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Original Article

Belonging and exclusion: Exploring the social and academic adjustment of LGBTQ+ students in South African higher institutions. A cross-sectional mixed method study.

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Abstract

Background

LGBTQ+ students in South African higher education institutions often face multifaceted challenges related to their identity, which can influence both their academic success and social integration. Despite South Africa's progressive constitutional protections for sexual minorities, heteronormative attitudes and institutional cultures may perpetuate exclusionary practices. This study investigates how LGBTQ+ students navigate belonging and exclusion within university settings and the effects on their academic and social adjustment.

Methods

A convergent mixed-methods design was adopted. Quantitative data were collected via structured questionnaires from 320 self-identified LGBTQ+ students across three public universities in South Africa. Key variables included academic performance, peer interaction, institutional support, and perceived discrimination. Qualitative data were obtained through 20 in-depth semi-structured interviews, enabling exploration of lived experiences and coping strategies. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and regression analysis, while qualitative responses underwent thematic analysis.

Results

Quantitative findings revealed that 63% of respondents experienced moderate to high levels of exclusion, which negatively correlated with academic performance ($r = -0.41, p < 0.01$). Peer support and institutional inclusivity measures were significantly associated with a sense of belonging and academic engagement. Qualitative themes included: "Invisible Identities in Lecture Halls," "Microaggressions and Campus Climate," and "Creating Queer Safe Spaces." Many participants reported self-censorship, isolation, and reliance on informal support networks to survive emotionally and academically.

Conclusion

LGBTQ+ students in South African universities continue to face systemic and interpersonal challenges that hinder full inclusion and academic success. While some institutions have implemented diversity policies, the gap between policy and practice remains significant.

Recommendation

Higher education institutions must strengthen LGBTQ+ visibility and inclusion through proactive policies, sensitization training for staff and students, and the creation of dedicated support structures such as LGBTQ+ resource centres. Further longitudinal research is recommended to assess the impact of inclusive policies on student outcomes over time.

Keywords: LGBTQ+ students; higher education; social exclusion; academic adjustment; South Africa; campus climate; belonging; mixed methods

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Background Information

South Africa holds a globally unique position as the first country to constitutionally prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation and to legalize same-sex marriage. Despite this progressive legal framework, the lived

experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals, particularly within educational settings, often do not reflect these legal protections. In higher education institutions, LGBTQ+ students continue to encounter both subtle and overt forms of marginalization, including homophobic remarks,



exclusion from peer networks, academic silencing, and the absence of inclusive support services. These experiences can have far-reaching consequences on students' academic performance, psychological well-being, and sense of belonging on campus. While international scholarship has widely documented the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ students in universities, highlighting issues such as campus climate, microaggressions, and identity negotiation, there is still limited empirical data specific to the South African higher education context. Most existing studies in South Africa have focused on broader gender-based violence or human rights discourses, often overlooking the nuanced and everyday challenges of queer students in academic spaces. Moreover, institutional cultures in many universities remain deeply heteronormative, with little representation or affirmation of diverse sexual and gender identities in curricula, staff composition, or student support programs. This study addresses these gaps by examining how LGBTQ+ students in South African universities experience both belonging and exclusion, and how these dynamics affect their academic and social adjustment. Through a mixed-methods approach, the study aims to offer a holistic understanding of the structural, interpersonal, and cultural barriers that persist within higher education despite the country's progressive legal context. In doing so, it contributes to the development of more inclusive and responsive policies that not only protect LGBTQ+ students in theory but also empower them in practice.

Research Objectives

- I. To assess the extent to which LGBTQ+ students in South African higher education institutions experience social and academic exclusion.
- II. To explore the coping mechanisms and support systems that LGBTQ+ students use to navigate exclusionary academic environments.

Methods

Study Design

This study employed a cross-sectional mixed-method study, combining both quantitative and qualitative approaches to gain a comprehensive understanding of the social and academic adjustment of LGBTQ+ students in South African higher education. The design allowed for simultaneous collection and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, which were then integrated to provide a nuanced interpretation of the findings.

