



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Navigating Homophobia in Higher Education: The Impact on LGBTQIA Students' Academic Performance and Well-Being in South Africa

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the experiences of LGBTQIA individuals in higher education within South Africa, focusing on the pervasive issue of homophobia. Despite progressive legal protections, LGBTQIA students encounter significant challenges, including prejudice, discrimination, and violence, which influence their academic performance and overall university experience. Utilising Social Constructionism and the Five Faces of Oppression as theoretical frameworks, this research explores how societal norms and institutional dynamics contribute to the marginalisation of LGBTQIA individuals. Through qualitative methods, including in-depth interviews with 15 LGBTQIA students from a tertiary institution in OR Tambo District Municipality, the study reveals both positive and negative impacts on academic outcomes. While some students demonstrate resilience, using prejudice as motivation to excel academically, others face considerable difficulties, including discriminatory behaviour from peers and faculty. Key findings indicate that homophobic attitudes affect students' academic performance, campus life, and mental well-being, with notable disparities based on sexual orientation and gender. The study underscores the need for cultural safety training, inclusive curricula, and structural support to create a more equitable and supportive academic environment for LGBTQIA students. Recommendations include implementing anti-discrimination policies, enhancing support systems, and fostering a sense of community to address the multifaceted challenges faced by LGBTQIA individuals in higher education settings.

INTRODUCTION

The experiences of LGBTQIA individuals have been the subject of increasing global discourse, particularly concerning homophobia and its many manifestations. Despite progressive cultural shifts and legal protections in certain regions, LGBTQIA individuals continue to face prejudice, discrimination, and violence. In this complex landscape, the decision to disclose one's sexual orientation remains a draught choice for many, particularly within traditional societies and institutions like education. This study explores the ongoing struggles of the LGBTQIA community, with a specific focus on homophobia as it is manifested and contested in both local and global contexts. It examines the societal, institutional, and individual challenges LGBTQIA individuals face and the broader cultural and religious dynamics that shape these experiences.

Homophobia, defined as an irrational fear or aversion to individuals perceived as LGBTQIA, manifests in various forms, ranging from personal prejudice to institutional discrimination. Literature on LGBTQIA experiences, especially in education, reveals that homophobia continues to affect students and academics alike. International research has consistently highlighted the mental health consequences of homophobic

bullying, including elevated rates of substance abuse and suicide among students, while others point to the importance of safe spaces and support systems to mitigate these harms (Paciente et al., 2024; Madireddy & Madireddy, 2022; Hanimoğlu, 2019). Recent studies highlight the challenges faced by LGBTQIA+ individuals in academic and healthcare settings. Many experience workplace bias, discrimination, and exclusionary behaviour, leading to high rates of depression and reluctance to disclose their identities at work (Pagliaccio, 2024; Ross et al., 2021). These environments often perpetuate heteronormative and cisnormative assumptions, causing stress and additional emotional labour for LGBTQIA+ professionals (Ross et al., 2021). The prevailing cultural norms in academia and STEM fields can create uncomfortable work environments, affecting performance and mental health (Boustani & Taylor, 2020). To address these issues, researchers suggest implementing cultural safety training, displaying indicators of inclusivity, and promoting institutional reflexivity (Ross et al., 2021). Additionally, there is a call for explicit LGBTQIA+ inclusion in diversity initiatives and curricula and structural and financial support for LGBTQIA+ individuals, particularly those with intersecting marginalized identities (Pagliaccio, 2024).

