

**An exploration of sexually diverse students' experiences regarding their social acceptance at a South African University: A narrative approach.**

by

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10 March 2025

## Declaration

I, Kwezi Indiphile Jonga, know that plagiarism is using someone's work and presenting it as my own, which is a criminal offence.

I declare that this dissertation is my work and has not been submitted for any degree at any other institution or published before.

I declare that all sources used have been properly acknowledged.

I declare that this dissertation was done while registered for a Master of Arts in Research Psychology (Coursework) in the Department of Psychology at the University of Pretoria, Hatfield Campus.

K.I. Jonga.....

Signature

10 March 2025.....

Date

## **Ethics Statement**

I, Kwezi Indiphile Jonga, have obtained the applicable research ethics and approval for the research **“An exploration of sexually diverse students’ experiences regarding their social acceptance at a South African University: A narrative approach”** on (27 June 2024 HUM037/0923) from the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Pretoria.

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## Abstract

Regardless of constitutional protection in place for sexually diverse individuals in South Africa, societal attitudes and cultural norms continue to create challenges that prohibit full inclusion in higher education (Msibi, 2012). Universities are expected to create an inclusive environment for their students; however, individuals identifying as sexually diverse still face discrimination, exclusion and marginalisation on campus (Francis & Reygan, 2016a). Despite research conducted on the experiences of LGBTQI+ individuals in the higher education setting, limited research explores how sexually diverse students navigate social acceptance within heteronormative university spaces; hence this study explores the experiences of sexually diverse students regarding their social acceptance at a South African university.

The study employs a qualitative research method, using semi-structured interviews to collect narratives from sexually diverse students at a South African university. The study is influenced by social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1996). The study further uses narrative thematic analysis (Riessman, 2005), to explore the participants' experiences regarding their social acceptance in a university in South Africa.

The findings of the study show that some students identifying as sexually diverse experience support through LGBTQI+ networks and institutional policies, and some continue to experience peer-based discrimination, microaggression and exclusion in social and residential spaces. Coping mechanisms such as peer support and hiding their identities emerged as themes in navigating these challenges. These findings further indicate that institutional policies fail to address the lived experiences of sexually diverse students regarding their social acceptance (Sithole, 2015). Coping mechanisms such as peer support and having to hide their identities emerged as themes in navigating these challenges.

This study contributes to the understanding of how sexually diverse students experience social acceptance in higher education, further showing institutional efforts in ensuring the inclusion of individuals identifying as sexually diverse and the challenges they continue to face. The findings have recommendations for improving campus inclusivity and informing policies that address the needs of sexually diverse students.

Keywords: Social acceptance; Sexual Diversity; Heteronormativity; Discrimination; minority Stress; Inclusivity.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

### 1.1 Introduction and Background to the Study

Sexual diversity, which the Psychological Society of South Africa (2017) defines as various sexual orientations or identities that are different from the traditional heterosexual norm, remains a contested subject within South African societies, regardless of the country's legal framework that protects the rights of sexually diverse individuals (van Vollenhoven & Els, 2013). According to Nduna et al. (2017) the experiences of sexually diverse students in higher education show the broader societal tensions between constitutional inclusivity and social stigma. Universities, as microcosms of society, are expected to be spaces of inclusivity and acceptance; however, students identifying as sexually diverse still encounter discrimination, exclusion and marginalisation based on their sexuality (Banda Chitsamatanga, 2023).

While South Africa's constitution and legal policies, such as the Promotion of equality and prevention of unfair discrimination Act of 2000, protect against discrimination, the reality of individuals identifying as sexually diverse reveals a gap between provisions and lived experiences (Kok et al., 2020). A study by Kim (2024) and Westwood (2022) asserts that cultural norms, religious beliefs, and historical influences continue to shape attitudes toward sexual diversity, leading to different levels of acceptance and resistance within society. Understanding the perspectives of sexually diverse students then becomes important in assessing whether the university in South Africa is fulfilling its role in creating inclusivity and whether its policies are effective in supporting these students.

Research conducted in South Africa indicates that regardless of constitutional protections, societal attitudes and norms continue to marginalise lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and intersex (Ferreira & Salvador, 2015), as some South Africans are guided and influenced by heteronormative frameworks, which may result in social exclusion and discrimination against non-heteronormative identities and same-sex relationships. Ferguson (2020) defines the diversity within the sexuality spectrum based on each category which encompasses lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender, queer and intersex [LBGTQI+] individuals.

Due to the normalisation of heteronormative norms, homosexuality is still discriminated against. Even though the South African constitution protects people from discrimination based on gender, sex and race, a gap persists between the legal framework and the lived realities of sexually diverse individuals (Thani, 2016). This gap between the legal framework and lived realities as stated by Thani (2016) is perceived in different social institutions, such as education,

healthcare, and the workplace, where LGBTQI+ individuals continue to face discrimination and exclusion (De Abreu et al., 2024). For instance, schools fail to provide inclusive education on gender and sexuality, and healthcare professionals may display biases towards LGBTQI+ individuals seeking medical care. Furthermore, stigma manifests in the form of microaggression, family rejection, and even violence, which further alienate sexually diverse individuals from social acceptance (Frost, 2011).

Despite the implementation of policies in place to protect and safeguard fundamental rights, institutions remain a hostile environment for LGBTQI+ students (Base, 2022). A study conducted by Jagessar and Msibi (2015) demonstrates how LGBTQI+ students experience marginalisation and discrimination in higher education environments. People's attitudes influence their behaviour, and LGBTQI+ students at universities are especially at risk of discrimination, as LGBTQI+ students attending university experience the university environment as homophobic and hostile, further hiding their sexual identities and fearing discrimination and victimisation (Base, 2022; October, 2006).

Exploring the narratives of sexually diverse students at a university in South Africa provides insight into the experiences of sexually diverse students and assists in moving toward a climate free of heteronormativity and homophobic discrimination. Moreover, this study helps in raising awareness about victimisation experienced by LGBTQI+ individuals and guides awareness campaigns to support LGBTQI+ students. With little information on how the University in South Africa students identifying as LGBTQI+ experience a heteronormative campus environment, it is anticipated that this study shows the gap by exploring sexually diverse student's experiences in public spaces (e.g. residences) in a university in South Africa as discrimination against sexually diverse students in South Africa remains high, more especially within institutions of higher learning (Francis, 2017; Francis & Reygan, 2016; Reygan & Steyn, 2017).

According to Abaver and Cishe (2018), like many other nations, South Africa still struggles with cultural norms and societal attitudes established that stigmatise and exclude sexually diverse individuals. This further leads to widespread homophobia, transphobia, and heteronormative belief, resulting in prejudice and discrimination against LGBTQI+ students (Russell et al., 2021). According to Haas et al. (2010) prejudice and discrimination against sexually diverse individuals have contributed to suicidal ideation among sexually diverse individuals, a study conducted by Barboza et al. (2016) stated that suicide overly affects individuals with gender identities that are considered non-traditional.

In South African universities, LGBTQI+ students report negative experiences of both overt and subtle discrimination (Francis, 2017; Sithole, 2015). This is demonstrated by the intersectional challenges faced by many students, where race, class and geographical factors play a part in how individuals navigate their sexual identities on campus (Cerezo et al., 2020). Harris et al. (2022) further state that lack of support and initiatives such as inclusive curriculum, safe space, and peer networks isolate sexually diverse students.

The experiences further influence students' sense of identity and mental health, Virupaksha et al. (2016) argued that suicide rates and tendencies among sexually diverse individuals range from 32% to 50% with 40 to 50 persons committing suicide every year due to gender-based victimisation, discrimination and being rejected by family, friends, and community. Discrimination, social exclusion and rejection by peers and family, according to Wilson and Cariola (2020) increases the mental health risk faced by LGBTQI+ students. A study by Moagi et al. (2021) has shown that individuals identifying as LGBTQI+ in South Africa experience higher rates of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation compared to their heterosexual peers.

Considering the rates of victimisation and limited attention given to these issues in the context of higher education, this study fills that gap by investigating how sexually diverse students experience social acceptance in public spaces, at a South African university.

Even though some universities have made efforts to create LGBTQI+ support networks, communal safe spaces and inclusive policies, there has been a gap between these initiatives and the lived realities of students. This research, therefore, seeks to understand the experiences of sexually diverse students at a university in South Africa, further raising awareness of the persistent stigma and victimisation that LGBTQI+ students face with the existence of policies and initiatives.

