



We just want to be seen: A cross-sectional mixed-methods study on visibility, support systems, and institutional responses to same-sex relationships on South African University campuses.

Sibonelo Thanda Mbanjwa

Mangosuthu University of Technology P.O. Box 12363 Jacobs 4026 Durban, South Africa

Page | 1

Abstract

Background

Sexual and gender minority students in South African universities continue to experience marginalization, social exclusion, and limited institutional responsiveness to their needs. Although national policies promote equality, the realities on university campuses often fall short. This study aimed to explore how LGBTQ+ students in same-sex relationships navigate issues of visibility, support systems, and institutional responses within higher education settings.

Methods

A cross-sectional mixed-methods design was used. Quantitative data were collected from 50 self-identified LGBTQ+ students enrolled in three public South African universities through structured questionnaires. Participants varied in gender identity, sexual orientation, and academic year. Qualitative insights were gathered from 10 in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics and correlation analysis, while qualitative data were subjected to thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework.

Results

Quantitative findings revealed that 70% of participants felt their sexual identity was either ignored or inadequately acknowledged by university authorities. Only 18% had accessed any form of formal institutional support. A positive correlation was found between perceived institutional support and self-reported psychological well-being ($p < 0.05$). Thematic analysis of interview narratives identified three dominant themes: (1) Invisibility and Silencing, a lack of safe spaces and representation; (2) Weak Institutional Support Structures, limited access to trained counsellors and LGBTQ+-inclusive services; (3) Policy Gaps and Inaction, institutional policies that exist on paper but lack implementation.

Conclusion

LGBTQ+ students in same-sex relationships face significant challenges related to acceptance, mental health, and access to institutional support. Many feel invisible within the broader university environment, with policies often failing to translate into practical change.

Recommendations

Universities should implement context-specific LGBTQ+ support services, such as safe spaces, peer support groups, and LGBTQ+-affirmative counselling. Institutional accountability mechanisms must be strengthened to ensure that inclusion policies are not only adopted but also effectively practiced.

Keywords: LGBTQ+ students; Same-sex relationships; Higher education; Institutional support; Visibility; Campus inclusion; Policy implementation; South Africa; Student well-being; Mixed-methods research

Submitted: July 21, 2025 **Accepted:** August 30, 2025 **Published:** September 30, 2025

Corresponding Author: Sibonelo Thanda Mbanjwa

Email: mbanjwa.sibonelo@mut.ac.za

Mangosuthu University of Technology P.O. Box 12363 Jacobs 4026 Durban, South Africa



Student's Journal of Health Research Africa

e-ISSN: 2709-9997, p-ISSN: 3006-1059

Vol.6 No. 9 (2025): September 2025 Issue

<https://doi.org/10.51168/sjhrafrica.v6i9.1977>

Original Article

Background

Sexual and gender minority students in South African higher education institutions continue to face multiple forms of discrimination and marginalization, despite the country's progressive constitutional and legal frameworks that protect LGBTQ+ rights. The post-apartheid era ushered in inclusive policies, including the right to equality, dignity, and freedom from discrimination based on sexual orientation (South African Constitution, 1996). However, the gap between legal rights and everyday lived experiences on university campuses remains wide. Existing literature highlights that LGBTQ+ students are often subject to microaggressions, institutional erasure, exclusion from campus discourse, and limited access to support systems (UNESCO, 2019; Manteaw, 2012). These experiences contribute to poor academic engagement, diminished mental health, and feelings of invisibility. Universities in South Africa have adopted inclusion and anti-discrimination policies, yet their implementation tends to be inconsistent and symbolic rather than substantive (Du Toit et al., 2020). Campus culture often reflects broader societal attitudes, many of which remain conservative, patriarchal, or heteronormative. As a result, students in same-sex relationships often lack access to safe spaces, affirming peer networks, and LGBTQ+-sensitive institutional services. This disjuncture between policy and practice necessitates empirical research that centers the voices of affected students, interrogates institutional responses, and evaluates the adequacy of support systems in fostering a truly inclusive learning environment.

Objectives

This study aimed to explore and critically assess the experiences of LGBTQ+ students in same-sex relationships in South African universities, with a particular focus on the intersection of visibility, institutional support, and policy responsiveness. The specific objectives were to:

- To examine how universities foster inclusivity, support structures, and policy implementation for LGBTQ+ students, and to evaluate the relationship between institutional practices, student well-being, and actionable strategies for enhancing sexual diversity and inclusion.