In South Africa, the situation is similarly complex. Despite constitutional protections for LGBTQIA rights, societal attitudes have not always kept pace. Research has shown that students and academics still face homophobic prejudice on campuses, reflecting broader social norms (Jagessar & Msibi, 2015; Matthyse, 2017). In addition, corrective rape and other forms of violence remain significant issues, particularly for Black lesbian women, as societal attitudes continue to frame non-heteronormative identities as deviant (Chabalala & Roelofse, 2015; Gaitho, 2022). Religious beliefs further complicate LGBTQIA identities in Africa, often serving as a foundation for conservative values that reject sexual and gender diversity. However, some studies suggest that LGBTQIA individuals are finding ways to reconcile their faith and sexual orientation, challenging the narrative that these identities are inherently in conflict (Rosenkrantz et al., 2016). This exploration of homophobia and LGBTQIA experiences situates itself within these broader debates, examining the intersections of culture, religion, and institutional dynamics that continue to shape the lives of LGBTQIA individuals across various contexts.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The study examining the lived experiences of homophobia is rooted in theories of Social Constructionism and the Five Faces of Oppression. Social Constructionism emphasises that knowledge and understanding of reality are shaped through social interactions, making it a fitting framework for exploring queer movements. It challenges the notion of absolute truths and recognises that societal norms about sexuality are constructed and maintained through human interaction. In African and religious contexts, being queer is often stigmatised, and this framework allows for an analysis of how these perceptions are built and can be reshaped. On the other hand, the Five Faces of Oppression highlights how societal systems oppress specific groups through mechanisms such as marginalisation, powerlessness, and cultural imperialism. This theory will help expose the systemic nature of homophobia in the study's context, revealing how LGBTQIA+ individuals are often subjected to violence, exclusion, and dehumanisation.

Social Constructionism views reality as a product of social and cultural evolution, where societal interactions shape human behaviours and identities. This theory suggests that societal perceptions of homosexuality as deviant can be challenged by reimagining these groups as fully human and worthy of equal treatment. The Five Faces of Oppression further supports this by illustrating the systematic ways in which queer individuals are marginalised. For instance, oppression manifests through mechanisms like exploitation, where those in power benefit from the subjugation of others, and violence, which stems from fear and hatred of sexual minorities. Both theories offer a comprehensive framework for understanding the depth of homophobia in African and religious settings and how societal norms can perpetuate or dismantle such oppression.

The Challenging Experiences of the LGBTQIA: Homophobia, Its Manifestation and Contestation

The plight of the LGBTQIA community has led to various discourses, raising critical questions about whether it is wise to disclose one's sexual orientation or preference. Moreover, in the 21st century, are people still

embracing evolving cultural norms and prescriptive moral values? Below are some debates surrounding the experiences of LGBTQIA individuals.

South African research has provided significant insights into the life worlds of sexual minority learners in primary and secondary schools, particularly concerning experiences of homophobia and the teaching and learning of themes on gender and sexual diversity. Similar studies in higher education have focused on perceptions of and attitudes toward homosexual students (Rothmann, 2016; Msibi, 2018; Kasa, 2022b) prejudice directed at these students on university campuses (Msibi & Jagessar, 2015; Matthyse, 2017); and the influence of subtle heterosexism or sources of resilience among gay male academics and students (Rothmann, 2016).

Some scholars view homophobia as encompassing a range of negative attitudes and feelings toward homosexuality or people identified or perceived as gay, bisexual, or transgender [queer, intersex, and asexual]. They further define it as contempt, prejudice, aversion, hatred, or antipathy, often based on irrational fear and frequently related to religious beliefs. According to Manual (2012), homophobia is defined as an irrational fear of, aversion to, or discrimination against homosexual people or perceived homosexual behaviour. This definition aligns with the broader understanding of homophobia.

Hilde-May (2014) distinguishes homophobia from other phobias by noting that the fear is not necessarily rooted in an individual's experiences but rather stems from culturally learned prejudices. Hilde-May also notes that the colloquial use of "homophobia" refers to negative, fearful, or hateful attitudes and behaviours toward LGBTQIA individuals. Homophobia can manifest in various forms: personal or internalised, interpersonal, institutional, and cultural (Kasa, 2024a). According to Ilyayambwa (2012), homosexuality is defined as the orientation of sexual need, desire, or responsiveness toward others of the same gender. Within this definition, a broad context emerges, indicating that a person need not have sexual relations to fit the definition; merely desiring a sexual association with someone of the same sex is sufficient. The study of homosexuality has historically been curtailed by what some authors refer to as "academic amnesia" or "academic defiance" due to the stigma surrounding the issue. Some authors concluded that since virtually no work had been done on the history of homosexuality in sub-Saharan Africa, there was no story to be told. Ilyayambwa (2012) argues that certain homosexual conduct forms the basis of various criminal offences.