## **1.2 Research Problem and Rationale**

South African educational institutions are often perceived as lagging and falling short in fully acknowledging and valuing sexual diversity (Msibi & Jagessar, 2015; Reygan & Steyn, 2017). Regardless of the constitutional and policies, same-sex relationships in South African institutions remain perceived as unacceptable, with sexually diverse students facing marginalisation, limited support, and discrimination (Butler, 2022; Francis, 2017; Msibi, 2009). A study conducted by Kheswa (2016) illustrated reports of discrimination towards students identifying as LGBTQI+ in South African Universities. In addition, Base (2022) stated that how people behave is influenced by their attitudes and their environment, creating a hostile environment for LGBTQI+ students in the university environment.

With homophobic attacks being a widespread issue globally and in South Africa, this further becomes a problem (Nicol, 2018), for instance, same-sex relationships are widely condemned in various African nations like Namibia, Zimbabwe, Zambia, and Somalia. Despite the existence of legislation and policies to protect human rights from homophobic attacks against individuals identifying as LGBTQI+, students, however, continue to be confronted with violent homophobic attacks and discrimination in institutions of higher learning (Mavhandu-Mudzusi & Ganga-Limando, 2014). A study conducted by Mwaba (2009) illustrated that 44% of university students believed that students identified under the LGBTQI+ community are not socially accepted in South Africa, a perception shaped due to their sexuality being considered unacceptable, which is influenced by sexual prejudice within certain religious organisations.

Recently, legislative efforts have been made to protect sexually diverse students against discrimination in higher education institutions (Ramos et al., 2022). However, despite these actions, challenges continue, as shown by recent legal cases showing discrimination against LGBTQ+ students (Sumbane & Makua, 2023). For example, an incident at the University of the Witwatersrand reported by Mahlangu (2018) whereby a wall painted in colours representing the LGBTQ+ community was defaced with hateful phrases, including slurs and derogatory language, this act occurred before Wits Pride activities scheduled for the end of August, serving as a distressing reminder of the discrimination and hostility faced by LGBTQ+ individuals within university settings.

Even though similar issues are studied globally, illustrating the challenges faced by sexually diverse students in university spaces, there is limited research conducted on how sexually diverse students navigate these challenges. A study by Kidd (2024) at the University of Idaho, reveals a case where students claim discrimination based on both race and LGBTQ identity, perpetrated by professors and other students within the university's College of Law, moreover, the administration did not adequately address the conduct through investigating these allegations inflicted upon the victimised students, this further shows a systemic problem in addressing discrimination and creating inclusivity within the University of Idaho

Similarly, Laviertes (2023) reports a case where a federal judge dismissed a lawsuit filed by LGBTQ+ students against the Department of Education, revealing challenges faced by sexually diverse individuals at Baylor University in Waco, Texas. These cases show a pattern of exclusion faced by sexually diverse students in the higher education system.

Victimisation of students identifying as lesbians, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer has become visible in the university environment, which includes, lecture halls, and university residences. Studies conducted by Msibi (2009), Francis (2017) and Kheswa (2016) have

explored the discrimination and hostility faced by sexually diverse students in South African Universities, focusing on institutional exclusion and negative social attitudes. Very little is known about how sexually diverse students navigate these challenges within a heteronormative university environment concerning their social acceptance in academic spaces (Francis, 2017).

Therefore, this study seeks to address this gap by exploring the lived experiences of sexually diverse students in a South African university, focusing on their social acceptance within academic settings. By examining these experiences, the study contributes to the understanding of the social challenges faced by sexually diverse students.

### **1.3 Research question**

How do sexually diverse students experience social acceptance at a South African university?

### **1.4 Aim and Objectives**

The study aims to explore the narratives of sexually diverse students' experiences regarding their social acceptance at a university in South Africa.

- To explore challenges faced by sexually diverse students in accessing social networks that contribute to their acceptance and inclusion on campus.
- To explore how sexually diverse students cope with heteronormative discourse and practices in the university space.
- To explore how the sense of belonging and feelings of alienation among sexually diverse students impact their psychological well-being.
- To explore and understand how sexually diverse students utilise their agency to resist heteronormativity within educational settings.

### **1.5 Definition of keyword**

#### **1.5.1 Lesbian**

A sexual orientation whereby women and non-binary people experience romantic and sexual attraction to other women (American Psychological Association, 2008).

#### **1.5.2 Gay**

According to Herek (2009) an individual identifying as gay is a person experiencing attraction to individuals of the same gender, emotionally, romantically or sexually.

#### **1.5.3 Bisexual**

A person who experiences romantic and/or sexual attraction to more than one gender, that is, they experience attraction to some men and women (Barker & Langdrige, 2008).

### **1.5.4 Transgender**

A gender description for someone whose gender identity differs from the sex they were assigned at birth. Anyone whose sex assigned at birth and gender identity do not correspond in the expected way, for instance, someone who was assigned male at birth, does not identify as a man (American Psychological Association., 2011).

### **1.5.5 Queer**

An individual whose sexual orientation or gender identity falls outside the heterosexual mainstream or the gender binary (LGBTQIA Resource Centre glossary, 2024).

### **1.5.6 Sexuality**

Sexuality is about your sexual feelings, thoughts, attractions, and behaviours towards other people (University of Pretoria, 2023).

## **1.6 Conclusion**

This chapter introduces the research topic and the background of the study. The research problem points out the gap between the South African legal framework and the lived experiences of sexually diverse students in higher education. Regardless of existing policies against discrimination, these students continue to face discrimination, marginalisation, and exclusion within university spaces.

Chapter 2 describes the literature that guides the researcher in conceptualising the need to conduct the study. The literature review covers the social and structural barriers faced by sexually diverse students in higher education concerning their social acceptance.

## **1.7 Chapter Outline**

This dissertation is divided into six chapters. Chapter 1 covers the introduction and the context of the study. It also outlines the research problem and the aim and objectives of the study.

Chapter 2 explores the literature on the experiences of sexually diverse students regarding their social acceptance in the university environment. The literature was collected from global, national, and local studies.

Chapter 3 explores in detail the theoretical framework chosen for the study, namely the Minority stress theory and the reason for this type of framework and the social constructionism as a research paradigm underpinning this study.

The fourth chapter accounts for the methodology utilised, including the research approach, research design, sampling procedure, data collection and management, trustworthiness, anticipated risks, and reflexivity and concludes with ethical considerations.

The fifth chapter presents the key findings, supported by data and participant narratives. It further links the findings to existing literature and theoretical perspectives.

Chapter 6 summarises the study's conclusion, providing further recommendations for future research based on the findings and noting the study's limitations.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

The preceding chapter deals with the introduction to the study, providing the purpose and focus of the study. This chapter presents a review of the literature about the experiences of sexually diverse students regarding their social acceptance in university spaces. A literature review according to Paré and Kitsiou (2017) provides a comprehensive understanding of the existing knowledge on the phenomenon under investigation. This chapter then provides an overview of research conducted on the phenomenon of interest, through this, this chapter reviews debates and discussions in line with the experiences of sexually diverse individuals in the university context.

Research conducted on students identifying as sexually diverse according to Moagi et al. (2021) focused on the negative experiences, such as discrimination, mental health and barriers in institutions of higher learning. Though these experiences are important, focusing only on the negative experiences can create a victim narrative, which overlooks the resilience and achievements of sexually diverse individuals (Rothmann, 2018). Through this literature, a balanced approach was adopted to provide an understanding of the experiences of sexually diverse individuals in university spaces.

By the researcher reviewing research conducted on the experiences of sexually diverse individuals, this assists in creating an understanding of those experiences, further illustrating the importance of inclusivity of diverse sexual identities in the university space.

### 2.1 Context of LGBTQI+ students in higher education

The historical context of LGBTQI+ students according to Glazzard et al. (2020) in higher education is complicated and marked by significant societal changes. With LGBTQI+ individuals facing systemic discrimination, marginalisation, and prejudice within educational institutions (International labour organisation, 2022). This prejudice significantly impacts their well-being, as indicated by a study conducted by Neves and Stephenson (2023), which revealed that LGBTQ+ identifying students are more prone to developing depression and anxiety.

Moreover, the challenges faced by LGBTQI+ students extend beyond mental health concerns, as emphasised by Wilson and Cariola (2020), they create a hostile learning environment, hindering their academic progress and educational experience. This experience impacts their participation in classroom discussions, extracurricular activities, and access to educational resources (Leath et al., 2019).