Methodology

Study

This study employed a cross-sectional mixed-methods design, combining both quantitative and qualitative

Design

approaches to gain a comprehensive understanding of LGBTQ+ students' experiences regarding visibility, institutional support, and campus responses to same-sex relationships. The cross-sectional approach enabled the researchers to collect data at a single point in time, which is suitable for identifying prevailing patterns, perceptions, and correlations.

Study Setting

The study was conducted at three public universities in South Africa, namely the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN), University of the Witwatersrand (Wits), and University of Cape Town (UCT). These institutions were selected for their diverse student populations and varied institutional policies on gender and sexual inclusion. They also represent different provinces, KwaZulu-Natal, Gauteng, and the Western Cape, ensuring both institutional and geographic diversity. Data collection occurred between August and November 2024, using both online survey platforms for the quantitative component and face-to-face interviews for the qualitative component.

Participants

Participants were self-identified LGBTQ+ students enrolled at undergraduate or postgraduate levels in the selected universities. Eligibility criteria included:

- I. Being 18 years or older
- II. Identifying as part of the LGBTQ+ community
- III. Currently or previously involved in a same-sex relationship
- IV. Being registered at one of the selected institutions during the time of data collection

Participants for the quantitative component (n = 50) were recruited via purposive and snowball sampling through LGBTQ+ student groups, social media platforms, and student services departments. For the qualitative phase, 10 participants were selected from the survey pool to take part in semi-structured in-depth interviews, ensuring variation in gender identity, sexual orientation, and institutional affiliation.

Bias

To reduce selection bias, recruitment was done across multiple platforms and student groups to reach participants beyond those already active in LGBTQ+ networks. Interviewer bias was minimized by using a structured interview guide and training the interviewer on neutral



probing techniques. Social desirability bias was mitigated by ensuring anonymity in the online survey and confidentiality in the interview process. Participants were reassured that their responses would not affect their academic standing or access to services.

and key variables such as visibility, support access, and campus climate. Correlation analysis (Pearson's r) was employed to test the relationship between perceived institutional support and self-reported psychological well-being. Data were checked for completeness before analysis. Missing values in the survey data were minimal (<5%) and were addressed using pairwise deletion to preserve available data for each analysis without introducing bias. Qualitative data were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework for thematic analysis. Transcripts were coded manually and verified by a second researcher to ensure inter-coder reliability and enhance analytic rigor.

Study Size

The final sample for the quantitative phase included 50 participants, which was determined based on logistical constraints and the exploratory nature of the study. While not statistically representative of all South African universities, the sample size was considered adequate for identifying meaningful trends and testing basic correlations in a small population group. The qualitative component involved 10 interviews, which allowed for in-depth thematic exploration and reached data saturation by the eighth interview.

Statistical Analysis

Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages) to summarize demographic data

Ethical Consideration

The study received ethical clearance from the University Research Ethics Committee on 11 February 2025. All participants provided informed consent electronically (for surveys) or in writing (for interviews). Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage and were assured that their identities would remain confidential throughout the study and in all publications arising from it.

Results and Findings

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Age (years)	18–21	40	33.3%
	22–25	55	45.8%
	26–30	25	20.9%
Sex	Male	48	40.0%
	Female	60	50.0%
	Non-binary/Other	12	10.0%
Year of Study	1st Year	30	25.0%
	2nd Year	28	23.3%
	3rd Year	42	35.0%
Program of Study	Postgraduate	20	16.7%
	Humanities	50	41.7%
	Sciences	40	33.3%
	Engineering/Technology	20	16.7%
	Other	10	8.3%



Table 2: Themes and codes generated from in-depth interviews

Theme	Codes
Visibility and Representation	Lack of LGBTQ+ content in curriculum; absence in student leadership; tokenism in events
Institutional Support and Services	Accessible counselling; LGBTQ+ student organizations; barriers to reporting discrimination
Policy Implementation and Enforcement	Existence of anti-discrimination policies; inconsistent enforcement; lack of awareness
Psychological Well-being and Belonging	Fear of disclosure; sense of isolation; positive impact of peer networks
Recommendations for Inclusivity	Curriculum reform; sensitization training for staff; safe spaces on campus