Early Roman criminal law expressly prohibited unnatural practices between men. In Roman-Dutch common law, many sexual acts between adults, whether between men or between a man and a woman, were criminal if they were not directed toward procreation (Ilyayambwa, 2012). Self-hatred by a homosexual person regarding their sexuality involves believing that feelings of attraction to the same sex are wrong, sinful, immoral, or repugnant. For heterosexual individuals, this may manifest as the fear of being perceived by others as homosexual, leading them to "prove" their heterosexuality (Chaudhary, 2023). This can be perceived as immoral behaviour, which may cause individuals to hide their sexual preferences.

Homophobia, defined as an irrational fear or hatred of LGBTQIA+ individuals, significantly impacts their lives, manifesting in discrimination, bullying, and violence (Chaudhary, 2023). Institutions such as law, education, and religion perpetuate this discrimination, often through hegemonic societal norms that marginalize LGBTQIA+ youth (Leibel, 2019). A cross-national analysis reveals that many countries actively discriminate against LGBTQ individuals, denying them rights and subjecting them to criminalization (Lee & Ostergard, 2017). Furthermore, the rise of hate speech on social media highlights the urgent need for automated detection systems to combat this abuse, particularly against the LGBTQIA+ community (Bharathi et al. et al., 2022). Collectively, these studies underscore the pervasive nature of homophobia and the necessity for societal change to foster inclusivity and protect the rights of LGBTQIA+ individuals.

Societal norms imply that heterosexuality is "better" and that everyone is or should be heterosexual. The media perpetuates heterosexuality as the norm by not presenting or representing the homosexual view, for example, on television, where most characters are assumed to be heterosexual. Despite improvements in attitudes toward homosexuality in the past decade, negative attitudes remain rampant in traditional African communities. Institutions of higher learning are components of these communities. Letsoalo (2016) notes that Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Intersex, Asexual, Transgender, and Queer youth face extreme discrimination within educational settings, including tertiary institutions.

Literature, both locally and internationally, suggests that homophobia is still rife in African communities. Stephanie (2011) recalls a conference in Kampala, Uganda, ironically focused on human rights, where a Ugandan parliamentarian stated that if his son were gay, he would have to kill him. Stephanie (2011) also notes that many African leaders are openly homophobic. This is further demonstrated by a prominent South African lawyer who, despite the South African constitution granting homosexual rights since 2006, tweeted on February 28, 2018, "Homosexuality is still a taboo in Africa, and people must respect that. People cannot force others to accept homosexuality just because it is 2018. People can reject what does not form part of their culture." This subjective tweet came from a highly respected lawyer despite the South African constitution's legalisation of same-sex marriages.

However, the freedom of existence for the LGBTQIA community is seen as a political goal. This goal is endorsed through legislation but minimally supported by some average South Africans (Stephanie, 2011). Nevertheless, LGBTQIA individuals are often victims of violence and crime due to stigmatised perceptions of their perceived sexual and gender anomaly. Unfortunately, many of these crimes go unreported. Keguro (2015) explains that these are named victims, some known and many unknown, who collectively populate and haunt Queer Archives. These are the names behind the numbers, the faces hidden from view, the stories that often remain untold.

Homophobic Bullying

Homophobic bullying manifests in various forms, such as name-calling, verbal threats, and sexual harassment, often driven by deep-seated prejudices. The effects of such bullying are profound, particularly for students who are still developing their sexual identities. Homophobic bullying can lead to severe psychological consequences, including depression, especially in environments like rural areas where research on the subject is minimal. Sexual violence against LGBTQIA individuals, particularly in the form of "corrective rape," is a heinous crime intended to "cure" individuals of their sexual orientation. While much of the literature focuses on the experiences of lesbian women, it is crucial also to consider the sexual violence faced by gay men, who often suffer in silence. In the South African context, corrective rape is viewed as a punishment for violating traditional gender norms and is deeply tied to issues of power, masculinity, and societal expectations.