The rise in homophobic attacks in communities is reflected in university spaces, perpetuating an unsafe atmosphere for LGBTQI+ students, and further affecting their well-being (Higa et al., 2014). Health disparities among the LGBTQI+ population, particularly in mental health, are evident, with discrimination, stigma, harassment, and abuse contributing to their struggles (Bostwick et al., 2014; Meyer, 2003; Russell & Fish, 2016).

Research findings suggest that though university spaces, including residences, are considered a home away from home, they are considered unsafe by LGBTQI+ students, further having an impact on their wellbeing (Higa et al., 2014). Russell and Fish (2016) pointed out health disparities among the LGBTQI+ population, particularly mental health. The LGBTQI+ population reports more significant mental health difficulties in comparison to their heterosexual peers (Moagi, Der Wath, et al., 2021). This is due to discrimination, stigma, harassment, and emotional and physical abuse (Meyer, 2003). A study by Bostwick et al. (2014) found that lesbian, gay and bisexual persons were one and a half to two times as likely to report mood and anxiety disorders.

Despite global progress in acceptance, studies suggest that attitudes toward LGBTQI+ individuals vary based on context (Boryczka, 2020). In the early 2000s, some progress was made with the implementation of anti-discrimination policies and the recognition of LGBTQI+ student organisations in higher education institutions (Thoreson, 2016). However, it was not until 2010 that significant steps were made, which depicted a growing societal acceptance of diverse sexual orientations and gender identities (Nishin, 2015). For instance, a study conducted by Camilleri and Ryan (2006) found that social work students in Australia demonstrated a positive attitude towards individuals identifying as sexually diverse. Despite these progressive movements, challenges such as bullying, discrimination, and mental health disparities persist towards LGBTQI+ students in higher education (Earnshaw et al., 2016).

A study by Gelbal and Duyan (2006) identified negative attitudes among Turkish university students towards lesbian and gay individuals. Similarly, Arndt (2004) observed prevalent negative attitudes, primarily among male students in South Africa, further highlighting the varying degrees of acceptance and understanding within different cultural and societal contexts. For instance, a study by Jagessar and Msibi (2015) demonstrated a case at one of the universities in South Africa in 2012, where there was a homophobic attack where a student was beaten in front of security staff by fellow students in the residence.

Another case was at the University of Zululand, where gay students were escorted out of their residences by a group of heterosexual males (Msibi, 2009). However, many higher education institutions have proactively created inclusive environments for LGBTQI+ students

(Raja et al., 2023). These efforts include establishing LGBTQI+ resource centres, introducing gender-neutral housing options, and incorporating LGBTQI+ programs within university spaces (McBrien et al., 2022a).

While the challenges faced by sexually diverse students in higher education are significant, McBrien (2022) asserts that LGBTQI+ students facing discrimination and marginalisation may not apply across all higher education institutions. According to Leung et al. (2022) the representation of university environments as unsafe for sexually diverse students overlooks the positive experiences and success stories within these spaces. Individuals identifying as sexually diverse according to Ceatha et al. (2021) report feeling accepted and valued in their academic communities, participating actively in classroom discussions, extracurricular activities, and campus life. A study by Chan et al. (2022) has shown that inclusive policies and supportive peers contribute significantly to the well-being and academic success of LGBTQI+ students.

Graham (2020) further states that the focus on negative experiences and health disparities among LGBTQI+ students can perpetuate a victimhood narrative, shadowing their resilience, achievements, and contributions; as emphasising challenges more as compared to highlighting successes, there is a risk of reinforcing stereotypes and neglecting the agency of LGBTQI+ individuals. The Committee on Understanding the Well-Being of Sexual and Gender Diverse Populations et al. (2020) exerts that celebrating the accomplishments of LGBTQI+ students, recognising their resilience, and showcasing their positive impact within academic and social contexts can inspire a more empowering narrative, further declining the fear and feeling of exclusion in the university space.

## **2.2 International Perspectives on LGBTQI+ Students in Higher Education**

Higher education is becoming internationally connected, and education researchers are seeking ways to create a more inclusive environment for a diverse and mobile student body (Campbell et al., 2024). Research according to Oba and Pope (2013) shows that LGBTQ + students have been under-supported. Recent attacks on LGBTQ + rights across the world have further threatened the social, political, and academic well-being of these already vulnerable students (Higa et al., 2014).

As a response to the experiences of sexually diverse students, higher education researchers are increasingly paying attention to LGBTQIA + issues, including the complex and intersectional identities of university students, and how campus programs include or exclude LGBTQIA + students (Lee, 2023). The research conducted differs, as the experiences of LGBTQI+ students in higher education vary significantly due to differing cultural, social, and

legal landscapes (McBrien et al., 2022a), for instance, in Western countries, such as Canada, the Netherlands and Sweden, steps toward acceptance and inclusion, have resulted in policies and support systems designed to protect and empower LGBTQI+ students. In the United States, many universities have implemented anti-discrimination policies, established LGBTQI+ resource centres, and offer counselling services tailored to the unique challenges faced by these students (Raja et al., 2023).

Countries in some parts of Europe demonstrate mixed feelings towards individuals identifying as sexually diverse, with countries such as the Netherlands and Sweden that are regarded as leaders in LGBTQI+ rights and inclusion, students benefit from anti-discrimination laws, support networks, and vibrant LGBTQI+ student organisations (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2014), however, in countries such as Poland and Hungary, there is an increase in discrimination and political rhetoric against LGBTQI+ communities.

LGBTQI+ students in some other regions face considerable challenges. In many parts of Asia, Africa, and the Middle East, societal norms and legal frameworks can be less supportive or even hostile, for instance, in countries like Uganda, where the president has signed one of the world's harshest anti-LGBTQ laws, including the death penalty for aggravated homosexuality (Bhandari, 2023), Somalia has a penal code that mandates a prison sentence of up to 3 years. In such countries where homosexuality is criminalised or stigmatised, LGBTQI+ students often navigate their educational journeys in secrecy, fearing repercussions if their identities are revealed (Sumbane & Makua, 2023), in certain Middle Eastern countries, strict social and legal prohibitions against LGBTQI+ identities can result in severe personal and academic consequences if a student's sexual orientation or gender identity becomes known.

Despite these challenges, there is progress and resilience across the African continent, for instance, South Africa has a progressive constitution, which prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation, further providing a legal framework that supports the rights of LGBTQI+ individuals (*Queer Lawfare in Africa*, 2022). South African universities have been at the forefront of promoting LGBTQI+ inclusion, with many institutions implementing anti-discrimination policies, establishing LGBTQI+ support centres, and fostering inclusive campus environments. For example, the University of Cape Town and the University of the Witwatersrand are known for their active LGBTQI+ student organisations and inclusive policies.

However, though South Africa is implementing strategies for full acceptance, inclusion and anti-discriminatory policies, social attitudes remain rooted in traditional beliefs regarding gender and sexuality, and incidents of discrimination and violence against LGBTQI+

individuals are not uncommon, for instance, an article by the University of Stellenbosch spoke of discriminatory behaviour by faculty and staff, whereby an openly gay student described being consistently mis gendered by a professor despite repeated corrections (Stellenbosch University, 2022).

South Africa, with its progress towards inclusivity, is still influenced by conservative backgrounds where traditional views on gender and sexuality are still dominant (Jones, 2019), for instance, a student from the rural Eastern Cape attending the University of Pretoria described being disowned by their family after coming out. The lack of family support can lead to financial instability and emotional distress, further complicating the student's academic journey. Other cases involve LGBTQI+ students who often face bullying from peers who hold traditional views (Abreu & Kenny, 2018), for instance, at Rhodes University, students have reported being disliked by classmates and subjected to cyberbullying on social media platforms.

### **2.3 Gender and Education**

Exploring gender in an educational setting is crucial according to Durrani and Halai (2018) as it assists in examining the evolving dynamics and impacts of societal norms, institutional practices, and educational policies on individual experiences within educational settings. Gender, as a social construct, influences various aspects of education, including access to educational opportunities, academic performance, career aspirations, and social interactions (Akinlolu, 2022). Within the context of sexually diverse students at a university, understanding how gender identities interconnect with educational experiences sheds light on the challenges and barriers faced by individuals navigating diverse gender expressions and sexual orientations within academic spaces.