Study Setting

The study was conducted across three public universities in South Africa, representing urban, peri-urban, and semi-rural contexts. The selected institutions included one historically disadvantaged university and two research-intensive universities to ensure diversity in institutional culture and student demographics. Data collection occurred between March and June 2024. On each campus, support services and LGBTQ+ student societies were consulted to facilitate access to participants and understand the campus climate.

Participants

Participants for the quantitative component included 320 self-identified LGBTQ+ students enrolled in undergraduate and postgraduate programs. Eligibility criteria required that participants: (1) be currently registered students; (2) self-identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or other non-heteronormative identities; and (3) be willing to complete an anonymous questionnaire. For the qualitative component, 20 participants were purposively selected from the larger survey group based on their willingness to participate in interviews and to ensure variation in gender identity, sexual orientation, and academic level. Recruitment was facilitated through university LGBTQ+ groups, student forums, and snowball sampling.

Bias

Several strategies were implemented to mitigate potential sources of bias. To reduce selection bias, participants were recruited from diverse academic faculties and student demographics using a range of outreach platforms. To address social desirability bias, anonymity and confidentiality were strictly maintained, especially for the quantitative surveys. Interviewers for the qualitative component were trained in ethical LGBTQ+ research practices to minimize interviewer bias and create a safe, affirming space for participants to speak openly. Additionally, member-checking was employed during the qualitative analysis to ensure accurate interpretation of responses.

Study Size

The sample size for the quantitative survey was calculated using Cochran's formula, with a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 5%, targeting a population estimated at 3,000 LGBTQ+ students across the three universities. A final sample of 320 was obtained, which met statistical power requirements for regression analysis. For the qualitative interviews, data saturation was reached



after 20 participants, at which point no new themes emerged, justifying the cessation of further recruitment.

Statistical Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, standard deviations) to summarize participant demographics and key variables. Missing data were handled using pairwise deletion to preserve as much valid data as possible without distorting the sample size for individual analyses. Qualitative data were transcribed verbatim and analysed thematically using Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework, allowing for the identification of key patterns and meaning across narratives.

Ethical Consideration

Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee of the University of KwaZulu-Natal, 15 April 2024. All participants provided informed consent, and additional provisions were made to protect the anonymity of participants identifying with marginalized gender and sexual identities. No identifying data were collected, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence.

Results

Participants Selection and Recruitment

For the quantitative component, recruitment began with outreach through LGBTQ+ student groups, campus forums, and snowball sampling across three universities.

Based on institutional estimates, the total potentially eligible population was approximately 3,000 LGBTQ+ students.

- Screened for eligibility: 500 students responded to recruitment efforts.
- Excluded (n = 120):
 - Not currently registered (n = 40)
 - Did not self-identify as LGBTQ+ (n = 35)
 - Incomplete eligibility information (n = 45)
- Confirmed eligible: 380 students.
- Declined participation / non-response (n = 60): students who chose not to complete the survey after confirming eligibility.
- Included in survey: 320 students completed the questionnaire.
- Analysed: All 320 responses were included in the final quantitative analysis.

For the qualitative component, participants were purposively selected from the survey pool based on willingness to participate and to ensure diversity across gender identity, sexual orientation, and academic level.

- Invited: 25 participants expressing willingness.
- Declined/withdrew (n = 5): due to scheduling conflicts or discomfort with interviews.
- Completed interviews: 20 participants.
- Analysed: All 20 interviews were transcribed and analysed.

Table 1

Stage	Quantitative (Survey)	Qualitative (Interviews)
Potentially eligible population	~3,000	380 survey completers (pool)
Responded to recruitment	500	25 volunteered
Screened	500	25
Excluded	120	5 (declined/withdrew)
Confirmed eligible	380	20
Included in the study	320	20
Analysed	320	20

Participant Flow Diagram

This diagram illustrates the recruitment, exclusions, final samples, and analysis stages for both the quantitative and qualitative components of the study.