The phenomenon of "corrective rape" targets LGBTQIA+ individuals, particularly Black lesbian women in South Africa, as a form of hate crime aimed at "curing" their sexual orientation (Chabalala & Roelofse, 2015; Lake, 2021). This violence stems from discrimination, homophobia, and the rejection of non-conforming gender identities in society (Sibanyoni et al., 2023). The term "corrective rape" is criticised for implying a rehabilitative aspect, with "homophobic rape" suggested as an alternative (Chabalala & Roelofse, 2015). The issue intersects with systemic racism, resulting in a disproportionate impact on Black, queer women (Gaitho, 2021). Despite legal advancements in addressing sexual violence, societal attitudes continue to perpetuate homophobia and misogyny, leaving Black lesbians vulnerable to violence (Gaitho, 2021). Addressing this complex issue requires a multifaceted approach that combines legal protection with societal transformation (Gaitho, 2021).

Religious Perspectives on LGBTQIA Identities

Religion significantly influences attitudes towards LGBTQIA individuals in Africa, where homosexuality is often perceived as immoral or "un-African." This intersection between religion and sexuality frequently leads to discrimination, with conservative and fundamentalist views dominating the discourse in major religions such as Christianity and Islam. These perspectives often fuel homophobic sentiments, making life particularly challenging for LGBTQIA individuals in religiously influenced environments, including campuses.

In many African societies, religious teachings heavily shape social norms and attitudes toward LGBTQIA individuals. Homosexuality is often condemned as sinful or unnatural, and these views are deeply embedded in both Christian and Islamic doctrines. Although there are diverse interpretations within these religions, conservative voices often dominate, marginalizing LGBTQIA individuals and labelling their

identities as deviant. The influence of religion extends into various aspects of life, including educational institutions, where religious societies can perpetuate these prejudices.

Recent research, however, reveals a more nuanced picture of the intersection between religion and LGBTQIA identities. While some individuals experience significant conflict between their faith and sexual orientation, others find ways to reconcile these aspects of their identities. For some, religious faith provides a source of love, acceptance, and spiritual strength, allowing them to find deeper meaning and purpose in their lives (Rosenkrantz et al., 2016). These positive aspects challenge the notion that religious and LGBTQIA identities are inherently contradictory.

The process of reconciling religious beliefs with LGBTQIA identity varies widely among individuals. Some may struggle with internal conflicts, while others report little to no tension between their faith and their sexual orientation (Fuist, 2016). LGBTQIA activist groups, particularly in Christian colleges, play a crucial role in shaping approaches to understanding the relationship between religion and sexuality. These groups often engage with different audiences, influencing perspectives on faith and identity in distinct ways (Coley, 2020).

The spatiotemporal context of how individuals' experiences and identities are shaped by their social and historical environments is critical in how religious and LGBTQIA identities are perceived and performed. This context influences whether individuals experience these identities as compatible or conflicting. Research has shown that LGBTQIA individuals can find positive aspects in their intersecting identities, such as empathy, compassion, and positive relationships, which contribute to their overall well-being and spiritual resilience (Rosenkrantz et al., 2016).

Education and institutional practices also play a significant role in shaping attitudes towards LGBTQIA individuals within religious contexts. For example, studies have shown that factors such as gender, age, and personal connections to LGBTQIA individuals can influence perceptions among religious communities (Christiani, 2022). Additionally, some religious leaders and institutions are working to create more inclusive spaces, recognising the need to support LGBTQIA individuals within their congregations (Kitaen & Xu, 2023).

Despite these efforts, many LGBTQIA individuals continue to face significant challenges in reconciling their religious beliefs with their sexual orientation. This often leads to psychological harm, social isolation, and a disconnection from their religious communities. However, the growing body of research on this topic, spanning disciplines like sociology, psychology, and religious studies, provides valuable insights into the complexities of these intersections and highlights potential pathways for creating more inclusive and supportive environments for LGBTQIA individuals within religious settings (Kim, 2024).

While religion often plays a role in perpetuating homophobic attitudes in Africa, there is a growing recognition of the need for more nuanced and inclusive approaches to understanding the intersection of religion and LGBTQIA identities. This evolving understanding is critical for fostering environments where LGBTQIA individuals can reconcile their faith with their sexual orientation and live authentically within their religious communities.