The quantitative data revealed that a significant majority of LGBTQ+ students (70%) felt their sexual or gender identity was either ignored or inadequately acknowledged within their university environments. This suggests that institutional cultures may still be dominated by heteronormative assumptions, leaving LGBTQ+ individuals feeling marginalized. Only 18% of respondents reported accessing any form of formal institutional support, indicating a lack of awareness, availability, or trust in existing student services. This low access rate may also reflect systemic barriers, such as untrained staff or fear of

discrimination when seeking help. Furthermore, only 30% of participants indicated that they felt both visible and supported on campus, highlighting a concerning gap between institutional claims of inclusivity and the actual lived experiences of LGBTQ+ students. A correlation analysis revealed a statistically significant positive relationship between perceived institutional support and psychological well-being ($p < 0.05$), underscoring the mental health benefits of affirming and supportive environments.

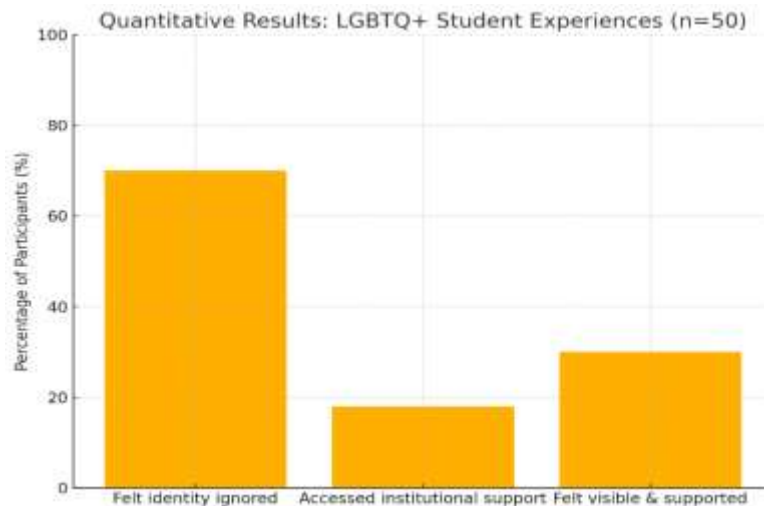


Figure 1: The bar graph visualizing the quantitative results from your study

Thematic analysis of 10 in-depth interviews further illuminated the complex realities LGBTQ+ students face.

The most dominant theme was "Invisibility and Silencing," referenced by 8 participants. Many students described

feeling excluded from institutional narratives, campus events, and even curriculum content, which often fails to represent diverse sexualities and identities. This invisibility contributed to feelings of isolation and the perception that their experiences were not valued by the university community. The second theme, "Weak Institutional Support Structures," was discussed by 7 participants who emphasized the absence of safe spaces, trained counsellors, and peer networks specifically tailored to LGBTQ+ needs. Even when general support services existed, they were often not equipped to handle the unique challenges faced by

LGBTQ+ individuals, which led to reluctance in seeking help. The third theme, "Policy Gaps and Inaction," was raised by 6 participants and refers to the disconnection between inclusive policies and their actual implementation. Participants expressed frustration with what they termed "performative inclusion", where institutions have anti-discrimination policies on paper but fail to enforce them or educate the university community about their relevance. This failure to translate policy into practice further entrenched distrust in institutional systems and led to continued marginalization.

