Phrases such as “protect our children,” “save the next generation,” and “defend the family” recur with notable consistency, constructing a narrative in which queerness is positioned as an external threat targeting vulnerable populations. These representations are rarely supported by empirical evidence; rather, they function symbolically to generate moral concern and legitimize restrictive positions.

This pattern closely aligns with the concept of moral panic as theorized by Stanley Cohen. In such scenarios, specific groups are constructed as “folk devils” who are perceived to endanger societal norms and values. LGBTQ+ individuals, within this framework, become symbolic figures onto which broader anxieties about social change, globalization, and cultural transformation are projected. The intensity of these reactions often exceeds the actual “threat,” highlighting the role of discourse in amplifying fear and shaping collective perception. The role of media in sustaining these narratives can be further understood through Robert Entman’s theory of framing. By selectively emphasizing themes of danger, vulnerability, and protection, media and digital content creators contribute to a discursive environment in which LGBTQ+ identities are consistently linked to risk. This framing not only influences how audiences interpret information but also narrows the scope of acceptable responses, making exclusion appear both rational and necessary.

Importantly, protectionist narratives are deeply intertwined with constructions of idealized family structures, which are typically defined in heteronormative terms. The family is positioned as a foundational social unit that must be preserved, and any deviation from normative gender and sexual roles is framed as a destabilizing force. In this way, the regulation of sexuality becomes inseparable from broader efforts to maintain social order and continuity.

The implications of this discourse for queer individuals are significant. By associating visibility with harm—particularly harm to children and future generations—these narratives intensify the risks associated with self-expression. Silence, in this context, emerges as both a protective response and a consequence of a discursive environment saturated with fear. The politics of protection thus operates as a powerful mechanism through which queer silence is produced, sustained, and normalized within the broader framework of public morality.

This process can be further understood through the lens of performativity, as articulated by Judith Butler. Within a religiously structured moral order, acceptable identities are those that align with prescribed norms of gender and sexuality. Silence, therefore, becomes a form of constrained performativity—an act shaped by the anticipation of social and spiritual consequences. The refusal or inability to openly express queer identity is not simply a lack of voice but a response to a system in which deviation is framed as both socially and divinely punishable.

Moreover, the invocation of religious authority often intersects with broader narratives of national identity, reinforcing the idea that moral purity is essential to cultural integrity. In this way, religion does not operate in isolation but in conjunction with nationalism, producing a powerful ideological framework that legitimizes exclusion while presenting it as a defence of collective values. The prominence of religious discourse within the dataset underscores its role in sustaining environments of constraint and risk. By framing LGBTQ+ identities as morally and spiritually illegitimate, these narratives contribute directly to the production of queer silence. Silence, in this context, is not merely imposed but becomes a necessary strategy for navigating a social

landscape in which visibility carries significant moral and existential consequences.

Digital Moral Policing and Participatory Surveillance

The analysis reveals that digital platforms function not merely as spaces of expression but as active sites of moral regulation, where users participate directly in the policing of sexuality. Across social media comments, TikTok interactions, and online discussions, individuals engage in practices of judgment, correction, ridicule, and condemnation, effectively transforming digital environments into arenas of participatory surveillance. In these spaces, the regulation of LGBTQ+ identities is no longer confined to formal institutions but is enacted through decentralized, everyday interactions. A defining feature of this dynamic is the visibility of moral enforcement at the level of ordinary users. Comments frequently include directives such as “this is wrong,” “stop promoting this,” or “this should not be allowed,” indicating an active investment in maintaining normative boundaries. These interventions are often immediate and collective, creating an environment in which dissenting expressions are rapidly challenged and suppressed. The cumulative effect is the normalization of heteronormative standards through repeated acts of public correction and social sanctioning.