Coming Out of the Closet

The concept of "coming out" has indeed evolved beyond its traditional association with LGBTQIA individuals, extending to other marginalised groups like undocumented immigrants, as noted by Villazor (2013). This process of self-disclosure is viewed as both a developmental task and a rite of passage, crucial for queer identity formation (Biswas & Chaudhuri, 2019). However, the cultural context significantly influences the experience and implications of coming out, making it a complex and multifaceted phenomenon.

In Western societies, coming out is often celebrated as an essential milestone in LGBTQIA identity development, associated with positive psychosocial outcomes such as increased well-being, happiness, and

a sense of meaning (Biswas & Chaudhuri, 2019) . However, even in these contexts, the process can be fraught with challenges, including fear of rejection and discrimination.

In contrast, in non-Western societies like India, coming out is more complicated due to deeply entrenched societal heteronormativity and conservative attitudes (Anjana, 2024). Despite the legal decriminalisation of same-sex relationships, LGBTQIA individuals in India still face significant challenges in disclosing their sexual orientation or gender identity. The influence of Western culture, particularly among younger generations, plays a role in shaping attitudes toward gender disclosure. However, this influence can clash with traditional values, leading to a complex and often conflicting experience for those contemplating coming out.

Geographical context is crucial in the decision to come out, as many LGBTQIA individuals in conservative or hostile environments may choose to migrate to more accepting areas to live openly (Matsúmunyane & Hlalele, 2022). For LGBTQIA people from Muslim backgrounds, the binary "in/out" construct of the closet may not fully capture their experiences. Boussalem (2020) argues for a more nuanced understanding that recognises silence as a productive strategy, non-disclosure as a form of agency, and the tacit circulation of knowledge about sexualities within these communities.

In South Africa, despite legal protections for LGBTQIA individuals, the reality is that many still face significant barriers to coming out, including the fear of rejection, marginalisation, and violence. The dominance of heteronormativity in society and within institutions like universities further complicates the decision to reveal one's sexual identity. For many LGBTQIA students, university life offers the first opportunity to explore their identities away from parental control. However, this exploration is often accompanied by substantial risks, particularly in environments that are not supportive.

Coming out is a deeply personal and culturally influenced journey that varies significantly across different contexts. While it is often associated with positive outcomes, the decision to come out is influenced by a complex interplay of cultural, social, and geographical factors. Understanding these nuances is essential in providing appropriate support to LGBTQIA individuals, particularly in non-Western societies where conservative norms and societal expectations may present additional challenges.

methodology

The article adopted a qualitative approach to studying human behaviour, focusing on understanding the perspectives of Queer individuals. The study's design is rooted in qualitative methods, chosen for their ability to explore complex social phenomena and provide deep insights into participants' experiences.

Research Approach: The qualitative method is essential for exploring social realities, offering a comprehensive understanding of behaviours and social interactions (Letsoalo, 2016; Henderson, 2010; Jagessar, 2015).

Study Area: The research was conducted in a tertiary institution in OR Tambo District Municipality, Eastern Cape, focusing on LGBTQIA students.

Sampling: A non-probability sampling method was used, specifically snowball sampling, where initial participants were selected and asked to refer other potential participants. This method was chosen for its cost-effectiveness and ability to represent the diverse student population.

Data Collection: In-depth interviews were guided by an interview schedule based on the study's objectives and existing literature. A total of 15 face-to-face interviews were conducted. The interviews aimed to explore the participants' narratives, experiences, and opinions. The data collection was thorough, with efforts to minimize bias and ensure participant confidentiality.

Data Analysis: The data were analysed using Thematic Analysis, which involves coding, identifying themes, and systematically interpreting the data. The process included familiarising myself with the data, generating

initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing, defining, and naming themes, and producing a comprehensive report.