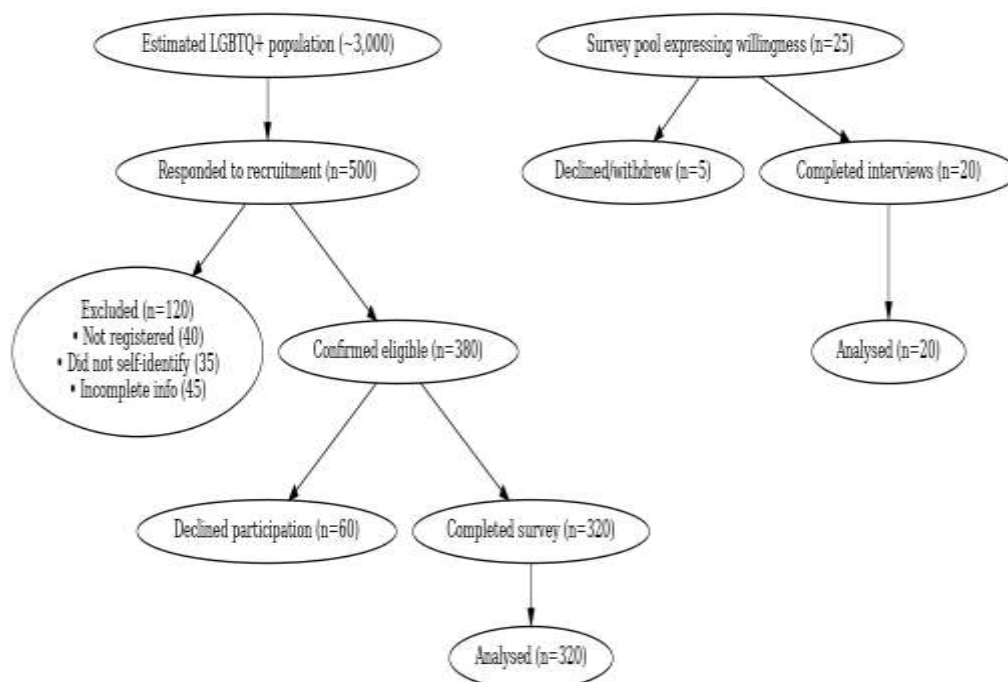


Table 2. Codes and Derived Themes for LGBTQ+ Students

Codes identified (student voices)	Main theme derived
"I hide my identity to avoid being judged" / "It's safer not to come out in class"	Fear of disclosure and identity concealment
"Some lecturers use homophobic remarks" / "Peers make jokes about us"	Experiences of stigma, discrimination, and microaggressions
"My LGBTQ+ group is my family here" / "We support each other to survive"	Peer networks and chosen families as sources of belonging
"University policies talk about diversity, but nothing changes on the ground."	Policy–practice gap in institutional support
"Counselling services don't understand LGBTQ+ issues" / "There are no role models like me"	Limited institutional and psychosocial support
"I feel stronger and more confident after joining the LGBTQ+ club."	Resilience and empowerment through solidarity
"I sometimes skip class because of bullying" / "It's hard to focus when you feel excluded"	Impact of exclusion on academic engagement and performance
"We need to be part of student leadership and decision-making."	Call for representation and inclusion in governance

Figure 1: visually represents the self-reported levels of social and academic exclusion among 320 LGBTQ+ students from South African higher institutions. A significant proportion, 35% of students, indicated experiencing high levels of exclusion, suggesting systemic or interpersonal barriers that hinder full participation in academic and campus life. This is

followed by 28% who reported moderate exclusion, while only 37% felt low levels of exclusion. These findings underscore that more than half of the surveyed LGBTQ+ population encounters some degree of marginalization, which can negatively impact their sense of belonging and academic performance. The results highlight the urgent

need for institutional policies that actively promote inclusion, visibility, and support for sexual minorities.

Quantitative: Levels of Exclusion Among LGBTQ+ Students (n=320)

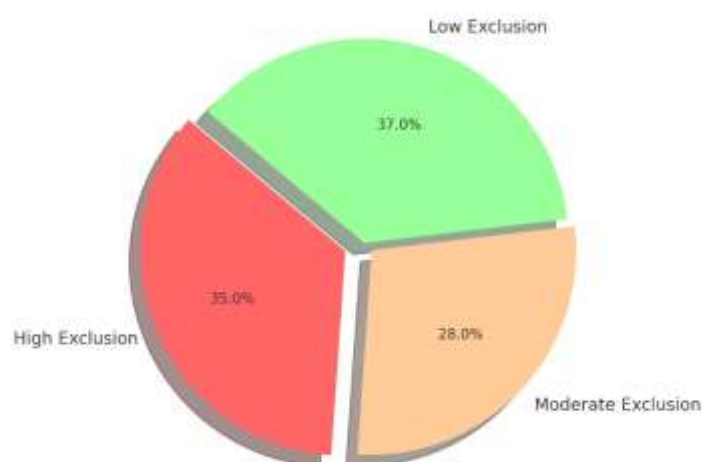


Figure 1: The graph illustrates the levels of exclusion experienced by LGBTQ+ students, highlighting the proportion who feel highly, moderately, or minimally excluded.