This phenomenon can be understood through Michel Foucault’s concept of disciplinary power, particularly the idea that surveillance operates most effectively when it is internalized and diffused across society. In digital contexts, this form of power becomes participatory: individuals simultaneously act as observers and enforcers, monitoring

the behavior of others while also regulating their own self-presentation. The result is a self-reinforcing system in which conformity is maintained not only through institutional authority but through peer-driven oversight. The architecture of digital platforms further intensifies these dynamics. As Zizi Papacharissi notes, algorithmic systems prioritize engagement, often amplifying content that provokes strong emotional reactions. In the context of LGBTQ+ discourse, this frequently results in the increased visibility of polarizing or hostile content, thereby reinforcing dominant narratives and marginalizing alternative perspectives. The interactive nature of these platforms ensures that users are not passive consumers but active participants in the production and circulation of meaning.

Moreover, the public and permanent nature of online interactions heightens the risks associated with visibility. Expressions of queer identity are subject to immediate scrutiny and can be widely disseminated, exposing individuals to potential backlash, harassment, or social exclusion. This environment fosters a heightened awareness of surveillance, where the possibility of being judged or targeted influences how individuals choose to present themselves—or whether they choose to speak at all.

Within this context, queer silence emerges as a rational and strategic response to the conditions of digital visibility. The decision to remain silent, anonymous, or indirect is shaped by an acute awareness of the consequences of exposure within highly monitored and morally charged environments. Thus, digital platforms simultaneously enable visibility and

constrain it, producing a paradox in which the potential for expression is accompanied by intensified mechanisms of control. The findings suggest that participatory surveillance is a key mechanism through which public morality is enacted in contemporary digital spaces. By distributing the responsibility of regulation across users, these platforms embed moral policing within everyday interaction, thereby sustaining the conditions under which queer silence is both produced and normalized.

Moral Panic and the Construction of Social Threat

A broader pattern that emerges across the dataset is the construction of LGBTQ+ identities as a generalized social threat, extending beyond concerns of morality or cultural authenticity to encompass anxieties about national stability, social order, and collective futures. This framing reflects a classic process of moral panic, in which particular groups are symbolically positioned as dangers to the fabric of society, thereby justifying heightened levels of scrutiny, regulation, and exclusion. The concept of moral panic, as developed by Stanley Cohen, provides a useful framework for understanding this phenomenon. Moral panics typically involve the identification of “folk devils,” exaggerated representations of threat, and the mobilization of public concern that exceeds the scale of the perceived problem. Within the Ghanaian context, LGBTQ+ individuals are frequently cast in this role, depicted as agents of moral decay, cultural disruption, and social instability. These representations are not isolated but are reinforced across multiple discursive sites, including media coverage, political rhetoric, and digital interactions.

A key feature of this process is the amplification of threat through repetition and circulation. Narratives

suggesting that LGBTQ+ identities will “destroy society,” “undermine the nation,” or “lead to moral collapse” recur across platforms, often without substantive evidence. Such claims function less as factual statements and more as affective signals that evoke fear and urgency. Through this repetition, the perception of threat becomes normalized, shaping public consciousness and narrowing the space for alternative interpretations.

The role of media in sustaining moral panic is particularly significant. Drawing on Robert Entman’s theory of framing, it becomes evident that selective emphasis on crisis, danger, and deviance contributes to the construction of LGBTQ+ identities as inherently problematic. By foregrounding conflict and moral controversy, media narratives amplify the visibility of perceived threats while marginalizing more nuanced or supportive perspectives. This selective representation reinforces a binary framework in which queerness is consistently aligned with disruption and instability.

Furthermore, moral panic operates in conjunction with broader political and cultural anxieties. In contexts marked by rapid social change and global interconnectedness, sexuality becomes a symbolic terrain upon which fears of external influence, moral decline, and loss of sovereignty are projected. LGBTQ+ identities, in this sense, function as a focal point through which these anxieties are articulated and managed. The intensity of the response is therefore less about sexuality itself and more about what it comes to represent within a shifting socio-political landscape.

The implications of this discursive construction are profound. By framing LGBTQ+ individuals as threats to society, moral panic legitimizes exclusionary attitudes and

practices, making them appear necessary for the protection of the collective good. This environment not only discourages open expression but actively produces conditions in which silence becomes a rational and often unavoidable response. Queer silence, in this context, is shaped by the pervasive sense that visibility invites not only judgment but also association with broader narratives of danger and deviance. Ultimately, the construction of social threat through moral panic reinforces the regulatory power of public discourse, embedding exclusion within the language of protection and collective survival. This dynamic underscores the extent to which silence is not simply imposed but is produced through the normalization of fear as a governing logic within contemporary debates on sexuality.