The study's qualitative approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of the lived experiences of LGBTQIA students in higher education, providing valuable insights into their social realities and challenges. The systematic data collection and analysis processes ensured the findings were reliable and representative of the participants' experiences.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 1: Biographical information of participants

Participant	Age	Sexuality	Nationality	Level of study
Participant 1	22	Gay	South African	IV
Participant 2	30	Bisexual	South African	M
Participant 3	28	Lesbian	South African	II
Participant 4	21	Gay	South African	II
Participant 5	26	Lesbian	South African	M
Participant 6	23	Gay	South African	III
Participant 7	26	Fluid	South African	N2
Participant 8	22	Gay	South African	IV
Participant 9				
Participant 10	24	Bisexual	South African	II
Participant 11	20	Bisexual	South African	N4
Participant 12	21	Pansexual	South African	II
Participant 13	25	Gay	South African	III
Participant 14	25	Lesbian	South African	IV
Participant 15	23	Bisexual	South African	IV

Table 1 above depicts the demographic information of all study participants. The first column of the table shows pseudonyms of the participants in line with the confidentiality clause in the participants' consent forms. Second column in the table shows age of the participants that were interviewed. The study was conducted with students registered in institutions of higher learning, as such their ages are from 20-30 years old.

The third column in Table 1 shows the sexuality of each participant. This column would show the “gender” of each participant but because the study is not concerned about their gender but their sexuality. Because of the variety and/or diversity of sexuality and when approaching or being referred to someone, they are just known to be “homosexual” we got to know where to categorize each participant as we got to interview them. One cannot balance sexuality and/or sexual orientation; as such, this column shows the variety and diversity of sexuality and sexual orientation. Table 1, column 4 shows the nationality of each participant. All the participants are South African nationals. This is the case because of fear of rejection and exclusion and more exposure to harm by the international students as they are already subjected to what can be termed “Afrophobia”, popularly known as xenophobia.

The fifth and final column of the table shows the participants' study levels. Out of 15 participants, only two are in their postgraduate studies and are masters’ candidates, with six doing their final years in their respective programs whilst the remainder are doing their either natives or N4 in the TVET sector in their second year of study at University.

Theme	Sub-theme	Probes/categories
Experiences faced by the LGBTQIA students and effects on academic performance and university life.	Does the fact that you are who you chose to be have any impacts on your academic performance now that you are out of the closet?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✚ Pass rate ✚ Behaviour of teachers/lecturers

Table 2 presents the experiences that were faced by LGBTQIA students and the effects on academic performance and university life, and the following are categories derived from the subtheme:

✚ Pass rate

The participants showed resilience and consistency when it comes to academic performance. Out of the interviewed participants, very few showed signs of hurting their academic progress and for others, it improved instead. Most participants attribute the improvement to the fact that they were told they would never make it in life and that they would never be successful. So, they study hard to prove the naysayers wrong. Those who have had a drop attribute the drop to the stressors that they are faced with daily and the lack of assistance from their institutions of higher learning. The consistency is attributed to the fact that they do not owe anyone any explanation for their sexual orientation.

Below are but some of the responses that the participants have had to say about the impact that these experiences might have on their academic performance.

“Academic performance was affected because I could not focus on class. Sometimes, you would be scared to answer questions because teachers would give you attitudes now that you are not closeted. It was better when I was in closet, but I had to improve for my sake”

“Academically, nothing at all. Nothing affected me. I am generally a clever person...no one can do anything about that”

“I remember first time going to the library, some guy asked which degree I am doing, and I responded ‘LLB’ and he said ‘soze ulunge. Zange ndalibona igqwetha elisisitabane’ (you will never make it. I have never seen a gay lawyer). That for me was and still is what keeps me going. I have to push myself harder and pass to prove him wrong.”

Schools and other educational contexts are often the first sites of victimisation for LGBTI youth (Krishan, 2014). Letsoalo (2016), found that other teens in academic settings ridicule sexual minority youth. Failure of academic success may also be precipitated by fear, anxiety and isolation that LGBTI individuals face at academic institutions (Sithole, 2015). This can hurt academic outcomes due to poor attendance and levels of aspiration and raise mental health concerns such as increased anxiety or reduced self-esteem (Naidu, 2017). As such it becomes difficult for LGBTI youth to learn, cope and perform well academically because of the hostile academic environment (Letsoalo, 2016). However, most attended their lectures with fear for their safety and emotional wellbeing

Behaviour of lecturers and other students

Some of the participants have reported that in as much the behaviour between lectures and students is the same that of lectures is to a certain extent because at least they do understand the homosexuality. Three participants reported that they have stopped attending some lectures because of the jokes that some of the lecturers tend to make about homosexuality. Five participants reported that they have requested to change the residence they were allocated to and be allocated in another residence because they could not tolerate the treatment they were getting in that residence. Eight participants reported that they no longer go to a certain study center because of the behaviour of students who go to that study center.