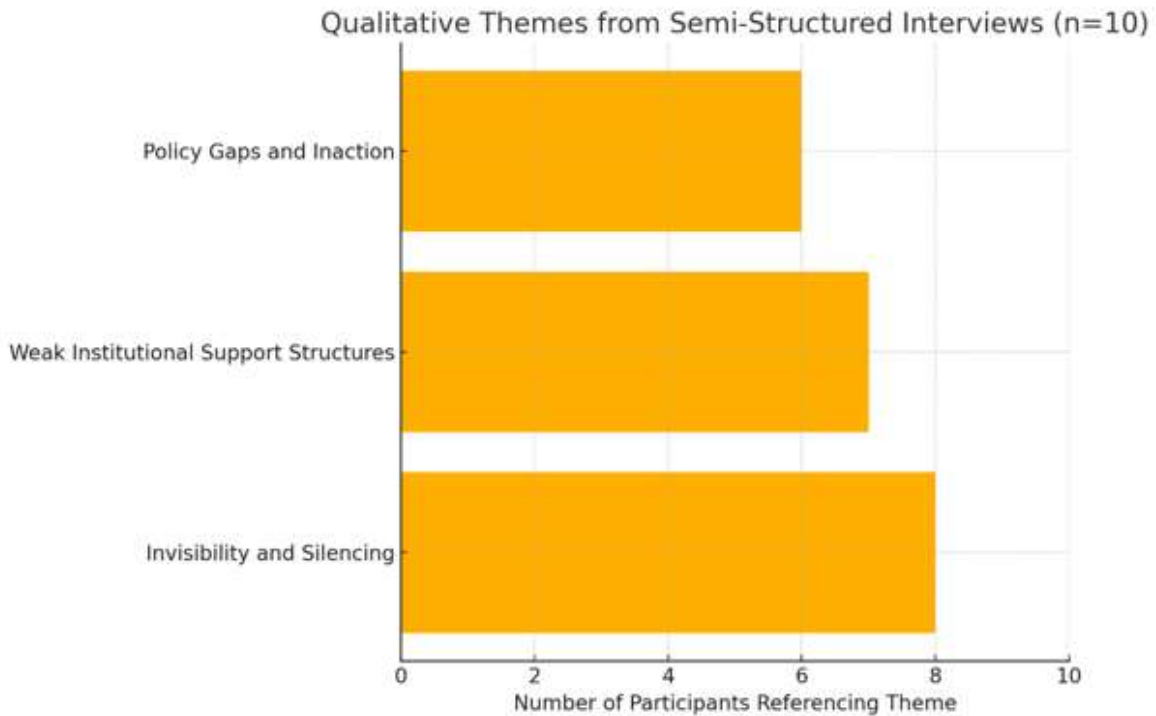


Figure 2: This horizontal bar chart presents the key qualitative themes identified from interviews with 10 LGBTQ+ students

Discussion

The results of this cross-sectional mixed-methods study, visually represented in the graphs, highlight significant disparities between institutional claims of inclusivity and the lived experiences of LGBTQ+ students in South African

universities. The quantitative findings indicate that 70% of participants felt their identities were ignored or inadequately acknowledged on campus (Graph 1). This aligns closely with the qualitative theme of "Invisibility and Silencing", which was mentioned by 8 out of 10 interview participants



(Graph 2). These parallel findings suggest a widespread lack of visibility and recognition for LGBTQ+ students within academic and social spaces, contributing to their sense of exclusion.

Moreover, the bar graph on institutional support shows that only 18% of participants had accessed any formal support structures. This low percentage corresponds with the qualitative theme "*Weak Institutional Support Structures*", which was raised by 7 participants. This convergence of data sources reflects a significant shortcoming in institutional responsiveness: while support mechanisms may exist in principle, their inaccessibility, whether due to inadequate resourcing, poor communication, or non-LGBTQ+-affirmative approaches, limits their effectiveness. It also suggests that institutional policies are failing to translate into practice in ways that tangibly benefit students in same-sex relationships.

Additionally, only 30% of survey respondents felt both visible and supported, underscoring a general lack of affirming environments. This is particularly concerning in light of the third qualitative theme, "*Policy Gaps and Inaction*", discussed by 6 of the interviewees. Students noted that although some universities had anti-discrimination or inclusivity policies, these were often poorly implemented or lacked monitoring and enforcement. This disconnect between policy and practice fosters a climate of distrust, wherein students perceive inclusivity efforts as symbolic rather than substantive. The statistical correlation between perceived institutional support and psychological well-being ($p < 0.05$) adds another critical layer to the discussion. It implies that when LGBTQ+ students do feel supported and visible, their mental health and academic engagement improve. This finding resonates with existing literature suggesting that inclusive learning environments enhance students' sense of belonging, motivation, and academic success (UNESCO, 2019; Anderson, 2012). Taken together, the graphs and themes demonstrate a consistent pattern: institutional invisibility, inadequate support, and policy failure. Despite legal protections for LGBTQ+ individuals in South Africa, universities are falling short in operationalizing these protections within their everyday practices. The converging quantitative and qualitative findings reveal not just a lack of infrastructure but a deeper cultural issue, one that requires systemic change, sensitization training, and the amplification of LGBTQ+ voices within policy-making and institutional life.