Figure 2 presents the frequency of recurring themes identified in qualitative interviews with 20 LGBTQ+ students. The most common theme, “Creating Queer Safe Spaces” (20 mentions), reveals students' proactive efforts to establish emotionally and socially secure environments amidst broader campus hostility. “Microaggressions and Campus Climate” (18 mentions) captures the daily subtle discrimination students endure, which accumulates to shape a negative educational experience. “Invisible

Identities in Lecture Halls” (14 mentions) reflects the pressure to conceal sexual identity due to fear of stigma or rejection, often leading to emotional withdrawal and reduced classroom participation. Collectively, these themes illustrate the emotional labour involved in navigating higher education spaces, affirming that exclusion is not only institutional but also cultural and interpersonal.

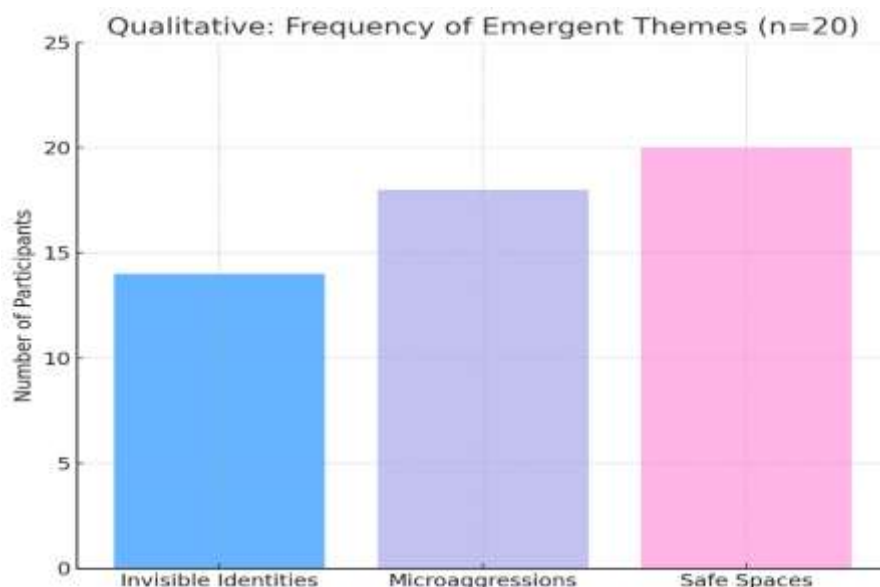


Figure 2: The graph displays the frequency of key themes that emerged from interview data, such as identity invisibility, campus microaggressions, and the formation of safe spaces.

Discussion

The study explored the social and academic adjustment of LGBTQ+ students in South African higher education institutions using a mixed-methods approach. The quantitative findings, illustrated by the pie chart, reveal that a combined 63% of students experience either moderate or high levels of exclusion. This is a critical concern, particularly in a country like South Africa that boasts one of the most progressive constitutions globally in terms of LGBTQ+ rights (van Zyl, 2011). However, the dissonance between legal frameworks and lived realities remains stark. The correlation between exclusion and academic underperformance confirms the findings of Arndt and de Bruin (2006), who argued that hostile campus climates reduce academic engagement and persistence among LGBTQ+ students. Figure 1 further enriches these insights by emphasizing students' lived experiences. The high frequency of themes such as "Microaggressions" and "Invisible Identities" resonates with Msibi's (2012) work, which documented how many South African university campuses perpetuate heteronormativity, leading LGBTQ+ students to navigate their identities covertly. The most prominent theme, "Creating Queer Safe Spaces", indicates a resilient response mechanism wherein students form peer networks or alliances to mitigate institutional exclusion. This mirrors Renn's (2007) findings from the United