Some of the participants attested:

“Classes have turned to be hostile for me. As such, I chose not to attend certain lectures and catch up with my friends and attend tutorials”

“There was a lecturer who did not want to make me rewrite my test whilst other students were allowed, and we all failed that module. The SRC had to attend to the matter, and the lecturer was forced to let me write.”

“Like I said earlier, this is a rural and conservative university. The residence I was allocated to was full of homophobes, and they were too much to handle. I was forced to request that the residence warden reallocate me to another res.”

“... ‘Kuvele kubengathi mandithi vuleka mhlaba ndingene’, when I would enter that residence. You would find guys on windows all looking at me, some insulting me. If I hadn’t changed it, I don’t know where I would be.”

Campus residences and lecture halls are important sites for exploring homophobic experiences (Letsoalo, 2016; Jagessar, 2015; and Tshilongo, 2018). These scholars have found that in these residences and lecture halls were the main areas in the university environment where homophobic attacks took place. Residence halls have been found to play a major role in promoting homophobia. However, they have also been found to promote the coming out process of LGBTQIA individuals, depending on the climate in the residence (Letsoalo, 2016; Jagessar, 2015).

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The researcher selected 15 participants, all of whom were Black and South African. In terms of sexual orientation, 30% identified as gay, 20% as lesbian, and 27% as bisexual, while fluid, asexual, and queer identities each accounted for 1%. The study was conducted at a public institution of higher learning (IHL) because private institutions do not accommodate their students. The study revealed that gay participants were more vulnerable compared to their lesbian counterparts. Male participants were more likely to remain closeted, while female participants felt more comfortable disclosing their sexuality to heterosexual friends, regardless of gender.

All participants were South African, with no international students involved in the study. Gay individuals comprised the highest proportion of participants, followed by lesbians. Some participants identified with other sexualities that are still becoming more widely recognised. The university should engage with

external stakeholders to promote the decriminalisation of homosexuality and ensure that all students, regardless of nationality, are protected from harm. The LGBTQIA+ community should strive to foster a sense of unity, which would help create a more supportive and conducive environment for personal and communal growth.

The study revealed that participants were affected academically by homophobic experiences, which also impacted their overall university or college life. These effects were positive for some but harmful for others. Some students dropped out, while others struggled with lecturers who refused to accept their assignments or made offensive jokes, leading some students to skip lectures. Sithole (2015) notes that 67% of students reported feeling isolated and marginalised by lecturers. This marginalisation often took the form of exclusion from class discussions, leading to the rejection or dismissal of their ideas.

The researcher further observed that students' academic performances were negatively impacted due to discrimination based on their sexual orientation. Tshilongo (2018) argues that this marginalisation is also evident in the absence of study materials addressing LGBTQIA+ themes in courses where they would be relevant. As a result, non-heterosexual students may feel unwelcome and uncomfortable in the classroom (Tshilongo, 2018).

Additionally, some LGBTQIA+ students felt like social outcasts, as they were threatened during university social events. Letsoalo (2016) reports incidents of heterosexual males using coercion and mockery to disparage male homosexuals at parties and bashes. At gala dinners, Letsoalo (2016) further reports that homosexual students serving as waitstaff were publicly ridiculed.

LGBTQIA+ students faced discrimination not only from fellow students but also from lecturers. Homophobic experiences affected academic performance, with some students skipping lectures due to discrimination. Social life and personal growth were also hindered, as these experiences damaged students' development. The lack of study materials addressing LGBTQIA+ issues in relevant courses perpetuated the marginalisation of these students. In democratic South Africa, with the Bill of Rights enshrined in the Constitution, it is unacceptable that people still face discrimination based on their sexuality. Universities and colleges should implement policies aligned with the Constitution to prevent such discrimination. The drop in academic performance is standard for many students, particularly second-year students. Therefore, universities and colleges should enforce attendance at tutorials and peer-assisted learning (PAL) sessions. Not all students attend lectures for various reasons so that these sessions can serve as catch-up opportunities.

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