Gender and education, according to Bailey and Graves (2016) overlap in shaping the experiences of sexually diverse students within academic institutions. Historically, as stipulated by Morgenroth and Ryan (2021) educational systems have been constructed around binary notions of gender, which perpetuates stereotypes and marginalisation of individuals whose gender identities fall outside traditional norms.

These traditional norms constructed around binary notions of gender according to Abaver and Cishe (2018) lead to sexually diverse students often facing discrimination, harassment, and exclusion, creating barriers to their social acceptance and academic success. For instance, transgender and non-binary students may encounter challenges accessing gender-separated facilities, such as residences and bathrooms, which can lead to feelings of alienation and

stigmatisation. Furthermore, curriculum content and teaching methods may further reinforce heteronormative narratives, erasing the experiences and contributions of LGBTQ+ individuals and hindering the development of inclusive learning environments (Francis & Kuhl, 2022).

Veenstra (2011) further adds that gender-based discrimination within educational institutions can be displayed in interpersonal interactions and social dynamics, further complicating the experiences of sexually diverse students, for instance, peer networks and social circles play a significant role in shaping sexually diverse students' sense of belonging and acceptance within the university community.

These rooted traditional gender norms and stereotypes according to Kuhlemeier et al. (2021) can create hostile environments for LGBTQ+ students, where bullying, harassment, and microaggressions are prevalent. To which, navigating these social dynamics for sexually diverse individuals in university spaces can be challenging, as they may fear rejection based on their sexual orientation or gender identity (Glazzard et al., 2020).

Moreover, according to Vargas et al. (2022) the lack of representation and visibility of LGBTQ+ individuals in campus social spaces and extracurricular activities can further perpetuate feelings of isolation and exclusion. This makes creating inclusive and supportive social networks on campus important for enhancing the social acceptance and well-being of sexually diverse students within the university setting (Juvonen et al., 2019).

While the exploration of gender in an educational setting is important, Ferfolja and Ullman (2020) argue that too much focus on gender issues within educational settings, specifically in the context of sexually diverse students, changes the primary mission of universities, such as knowledge production, research and student academic development.

In line with Ferfolja and Ullman's argument, David (2014) adds that universities should prioritise academic excellence and scholarly pursuits over social advocacy and identity politics. In summary of both arguments by Ferfolja, Ullman and David, Condrón et al. (2023) asserted that the efforts to address gender differences and promote social acceptance among sexually diverse students may be seen as distracting from core educational objectives and potentially diluting the quality of academic discourse.

Moreover, Andrews (2020) argues that the discussions of gender and sexuality in education risk the politicisation of the learning environment and imposing specific ideological perspectives on students, further adding that academic institutions should remain a neutral platform for intellectual inquiry and debate, rather than promoting particular social agendas or value systems. In line with Andrew's viewpoint, Wood (2023) speaks of introducing discussions on gender and sexuality into the curriculum, as this might lead educators to

unconsciously indoctrinate students with biased viewpoints, limiting their exposure to diverse perspectives and hindering their critical thinking skills.

For Masferrer (2023) such an introduction can infringe on freedom of speech and expression, in a sense that it could limit individuals' freedom to hold and express their own beliefs and opinions, even if they contradict the main norms or challenge the mainstream ideologies. To which, according to Kayyali (2022) programs to promote social acceptance may be perceived as imposing conformity, thus undermining the principles of academic freedom and intellectual diversity within educational institutions.

However, considering the South African context, where sexually diverse individuals continue to face discrimination, harassment and violence, not considering the systematic inequalities in universities does not create a safe and inclusive space but instead reinforces the existing heteronormativity ideology (Bermúdez Figueroa et al., 2023). Universities should create an environment where all students, regardless of their gender identity, feel safe and included. A research study conducted by Bhana (2012) and Msibi (2012) regarding addressing gender and sexuality in university spaces shows that gender and sexuality in universities is not about adopting a single ideology, but ensuring that marginalised groups are included and safe.

Universities, according to Banda Chitsamatanga (2023) cannot be neutral regarding the issue of gender and sexuality, as it has an impact on students identifying as sexually diverse. Neutrality benefits dominant groups, which leaves the marginalised communities, in this context, sexually diverse communities, vulnerable to being discriminated against (Gómez et al., 2021). In the South African context, according to Mdokwana (2024) homophobic violence and exclusion remain prevalent, institutions have a responsibility to create an inclusive learning environment. The creation of inclusive spaces would not mean politicisation of the learning environment and imposing specific ideological perspectives on students as asserted by Andrews (2020), but ensuring that all students, regardless of their gender and sexual identity, participate in and are included in academic activities without fear of discrimination.

#### **2.4 Institutional practices affecting sexually diverse students.**

The landscape of higher education has undergone significant transformations, yet the experiences of sexually diverse students within institutional settings remain a vital and evolving topic of concern (Nduna et al., 2017). From admission processes to campus resources, inclusivity, and the overall campus climate, these practices significantly influence the well-being of sexually diverse students (Garvey et al., 2017). Having an understanding of these institutional practices according to Juvonen et al. (2019) is important not only for promoting

inclusivity and diversity but also for creating an educational environment where all students can excel, regardless of their sexuality and gender identity.

However, certain institutional practices exclude sexually diverse, further creating environments that are unwelcoming and unsafe (Pryor, 2018). One of the practices as stipulated by Francis et al. (2022) lies in the lack of gender-inclusive facilities, such as restrooms and housing options, making it difficult for sexually diverse students to navigate campus life comfortably, further creating a hostile environment, and hindering the social and academic participation of sexually diverse students. Snapp et al. (2015) further added that sexually diverse students experience worse outcomes in mental and physical health. Moreover, the exclusionary institutional practices not only create unwelcoming environments for sexually diverse students but also expose them to heightened risks of violence and discrimination (Kosciw et al., 2020), as sexually diverse students experience physical abuse, verbal harassment, exclusion, and other forms of victimisation.

A study conducted in the United States illustrated high rates of sexual assaults among students in institutions of higher learning (Paul et al., 2013). For instance, the prevalence of assaults on women ranged from 0.5% to 8.4% on threats of physical force (Fedina et al., 2018). While Fedina et al. (2018) indicated cases of assaults towards women, according to Cantor et al. (2019) more than 40% of transgender, queer, and gender non-conforming students reported assaults. In addition, from a theoretical point of view, minority stress theory suggests that LGBTQI+-identifying individuals experience an increased rate of psychological distress due to heterosexism (Abaver & Cishe, 2018; Woodford et al., 2018). To which heterosexism is manifested at a structural level (Woodford et al., 2018), in the sense that societal structure and institutions maintain and reinforce heterosexual privilege, further marginalising individuals identifying as LGBTQI+, further having mental and physical health consequences (Puckett et al., 2018).

Conversely, Sanger (2020) pointed out that various institutions of higher education have inclusionary initiatives that create an atmosphere of acceptance, respect, and safety for sexually diverse students. One of the fundamental inclusionary practices involves implementing comprehensive anti-discrimination policies that protect sexually diverse individuals, leading to a more tolerant and understanding campus culture (Russell et al., 2021). Kilgo (2019) further stated that institutions of higher education offering gender-inclusive facilities, such as restrooms and housing options, portray a step towards creating a more supportive environment, enabling sexually diverse students to navigate campus life comfortably.

For instance, the University of Cape Town implemented an inclusivity policy for sexual orientation in December 2017, for “ensuring that the institution reflects the principles enshrined in The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa of 1996, specifically section 9 of the Bill of Rights, which states that “everyone [as] equal before the law” and prohibits “unfair” discrimination based on their sex, gender and sexual orientation” (UCT Inclusivity Policy for Sexual Orientation, 2017, p.2) this policy further ensures that student committees and societies ensure that student-to-student engagement, within these societies or committees, is inclusive of sexual diversity. The university in South Africa implemented the Trans Protocol, to strengthen and support the Anti-Discrimination policy, to remove discrimination against sexually diverse individuals and towards building a positive and affirming environment (Centre for Human Rights, 2021).

UNESCO (2017) added that having inclusive student organisations and clubs provides a platform for support and community building, which creates a sense of belonging among sexually diverse students. These, according to Katz et al. (2016) have proven to have positive social well-being and health outcomes. This is visible in some of the institutions in South Africa, such as the University of Pretoria, with the Tuks UP&Out organisation dedicated to creating a free, equal, and equitable environment for sexually diverse individuals within the University of Pretoria, it further creates spaces in which queer people feel safe and have a means to meet and socialise with other queer people (Tuks UP & OUT, 2023).