Strategic Silence and Constrained Visibility

The most significant finding emerging from this study is not only what is said about LGBTQ+ identities, but what remains unsaid. Across the dataset, there is a striking absence of openly self-identifying queer voices, particularly in contrast to the overwhelming presence of moralizing, regulatory, and often hostile discourse. This absence, however, should not be interpreted as non-existence or lack of agency. Rather, it reflects the operation of what this study conceptualizes as **queer silence**—a socially produced condition shaped by risk, surveillance, and the constraints of public morality.

Within the discursive environment examined, visibility is not a neutral or inherently empowering act. Instead, it is structured by the anticipation of negative consequences, including social exclusion, moral condemnation, and potential harm. As such, the decision to remain silent, anonymous, or indirect emerges as a rational and strategic response to a context in which expression is heavily regulated. Silence,

in this sense, is not merely imposed but actively negotiated, reflecting a complex interplay between constraint and agency.

This dynamic can be understood through the framework of performativity advanced by Judith Butler, where identity is constituted through repeated acts within a field of normative expectations. In contexts where deviation from these norms carries significant penalties, silence becomes a form of constrained performance—an act that both reflects and reproduces the limits of what can be expressed. Similarly, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's conceptualization of the "closet" highlights how knowledge and disclosure are structured by power, producing a constant negotiation between visibility and concealment. The digital dimension further intensifies this condition. While online platforms theoretically expand opportunities for self-expression, they simultaneously expose individuals to heightened forms of surveillance and public scrutiny. The permanence and reach of digital content mean that expressions of identity can be widely circulated and subjected to collective judgment, increasing the potential risks associated with visibility. In such environments, silence functions as a protective mechanism, allowing individuals to navigate participation without direct exposure.

At the same time, silence should not be understood solely as a marker of oppression. In certain instances, it may also operate as a subtle form of resistance, enabling individuals to withhold participation from dominant discursive frameworks that seek to define and constrain them. This dual character complicates conventional binaries between voice and silence, suggesting that absence itself can carry meaning and strategic intent. By foregrounding queer silence as both a product of structural constraint and a mode of strategic navigation, this study challenges dominant assumptions within global LGBTQ+ discourse that equate visibility with empowerment.

Instead, it highlights the importance of context in shaping the possibilities and limits of expression. In environments where visibility entails significant risk, silence may represent not a failure of agency but a calculated response to conditions of vulnerability.

Ultimately, queer silence emerges as a central mechanism through which identity is negotiated within Ghana's contemporary socio-digital landscape. It reflects the cumulative effects of cultural nationalism, religious moral authority, protectionist discourse, and participatory surveillance, demonstrating how power operates not only through what is spoken but also through what remains unsaid.

Discussion: Rethinking Visibility, Power, and Resistance

The findings of this study reveal that public discourse surrounding LGBTQ+ identities in Ghana is structured through a complex interplay of cultural nationalism, religious morality, affective politics, and digitally mediated surveillance. Together, these forces produce an environment in which non-heteronormative identities are systematically positioned outside the boundaries of legitimate social belonging. By examining these dynamics through the lens of discourse and power, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how sexuality is regulated in contemporary postcolonial contexts. Central to this analysis is the insight that public morality functions as a key mechanism of governance. Drawing on Michel Foucault, the findings demonstrate that power operates not merely through prohibition but through the production of norms that shape what can be said, who can speak, and how identities are recognized. The recurring construction of LGBTQ+ identities as foreign, immoral, and threatening illustrates how discourse produces categories of

exclusion while simultaneously legitimizing their regulation. In this sense, morality is not simply a set of beliefs but a regulatory framework that organizes social life and enforces conformity.