Generalisability

Due to the modest sample size and the specific institutional contexts from which participants were drawn, the generalisability of the findings is limited. The results are most applicable to urban, public universities with diverse student populations and established gender and sexuality policies. However, the recurring themes, such as institutional inaction, lack of visibility, and insufficient support structures, are consistent with findings in related South African and international studies. This suggests that the issues raised may resonate more broadly across higher education settings, especially in similarly postcolonial and post-apartheid societies navigating the complexities of policy implementation and cultural inclusion.

Conclusion

This study highlights the complex realities faced by LGBTQ+ students in South African universities, revealing both progress and persistent challenges in creating inclusive and supportive academic environments. While policies and student-led initiatives exist, they are often poorly communicated, inconsistently implemented, or inadequately resourced, leaving many students vulnerable to discrimination, invisibility, and psychological strain. The findings emphasize that institutional visibility, tailored support structures, and proactive enforcement of anti-discrimination policies are critical in improving the well-being and academic experiences of LGBTQ+ students. Peer networks and safe spaces emerged as valuable coping mechanisms, yet these cannot substitute for systematic and institutionalized change. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that universities have a responsibility not only to adopt inclusive policies but also to actively integrate them into curricula, staff training, and campus culture. Doing so will enhance student belonging, foster equity, and contribute to the broader goals of social justice and transformation in higher education.

Limitations

This study had several limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small ($n = 50$ for the quantitative phase and $n = 10$ for the qualitative phase), which may limit the statistical power and breadth of perspectives captured. While the study included students from three South African universities, the findings may not fully represent the experiences of LGBTQ+ students across all higher education institutions in the country, particularly in rural or historically conservative regions. Additionally, participation was self-selected, which



could introduce response bias, as those who chose to participate may have had more pronounced experiences, positive or negative, regarding visibility and institutional support. Finally, while the mixed-methods approach allowed for deeper insights, the study relied on self-reported data, which are subject to memory recall issues and social desirability bias.

Recommendations

The findings strongly indicate that South African universities need to transition from policy rhetoric to practice. Institutions should establish LGBTQ+-specific support centres staffed with trained professionals to provide counselling, advocacy, and academic guidance. Additionally, staff development programs on gender and sexual diversity should be institutionalized to foster a culture of awareness and inclusivity. Monitoring and evaluation systems should be implemented to ensure that existing anti-discrimination policies are not only adopted but also enacted at all levels of campus life. Furthermore, student-led LGBTQ+ associations should be supported and included in decision-making bodies to ensure that institutional responses are grounded in lived experience. Future research should explore intersectional issues, such as how race, class, and religion interact with sexual identity to affect visibility and access to support.

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.

Acknowledgements

I acknowledge the moral support and encouragement from the Deans and HOD of the Department of Nature Conservation, Faculty of Natural Science, Mangosuthu University of Technology.

Funding

This work was not supported by any grant. The author did not receive research support from any company. The authors declare that no funds, grants, or other support were received during the preparation of this manuscript.

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.

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.

References

1. Anderson, E., 2012. *Inclusive masculinity: The changing nature of masculinities*. Routledge.
2. Braun, V. and Clarke, V., 2006. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), pp.77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp0630a>
3. Manteaw, B.O., 2012. Education for sustainable development in Africa: The search for pedagogical logic. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 32(3), pp.376–383. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2011.08.005>
4. UNESCO, 2019. *Out in the open: Education sector responses to violence based on sexual orientation and gender identity/expression*. Paris: UNESCO.
5. Du Toit, P.H., Van den Berg, R. and Botha, M., 2020. Transforming Higher Education Institutions for the 21st Century: A South African Perspective. *Education as Change*, 24(1), pp.1–22.



Student's Journal of Health Research Africa
e-ISSN: 2709-9997, p-ISSN: 3006-1059
Vol.6 No. 9 (2025): September 2025 Issue
<https://doi.org/10.51168/sjhrafrica.v6i9.1977>
Original Article

PUBLISHER DETAILS:

Student's Journal of Health Research (SJHR)

(ISSN 2709-9997) Online

(ISSN 3006-1059) Print

Category: Non-Governmental & Non-profit Organization

Email: studentsjournal2020@gmail.com

WhatsApp: +256 775 434 261

Location: Scholar's Summit Nakigalala, P. O. Box 701432,
Entebbe Uganda, East Africa