Regardless of the claim by Katz et al. (2016) of sexually diverse student programs having been proven to have positive social well-being and health outcomes, further assisting in the reduction of violence and discrimination towards sexually diverse communities on campus (Cruz, 2015). Bhattar (2019) and Duran (2021) stated that although these inclusive spaces for sexually diverse students, such as queer lounges, clubs, pride, and ally organisations within the university are important, there is some form of exclusion among the sexually diverse such as students from diverse ethnic backgrounds as they have reported instances of feeling excluded.

Makhowane (2021) further added, despite policies and programs in place serving the purpose of safeguarding sexually diverse student from being discriminated in university spaces with them also having a shared experience of facing societal prejudice, some individuals within these communities may discriminate against each other based on differences in sexual orientation, gender identity, race, ethnicity, or other factors. According to Tatum (2000) such a phenomenon indicates the complexity of identity, further creating the need for awareness within the LGBTQI+ community.

## 2.5 Campus climate and its impact on the experiences of sexually diverse students

Rankin (2005, p. 17-24) defined campus climate as “the attitude, behaviours and standards of students concerning the inclusion of, and level of respect for individuals and group needs, abilities and potential”. Rankin (2005) further stated that campus climate impacts academic development. For Brown (2016) campus climate is a lens on the sexually diverse students’ experiences in institutions of higher learning, it has been formulated by their perception of discrimination, harassment, and attitudes from heterosexual individuals on campus towards the LGBTQI+ community. For instance, a study conducted by Russell et al. (2021) found that with the campus environment regarded as inclusive, LGBTQI+ students experienced the environment as hostile, as several incidents on campus include some form of homophobic attacks on LGBTQI+ students.

Various campus climate studies conducted in the United States of America suggested that LGBTQI+ students remain at risk for harassment and discrimination in higher education institutions (Blumenfeld et al., 2016), despite the global push for diversity and equality (Evangelista et al., 2022). While there is a growing body of research internationally on students identifying as LGBTQI+ experiences in higher education, the challenges faced by LGBTQI+ individuals in South African higher education institutions have received less attention (Tanga et al., 2019).

This gap, according to Ng (2016) limits the understanding of the unique experiences, needs and barriers faced by LGBTQ students, particularly when considering the concept of intersectionality. Bochatay et al. (2022) referred to intersectionality as the recognition that individuals possess multiple social identities and that these identities intersect and interact to shape experiences and perspectives. Intersectionality adds another layer of complexity to the experiences of LGBTQI+ students, as their sexual orientation or gender identity intersects with other aspects of their social location, such as race, class, ethnicity, religion, and ability (Laker & Davis, 2011). This study considered intersectionality to explore the experiences of LGBTQI+ students in South African higher education institutions and identify the specific challenges they face within the broader context of their intersecting identities.

While Brown (2016) speaks of campus climate as a lens on sexually diverse student’s experiences in institutions of higher learning being formulated by their perception of discrimination, harassment, and attitudes from heterosexual individuals on campus, McBrien et al. (2022) speaks on policies, e.g. the University of Pretoria’s Anti-Discrimination Policy (2019) and initiatives such as anti-discrimination measures, and inclusive housing options aim to create a supportive campus climate. Manaze and Ford (2021) further emphasised that

campus climate encompasses the attitudes and behaviours towards inclusivity, and various universities have shown commitment to these principles.

In the context of South African higher education, Maake (2024) highlighted the persistent influence of heteronormativity and the marginalisation of LGBTQI+ identities within university settings, as the challenges faced by LGBTQI+ students in South African schools according to Francis (2017) are categorised by fear of victimisation and a lack of supportive policies, which later contribute to a hostile environment. Furthermore, a survey conducted by the Youth Risk Behaviour Surveillance System emphasised the need for sexual orientation and gender identity training programs for faculty and staff to enhance the inclusivity and safety of LGBTQI+ students (Day et al., 2019). Russell et al. (2021) argued that the presence of LGBTQI+ student organisations and support systems in some universities has led to significant improvements in campus climate, suggesting that the situation is more nuanced and varies across institutions.

### **2.7 Barriers to full participation for LGBTQI+ students**

Despite progress in promoting inclusivity, LGBTQI+ students still face significant barriers that hinder their full participation in academic environments (Leung et al., 2022). These barriers, according to Maloy et al. (2022) are complex and influenced by societal, institutional, and interpersonal factors contributing to a hostile or unwelcoming atmosphere. McBrien et al. (2022) further asserts that comprehending these barriers is important for developing effective strategies to support LGBTQI+ students and ensure equitable educational opportunities.

One significant barrier is the prevalence of discrimination and harassment (Abaver & Cishe, 2018). According to Vega et al. (2012) sexually diverse students often encounter derogatory remarks, bullying, and even physical violence from peers, which can create a hostile learning environment, for instance, a homophobic attack towards Mpho Falithenjwa who died by suicide after he was bullied for being gay (Itai, 2022). Such experiences, according to Mofatteh et al. (2021) can lead to increased levels of anxiety, depression, and a sense of isolation, negatively affecting their academic performance and overall well-being. Hence, Hall (2017) speaks of schools and universities implementing strict anti-discrimination policies and providing comprehensive training to staff and students to address these issues.

Cerezo and Bergfeld (2013) further point out the lack of representation and visibility of LGBTQI+ individuals within the curriculum and school leadership. In the case where LGBTQI+ students do not see themselves reflected in the educational material or positions of authority, it can contribute to a feeling of invisibility and marginalisation (Gray, 2013). By

inclusive curriculum, Butler (2022) speaks of LGBTQI+ histories, contributions, and perspectives, along with diverse role models in school leadership, to which this can help mitigate this issue and create a more inclusive educational environment.

Regardless of the representation of sexually diverse students within the university curriculum, Radebe (2022) asserts that institutional policies and practices also play a crucial role in either supporting or hindering LGBTQI+ students, as policies that fail to recognise and accommodate the unique needs of LGBTQI+ students, such as those related to name changes, gender-neutral bathrooms, and housing, can create significant obstacles. Adams (2023) further adds that schools and universities must adopt policies that are inclusive and responsive to the needs of LGBTQI+ students to ensure their comfort and safety within the academic setting.

However, while there are movements that serve as a platform for advocating for the addressing issues faced by sexually diverse students, the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights (2016) argues that the current efforts may not be the most effective or necessary, as they state that the issues faced by individuals who identify as sexually diverse may be exaggerated and that focusing too much on these issues could divert attention from other important educational priorities.

Holliday (2000) and Russell et al. (2016) argued that many schools already have robust anti-bullying policies that protect all students, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Further suggesting that additional measures specifically for LGBTQI+ students might not be necessary and that resources could be better spent on improving the overall university environment for all students, as they suggest that these existing policies are sufficient to create a safe and inclusive environment for LGBTQI+ students, as well as their peers. Devine and Ash (2022) contend on Holliday and Russell's argument, further stating that educational institutions should prioritise broad-based initiatives that promote a culture of inclusivity and respect for diversity. These initiatives should include staff training on recognising and addressing all forms of bullying and discrimination and programs that build empathy and understanding among students.

In contradiction to Cerezo and Bergfeld (2013) argument, Nodin (2022) asserts that incorporating more LGBTQI+ representation in curricula and leadership might not significantly impact student well-being or academic success. According to Cheney (1990), this would fragment the curriculum as the primary focus of education should remain on core academic subjects rather than adding specific LGBTQI+ content, further stating that developing a culture of respect and inclusivity is more effective than emphasising specific identity groups.

Instituting unique accommodation for LGBTQI+ students as stated by Radebe (2022), could be challenging and can be a financial burden for educational institutions, as stated in a study by Francis et al. (2022), further arguing that existing facilities can be used to ensure all students feel safe and comfortable without the need for extensive modifications. However, Kosciw et al. (2018) contend with Radebe (2022), stating that university toilets have been identified by sexuality and gender-diverse (SGD) students as the least safe spaces within schools and universities, to which a 2017 survey about the school experiences of 23,001 SGD students in the United States found that almost 43% of students avoided toilets at school due to safety concerns or feelings of discomfort as a result of verbal, physical, and sexual assault towards these students. In line with Francis et al. (2022), Neitzel (2023) adds that such changes might provoke backlash from other students or parents, potentially creating a more divided school environment.