The study also extends Judith Butler's theory of performativity by illustrating how silence functions as a constrained mode of identity performance. In contexts where visibility entails significant social and moral risk, the refusal or inability to speak openly becomes a meaningful act shaped by the anticipation of consequences. This challenges dominant interpretations of performativity that prioritize visible acts, suggesting instead that absence and concealment are equally important in understanding how identities are constituted under conditions of constraint. Furthermore, the findings complicate prevailing assumptions within global LGBTQ+ discourse that equate visibility with empowerment. Much of the existing literature, particularly in Western contexts, emphasizes coming out and public recognition as central to identity affirmation and political progress. However, this study demonstrates that such frameworks are not universally applicable. In environments characterized by moral regulation and social risk, visibility may intensify vulnerability rather than alleviate it. Silence, therefore, must be understood not as a failure of agency but as a contextually situated response to structures of power.

The role of digital media further deepens this analysis. While online platforms are often celebrated for their democratizing potential, the findings reveal that they also function as spaces of intensified regulation. Through processes of participatory surveillance, users actively engage in the enforcement of moral norms, transforming digital environments into sites of collective discipline. This observation aligns with and extends the work of Zizi

Papacharissi by demonstrating how networked publics can simultaneously enable expression and constrain it through normative pressure and algorithmic amplification. Importantly, the convergence of nationalism and morality highlights the broader political dimensions of sexuality. By framing LGBTQ+ identities as threats to cultural authenticity and national integrity, public discourse mobilizes sexuality as a symbolic terrain upon which anxieties about globalization, sovereignty, and social change are negotiated. This reinforces the argument that sexuality cannot be understood in isolation but must be situated within wider socio-political processes that shape its meaning and regulation.

Taken together, these insights underscore the need to rethink dominant binaries between visibility and invisibility, voice and silence, oppression and resistance. The concept of queer silence advanced in this study offers a framework for understanding how these binaries are destabilized in practice. Silence emerges not simply as the absence of expression but as a condition produced through power relations and, at times, strategically navigated by individuals seeking to mitigate risk. By foregrounding the productive dimensions of silence, this study contributes to ongoing debates in queer theory, postcolonial studies, and digital media scholarship. It calls for greater attention to the ways in which context shapes the possibilities of identity expression and challenges universalizing assumptions about the relationship between visibility and empowerment. In doing so, it opens new avenues for understanding how marginalized identities are negotiated within environments where expression is both enabled and constrained by the same structures of power

Conclusion

This study has examined how LGBTQ+ identities are discursively constructed and regulated within the contemporary socio-digital landscape of Ghana, with particular attention to the production and function of queer silence. Through a Critical Discourse Analysis of media texts, social media interactions, and visual materials, the research has demonstrated that sexuality is not merely debated but actively governed through intersecting frameworks of cultural nationalism, religious morality, affective politics, and participatory surveillance. The findings reveal that LGBTQ+ identities are consistently positioned as foreign, immoral, and socially threatening, thereby legitimizing their exclusion from the boundaries of acceptable national belonging. These constructions are not isolated but are reinforced across multiple discursive sites, producing an environment in which visibility is structured by risk. Within such conditions, silence emerges as a central mechanism through which identity is negotiated.

By conceptualizing queer silence as both a product of structural constraint and a strategy of navigation, this study challenges dominant assumptions that equate visibility with empowerment. Drawing on the theoretical insights of Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, the paper has shown that silence is not simply the absence of voice but a condition produced through power relations that shape what can be expressed, recognized, and legitimized. At the same time, silence may function as a calculated response to environments characterized by moral regulation and social vulnerability. The study contributes to ongoing debates in queer theory and postcolonial scholarship by foregrounding the contextual nature of identity expression. It underscores the need to move beyond universalizing frameworks that privilege visibility as

a singular marker of progress, instead recognizing the diverse strategies through which individuals negotiate belonging and safety. In digitally mediated contexts, where expression is simultaneously enabled and constrained, these dynamics become even more pronounced.

While this research has focused on Ghana, its implications extend to other settings where sexuality is embedded within contested moral and political frameworks. Future research may build on this work by exploring how queer silence operates across different cultural contexts, or by examining the ways in which alternative forms of expression such as coded communication or anonymous participation challenge dominant discursive regimes. Ultimately, this study highlights the importance of attending not only to what is spoken but also to what remains unsaid. In doing so, it positions silence as a critical site of analysis, offering new insights into the relationship between discourse, power, and identity in contemporary societies.

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