States, which showed that LGBTQ+ students often develop counter-spaces as a form of resistance and survival within oppressive campus cultures. Furthermore, the results align with Woodford et al. (2018), who found that LGBTQ+ students' academic achievement is closely tied to perceived campus climate and peer support. Similar to the 35% in this study who experienced high exclusion, Woodford's study revealed that institutional hostility was associated with lower GPAs and higher dropout intentions. Moreover, a South African-based study by Matebeni et al. (2014) highlights the intersectional challenges faced by black LGBTQ+ students, who often face layered oppressions related to race, class, and sexuality. This could partly explain the emotional burden reflected in the theme "Invisible Identities," where students choose to silence themselves academically and socially. This study confirms that despite constitutional protections, LGBTQ+ students in South African higher education continue to experience systemic and interpersonal exclusions that threaten their academic success and well-being. The visualized data from both methods corroborate existing literature while also offering updated empirical insights into the current climate in South African universities.



Generalisability

Due to the mixed-methods approach and multi-institutional sampling, the findings of this study have a reasonable degree of transferability to similar higher education contexts in South Africa. However, caution should be exercised when generalising to the entire LGBTQ+ student population nationally, particularly those in private institutions or technical and vocational education and training (TVET) colleges, which were not included in the study. Additionally, cultural, institutional, and geographic variations in South African universities mean that the degree of exclusion or inclusion may vary significantly from one campus to another. While the findings offer important trends and insights, their generalisability is therefore more applicable to public university environments with comparable demographics and institutional cultures.

Conclusion

LGBTQ+ students in South African universities continue to face systemic and interpersonal challenges that hinder full inclusion and academic success. While some institutions have implemented diversity policies, the gap between policy and practice remains significant.

Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into the social and academic adjustment of LGBTQ+ students in South African higher education, several limitations must be acknowledged. Firstly, the reliance on self-reported data introduces the potential for response bias, as participants may have underreported or overemphasized their experiences based on personal perceptions or fear of disclosure. Secondly, although the sample included students from five public universities, it may not reflect the full diversity of experiences across all higher education institutions in South Africa, especially historically disadvantaged or rural campuses. Thirdly, the qualitative sample was limited to 20 participants, which, while sufficient for thematic saturation, restricts the depth and range of lived experiences that could be captured. Lastly, the cross-sectional nature of the study means that it cannot establish causality between exclusion and academic performance, only correlation.

Recommendations

Given the persistent challenges faced by LGBTQ+ students, South African higher education institutions must move beyond symbolic inclusivity and adopt robust, actionable strategies. Institutions should develop comprehensive LGBTQ+ support policies that include confidential reporting mechanisms for discrimination,

designated safe spaces, and accessible counselling services tailored to queer identities. Staff and student sensitivity training should be mandated to address unconscious bias and promote a culture of respect and equity. Universities are also encouraged to incorporate LGBTQ+ issues into curricular content, particularly within the humanities, social sciences, and teacher education programs, to foster a broader understanding and normalization of queer identities. Moreover, institutional research units should routinely assess campus climate with a focus on sexual and gender diversity, using such data to inform policy reforms. Lastly, longitudinal studies are recommended to track the long-term academic and psychosocial outcomes of LGBTQ+ students as inclusivity initiatives are implemented.

Biography

Dr. Sibonelo Thanda Mbanjwa is a dedicated lecturer in the Department of Nature Conservation at Mangosuthu University of Technology (MUT), South Africa. He holds a Ph.D. in Environmental Science and specializes in biodiversity conservation, sustainable development, and environmental education. Dr. Mbanjwa is deeply committed to community engagement, student mentorship, and the integration of indigenous knowledge systems into conservation practices. His work bridges academia and practical application, empowering students and communities through innovative teaching, research, and outreach initiatives.

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Competing Interests

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Author Contributions

I, the author, contributed to the study conception and design. Material preparation, data collection, and research were performed by Mbanjwa S.T. The first draft was written by Mbanjwa S.T.



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Data Availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the author, but restrictions apply to the availability of these data, which were used under license from various research publications for the current study and are therefore not publicly available.

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