## **2.8 Impact of Residence Life on LGBTQI+ Students**

Higher education institutions provide opportunities and experiences for students to develop holistically and undergo a transformative process that not only equips them with the skills needed to grow independently and interdependently with students around them, but also flourish after they graduate (Lukens et al., 2022). Through the transformative experiences acquired at higher education institutions, students also have the opportunity to develop meaningful relationships with other students, including long-term interpersonal relationships that last through their college years (Alemán, 2010; Bronkema & Bowman, 2017).

Residence life plays a critical role in shaping the experience of students in general, including those who identify as sexually diverse, further influencing their academic performance, social interactions, and overall well-being (Mubaiwa, 2024). Living on campus provides opportunities for student communities to build and support each other, but it can also present challenges unique to LGBTQI+ individuals (Rand et al., 2021a). According to Rapp and Corral-Granados (2024) understanding these experiences is important for creating a residence life environment that promotes inclusivity and support for all students.

Traditional residence setups often impose binary gender norms that may not accommodate the identities of transgender and non-binary students, leading to discomfort and a sense of exclusion (Collins, 2016). According to Amos et al. (2021) providing gender-neutral housing options can help create a safer and more welcoming living environment, allowing LGBTQI+ students to live authentically and comfortably without fear of discrimination or harassment. According to Garcia et al. (2020), shared spaces can enact community dynamics that can either

provide a source of support and acceptance or contribute to feelings of isolation and marginalisation. According to Wells and Tsutsumi (2013), the provision of inclusive programming and training for resident advisors and students can promote understanding and respect for diverse identities, helping to build a community where LGBTQI+ students feel valued and connected. However, according to Jeffries (2018) having gender-neutral accommodations could create challenges and potentially lead to unintended consequences, such as increased tension or discomfort among other students.

Furthermore, Xulu-Gama (2019) speaks of the presence of support services and resources within the residence life system, as having access to support groups, counselling services, and inclusive health resources can significantly enhance the residence life experience for LGBTQI+ students. These services according to the Committee on Mental Health, Substance Use, and Wellbeing in STEMM Undergraduate and Graduate Education et al. (2021) can provide crucial mental health support and a sense of community, helping students navigate the unique challenges they may face in their personal and academic lives.

Though, Crockett et al. (2022) argues that general mental health and counselling services are already equipped to handle a wide range of student issues, including those related to sexual orientation and gender identity, therefore creating specific services for sexually diverse students might be seen as redundant, potentially diverting resources from services that benefit the entire student population. According to Wiedermann et al. (2023) enhancing the overall mental health resources and ensuring they are inclusive and accessible to all students is a more effective approach to supporting the well-being of the entire campus community.

## **2.9 Social and community experiences of sexually diverse students**

The social and community experiences of sexually diverse students within university settings form a critical aspect of their well-being and academic success (Chan et al., 2022a). These experiences are shaped by an interaction of factors, including institutional culture, peer dynamics, familial support, and societal attitudes toward sexual orientation and gender identity (Schnabel, 2018). In navigating their social environments, sexually diverse students encounter both sources of affirmation and acceptance, as well as challenges coming from discrimination and marginalisation (Gill & McQuillan, 2022).

Community experiences, according to Chan et al. (2022) play an important role in shaping the well-being and sense of belonging of sexually diverse students within the university context. Supportive social networks and inclusive community spaces can provide sources of validation, solidarity, and empowerment for sexually diverse students, enhancing their overall

social acceptance and mental health outcomes (Waling, 2019). These spaces, which may include sexually diverse student organisations and campus resource centres, offer opportunities for connection, advocacy, and collective identity formation (Singh et al., 2013). With sexually diverse students participating in social events, activism, and peer support initiatives, they can promote a sense of belonging and find affirmation in their identities, dealing with the isolation and marginalisation they may experience in other areas of campus life (Ceatha et al., 2019).

In contrast, Sithole (2015) speaks on sexually diverse students also encountering social challenges and discrimination within both university and broader community settings, irrespective of the increasing awareness efforts, homophobic, and transphobic attitudes persist, contributing to negative social experiences such as bullying, harassment, and exclusion. According to Oswalt and Wyatt (2011) these experiences can negatively impact students' mental health, academic performance, and well-being. Moreover, sexually diverse students may face complicated challenges within their families and communities outside the university environment, where acceptance and support may change (Katz-Wise et al., 2016), as some students, openly expressing their sexual orientation or gender identity can lead to rejection, hostility, or even violence from family members or peers.

### **2.10 Interpersonal relationships and support networks for sexually diverse students**

Support networks for individuals that identify as sexually diverse according to Schmitz and Tyler (2019) plays an important role in their lives, providing them with sources of affirmation, understanding, and resilience in the face of social challenges. In consideration of the university context, these relationships can include friendships, romantic partnerships, mentorships, and connections with faculty, staff, and fellow students (Badat, 2020). For sexually diverse students, according to Leed Management Consulting (2023) building and maintaining supportive relationships is important for navigating the difficulties of identity expression, social acceptance, and personal well-being.

Friendships among sexually diverse students can offer vital sources of empathy, validation, and companionship, providing a sense of belonging and solidarity within the university community (Kuhlemeier, 2022). LGBTQ+ student organisations and social groups according to Reeves-Blurton (2019) offer opportunities for connection and peer support, allowing students to share their experiences, advocate for their rights, and organise social and educational events that celebrate their identities, further fostering a sense of community and empowerment, helping students develop a positive sense of self and deal with their feelings of being isolated and alienated.

Despite the formation of interpersonal relationships and support networks, sexually diverse students may also encounter barriers to forming and maintaining these connections (Fehr & Harasymchuk, 2022). As discrimination, prejudice, and internalised stigma can undermine the trust and communication within relationships, leading to feelings of isolation and distrust (Oexle et al., 2018).

Furthermore, Sue (2013) asserts that focusing on the emphasis on interpersonal relationships for sexually diverse students within the university setting could perpetuate segregation and reinforce a sense of victimhood. However, Hlalele and Alexander (2012) contradicts this viewpoint, stating that this perspective assumes that university spaces are inclusive. In line with Hlalele and Alexander (2012), Parker et al. (2018) argues that this perspective downplays the barriers and discrimination that sexually diverse students face in the university environment. Bartlett (2022) and Conrad (2020) suggest that students identifying as sexually diverse should be empowered to navigate social challenges and seek support from a diverse range of sources, rather than relying exclusively on identity-based networks.

### **2.11 Mental health and well-being of sexually diverse students**

The well-being and mental health of sexually diverse students within the university environment looks into a critical area of inquiry, creating a gap for attention and consideration (Hernández-Torrano et al., 2020). As members of a sexually diverse group, navigating challenges and stressors related to their sexual orientation and gender identity, can significantly impact their psychological and emotional health (Russell & Fish, 2016). Numerous studies according to Haas et al. (2010) demonstrate that several studies in the 1980s began to identify concerning rates of reported suicidal behaviour among gay youth. This historical trend of LGBTQ+ individuals according to Wilson and Cariola (2020) provides a background for understanding the mental health and well-being of sexually diverse students within the university context.

Young people experience many challenges in adolescence. Anxiety, depression and suicide are reported as causes of youth morbidity and mortality across the world (Adelson et al., 2016). According to Russell and Fish (2016) studies suggest that youth who identify as sexually diverse can find themselves faced with these challenges, compared to youth who identify as heterosexual, as they navigate the heteronormative educational and societal institutions where children and youth spend much of their early lives. Individuals that identify as sexually diverse according to Moagi et al. (2021) are one of the most vulnerable groups in society due to their increased risk of mental health problems, as they experience hostile environments at home and

in society in general, and are subjected to direct and indirect discrimination, harassment, disadvantage and inequality with unfavourable consequences for mental health.

According to Lucassen and Burford (2015) a survey conducted in 2012 in Australia that was completed as part of the youth 2000 survey series, individuals who are attracted to the same sex or both sexes reported that sexual and gender minority youth were more than three times as likely to express symptoms of depression and more compared to their heterosexual peers to have self-harmed themselves, with one in five had attempted suicide, with almost half of the respondents having thought about a suicide attempt. Similarly, in Scotland, 40% of individuals identifying as sexually diverse considered themselves to have a mental health condition in comparison to 25% of non-sexual and gender minority youth, and bullying was identified as a key factor identified among respondents (Town et al., 2022). According to the Department of Behavioural Sciences et al. (2015) this results from the LGBTQ+ community being historically marginalised, mistreated and ignored by society and the education system.

Meyer (2003) theory on minority stress extends by stating that increased level of social stress, including stigma, discrimination, prejudice, and victimisation leads to an increased prevalence of mental health issues experienced by LGBTQI+ youth. In the context of an educational environment, feeling discriminated against can result in significant psychological challenges for sexual and gender minority youth (Russell & Fish, 2016). In addition, according to Hafeez et al. (2017), the lack of access for sexually diverse individuals to understanding peers, safe places and change room facilities creates a psychological burden. A study conducted by Taulke-Johnson (2010) found that university spaces such as student accommodations can be intolerant, hostile and homophobic, as evidence of anti-gay opinions were written on the doors of rooms, resulting in gay students modifying their behaviour so that it did not have a visible presence in the accommodation. Such behaviours resulted in feelings of isolation and psychological distress, as well as feeling required to educate housemates to change their negative attitudes (Formby, 2015).

Though some students would prefer accommodation for sexually diverse students, others did not want to be segregated into staying in accommodation for sexually diverse students, but instead wanted their institutions to create safe, inclusive accommodation for all students (Wood, 2023). In addition, Garcia et al. (2020) stated that the notion of separating housing for sexually diverse and heterosexual students would not be an adequate solution as it would create an othering effect which would lead to further marginalisation and discrimination.

However, as it is important to address the mental health and well-being of sexually diverse students within the university environment, it is also important to consider a perspective that

challenges the portrayal of LGBTQ+ individuals only as victims of societal discrimination (Glazzard et al., 2020). With the acknowledgment that there are indeed challenges and stressors faced by sexually diverse youth, including higher rates of anxiety, depression, and suicidal behaviour compared to their heterosexual peers (Haas et al., 2010; Moagi, Der Wath, et al., 2021; Russell & Fish, 2016). According to Formby (2015) universities have transitioned into a relatively positive experience that allows students to explore their gender and sexual identities. Grimwood (2017) found that university students were more likely to speak up against homophobic, biphobic, and transphobic discrimination in universities, which might indicate that they feel empowered to challenge injustices.

While it is important to attend discrimination and create inclusive environments, it is also important to recognise the diverse experiences within the LGBTQ+ community and the protective factors that contribute to an individual's well-being (Ceatha et al., 2021). For instance, not every student identifying as sexually diverse does experience mental health issues. Moreover, various factors can contribute to mental health issues of sexually diverse students besides discrimination, other contributing factors such as socioeconomic status and family dynamics (Mezzina et al., 2022). Even though the theory by Meyer (2003) provides an understanding of the impact of societal stigma and discrimination on the mental health of individuals identifying as sexually diverse, it is important to recognise that individuals within the LGBTQ+ community respond to stressors in diverse ways, making it important according to Delgado (2020) to avoid oversimplifying the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals and to recognise their ability to navigate adversity within the university context.

## **2.12 Conclusion**

This chapter explored the literature review pertaining to the experiences of sexually diverse individuals regarding social acceptance in the university environment. The context of LGBTQI+ students in higher education, institutional practices affecting sexually diverse students, campus climate and its impact on the experiences of sexually diverse students, social and community experiences of sexually diverse students, interpersonal relationships and support networks and mental health and well-being of sexually diverse students were examined. Due to the wealth of information gathered for the current study, few gaps were identified. An amount of information about the experiences of sexually diverse individuals was scanned. The chapter was concluded with a discussion of the mental health and well-being of sexually students. The following chapter will explore the research methodology used in the current study.

### **Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework and Research Paradigm**

The preceding chapter dealt with the literature review pertaining to the experiences of sexually diverse individuals regarding their social acceptance in the university environment. It examined the context of LGBTQI+ students in higher education, institutional practices affecting sexually diverse students, campus climate and its impact on the experiences of sexually diverse students, social and community experiences of sexually diverse students, interpersonal relationships and support networks, and mental health and well-being of sexually diverse students.

This chapter provides an outline of the theoretical framework and paradigm of the study. To which a theoretical framework in research, according to Grant and Osanloo (2014) is a collection of ideas, concepts, and theories that helps to understand a specific problem or phenomenon. For Kivunja (2018) theoretical framework connects existing knowledge and theories to the new study, helping to explain or predict outcomes. As for a research paradigm, Ebohon et al. (2021) defines it as a set of beliefs, methods, and assumptions that guide how research is conducted. The current study employs the minority stress theory as its theoretical framework and falls within the social constructionism paradigm and its relevance to understanding the experiences of sexually diverse students within the context of social acceptance at a South African university.

Minority stress theory, according to Meyer (2003) examines how individuals from marginalised groups, such as sexual minorities, encounter unique stressors rising from societal discrimination and prejudice. Concurrently, social constructionism according to Burr and Dick (2017) asserts that identities, including sexual orientation, knowledge, and meanings, are created and maintained through social interactions and discourse. Using minority stress theory and social constructionism, the researcher intends to examine how minority stress and social constructionism contribute to shaping the experiences of social acceptance among sexually diverse students in a South African university.

#### **3.1 Minority stress theory**

The minority stress theory was initially developed to explain health disparities experienced by sexual minorities due to their exposure to social stressors associated with stigma and discrimination (Frost & Meyer, 2023). This theory states that the marginalisation of the sexual minority population creates stressors that contribute to difficult health outcomes. Although the initiation of the minority stress theory was focused on sexual minorities, according to Sevelius

et al. (2021), the minority stress theory was expanded to include gender minorities, considering gender non-affirmation as a stressor for gender-diverse individuals.

Meyer (2003b) identifies two categories of stressors impacting LGBTQI+ individuals, that is, distal stress and proximal stress. Distal stress stems from external societal factors, including discriminatory laws and policies, major life events, chronic stressors and microaggression. In contrast, proximal stress is due to internalised processes shaped by socialisation, whereby sexually and gender diverse individuals learn to reject and also hide their identities as a coping mechanism to deal with external discrimination (Liang & Huang, 2022).

Minority stress theory according to McConnell et al. (2018) is a psychological framework that seeks to understand the unique stressors and challenges faced by individuals from marginalised or minority groups, such as LGBTQ+ individuals, racial and ethnic minorities, or individuals with disabilities. The minority stress, coined by Meyer (2003), investigates factors that are linked to various stressors that result in negative or positive outcomes. Meyer (2003) stated that the model describes the stress processes, including experiences of prejudice, discrimination, internalised homophobia, and discrimination. This theory further posits that the experience of being a member of a stigmatised minority group can lead to chronic stress due to exposure to prejudice, discrimination, and social stigma. Which in turn places them at risk for several negative physical and mental health outcomes.

Meyer (2003) introduced the concept of minority stress to explore how these stressors interact and affect individuals differently. However, for LeBlanc et al. (2015) minority stress is not about individuals' experiences of discrimination, but it is about society creating and maintaining structures that disadvantage some groups.

Extended exposure to these stressors according to Mariotti (2015) leads to chronic stress, which negatively impacts mental and physical health. A study conducted by Bockting et al. (2016) shows that individuals facing minority stress are more likely to experience anxiety, depression, substance abuse and suicidal ideation.

In line with the study conducted by Bockting et al. (2016), Timmins et al. (2020) further state that this stress can manifest in various forms, including interpersonal stressors like rejection or harassment, as well as structural stressors such as institutional discrimination. These stressors can negatively impact mental and physical health, contributing to higher rates of anxiety, depression, substance abuse, and other health disparities among minority populations (Williams, 2018). Moreover, the minority stress theory further shows the importance of understanding the role of internalised stigma, where individuals from minority groups may

internalise negative societal attitudes and beliefs about their identity, leading to further psychological distress (Holman, 2018).

The minority stress theory according to Dentato (2012) stems from various social and psychological theoretical perspectives and can be described as a relationship between minority and dominant values and reluctant conflict with the social environment experienced by minority group members. Minority stress theory states that sexual minority health differences can be explained by stressors induced by hostile and homophobic culture, caused by harassment, discrimination, and victimisation (Marshal et al., 2008; Meyer, 2003).

Specific environments, such as communities, schools, and churches, become stressors because of negative perceptions towards sexually diverse individuals due to these environments negating and invalidating minority cultures (Paceley et al., 2019). All these factors as stipulated by this theory affect how sexually diverse individuals experience social acceptance in certain environments. This study is interested in exploring the narrative of sexually diverse students regarding their social acceptance in university environments.

It is crucial according to Tan et al. (2020) to consider the stressors that are experienced by minority groups, as they are likely to be subjects of conflicts due to the dominant cultural perspectives and societal norms that do not approve of sexually diverse individuals or groups.

As this study focused on the experiences of sexually diverse students through their stories, the minority stress theory then becomes relevant for the study, as it provides a framework for understanding the challenges faced by these individuals within educational settings. Through the researcher examining stressors related to sexually diverse students' sexual orientation, such as bullying, microaggressions, and social exclusion, the researchers can comprehend how these stressors impact the mental and emotional well-being of sexually diverse students (Tsai et al., 2021).

In addition, the minority stress theory allowed the researcher to investigate the role of supportive factors, like inclusive school policies, and LGBTQ+ student groups in mitigating the negative effects of minority stress (Chaudoir et al., 2017). Through the application of this framework, the study offers valuable insight into the specific challenges faced by sexually diverse students within educational contexts, informing the development of targeted interventions and supportive environments to enhance their overall well-being and academic success (Fazel et al., 2014).

According to Meyer (2003), the minority stress theory further focuses on the stressors and challenges that a minority group, in this case, LGBTQI+ students at a university in South Africa, face such as discrimination, stigma, and marginalisation based on their sexual

orientation. Research focusing on LGBTQI+ students showed that these individuals tend to perceive the campus environment as less hospitable or less friendly compared to their non-LGBTQI+ peers (Blumenfeld et al., 2016). A study conducted by Glazzard et al. (2020) indicated that there is an increasing prevalence of student mental ill health in higher education due to their sexual and gender identity. LGBTQI+ students, therefore, have a different campus experience.

Fazel et al. (2014) further argue that by applying this framework, the study can offer valuable insights into the specific challenges faced by sexually diverse students within educational contexts. Alegria et al. (2018) states that using this theory provides a comprehensive framework that goes beyond individual-level factors, allowing researchers to explore the broader social and structural determinants of mental and physical health disparities. Brannon (2023) further adds that this theory sheds light on the systemic issues that contribute to the challenges marginalised groups face.

However, even though the minority stress theory provides valuable insights into the challenges faced by marginalised groups, in this case, the sexually diverse students, there are contradictory perspectives. Seaton et al. (2013) argued that emphasising stressors related to minority status may mistakenly reinforce a victimhood narrative, which would lead individuals to perceive themselves primarily as victims of societal prejudice. For Yilmaz (2021) this victimhood perspective could overshadow their agency and resilience, potentially hindering coping strategies and promoting a sense of helplessness among those it aims to support.

Furthermore, Nash (2008) contends that the minority stress theory does not adequately address the intersectionality of identity, as individuals belong to multiple marginalised groups, and their experiences of stress and discrimination can differ based on the interaction of their identities. An example by Kia et al. (2021) is that a person who is both sexually diverse and part of a racially marginalised group might face stressors that differ from those experienced by someone who is only part of one marginalised group. Bi et al. (2020) further extends that Individuals with multiple minority statuses may experience intersecting systems of oppression, thus the failure of minority stress theory to account for these intersecting identities can result in an incomplete understanding of the experiences of sexually diverse students, limiting the theory's applicability.

By highlighting minority stress as the primary cause of mental health disparities, there might be an underemphasis on other factors contributing to mental health issues within the LGBTQI+ communities, such as socioeconomic status, access to healthcare, or cultural factors (Khan et

al., 2017). According to Reiss et al. (2019), socioeconomic status can broadly impact access to mental health resources, quality of life, and overall well-being.

In addition, Lin (2020) expands on the cultural aspects impacting minority communities, stating that culture might play a role, as different cultural contexts can lead to the experiences of sexually diverse individuals to stress and discrimination. For instance, many communities in South Africa adhere to traditional beliefs that do not fully accept sexual diversity, as in some rural areas, traditional leaders and elders often uphold conservative views that reject homosexuality, seeing it as contrary to their cultural norms and values, for instance among the Xhosa people, traditional initiation practices into manhood, known as “ulwaluko,” emphasise heteronormative masculinity.

These practices can marginalise young men who do not conform to these rigid gender and sexual norms (Ntuli & Ngcobo, 2022). From a Christian as well as some Islamic communities point of view, Westwood (2022) states that they view homosexuality as sinful or immoral, which can lead to the rejection and stigmatisation of LGBTQ+ individuals within these communities.

Pascoe and Smart-Richman (2009) further state that by focusing solely on external stressors, there might be a risk of neglecting the importance of internal strengths, community support, and individual resilience in mitigating the negative effects of discrimination and prejudice. Gautam et al. (2024) concur with Pascoe and Smart-Richman (2009) that the emphasis on stress might overshadow the potential for positive coping mechanisms and the role of supportive networks, as support from the community can protect an individual against the negative impacts of minority stress, further creating a sense of belonging and acceptance that reduces feelings of isolation.

Furthermore, Frost and Meyer (2023) argues that the minority stress theory can mistakenly contribute to a negative perspective, which views marginalised individuals through the lens of their struggles rather than their strengths and capacities. This theory can be disempowering and may prevent the recognition of resilience and resourcefulness that sexually diverse individuals exhibit when faced with problems.

The minority stress theory offers insights into the challenges of sexually diverse students and marginalised groups by indicating discrimination and prejudice as significant stressors. However, research suggests it may mistakenly emphasise a victimhood narrative and overlook individual resilience (Seaton et al., 2013; Yılmaz, 2021). Moreover, its limited consideration of intersectionality, where multiple marginalised identities intersect, complicates its broad application (Bi et al., 2020; Kia et al., 2021; Nash, 2008). There is also concern that focusing

only on minority stress ignores factors like socioeconomic status, healthcare access, and cultural influences that impact well-being (Lin, 2020; Reiss et al., 2019). Thus, integrating a broader understanding of resilience and diverse influences is important for support strategies for sexually diverse individuals.

### 3.2 Social Constructionism

Social constructionism is a paradigm that states that reality and knowledge are not objective truths but are shaped by social interactions and cultural contexts (Nightingale & Cromby, 2002). This paradigm, according to Hollinshead (2006) emerged as a response to positivist and essentialist views. Social constructionism was influenced by Berger and Luckmann (1966) (Knoblauch & Wilke, 2016), they argued that knowledge is created through social processes.

Positivism, according to Park et al. (2020) emphasises objective observations and measurable phenomena to understand social behaviour. The positivistic paradigm then becomes relevant when the researcher seeks to establish causal relationships through controlled experiments and quantitative data analysis (Maksimović & Evtimov, 2023). Researchers who employ this paradigm use specific quantitative tools such as surveys and experiments, and pursue measurements or statistical-based research (Park et al., 2020).

Rehman and Alharthi (2016) further add that the positivistic approach assumes that reality exists independently of human perception, with the aim of generalisable knowledge that can be validated through empirical evidence. Critics of positivism as a paradigm maintain that it “reduces people to numbers” and ignores the subjective lived experiences of people (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020 p.41)The study is interested in the experiences of sexually diverse students regarding their social acceptance at a university in South Africa, so this paradigm becomes irrelevant.

In contrast, social constructionism as stipulated by Phillips (2023) asserts that reality and knowledge are socially constructed rather than being objective. Instead, social constructionism argues that meanings, understandings, and realities are shaped through social processes and interactions within specific cultural and historical contexts (Knorr Cetina, 2001). This view challenges the notion of an objective reality that exists independently of human perception and social influence stipulated by positivism.

Knorr and Cetina (2001) argue that scientific knowledge itself is not just discovered but constructed through the practices, negotiations, and agreements of the scientific community, meaning that what comes to being accepted as scientific facts is linked to the social and cultural context in which they are produced. Similarly, social constructionism argues that concepts such

as gender, race, and class are not fixed categories but are constructed through societal norms and interactions (Andrews, 2012). This approach provides an understanding of reality as a socially dependent construct, rather than a statistical and scientific truth.

The paradigm of social constructionism is linked to individual and collective experiences (Galbin, 2014). According to Burke et al. (2009) social constructionism posits that experiences are shaped by the social contexts in which they are occupied. For instance, how people experience and interpret events, relationships, and identities is influenced by the cultural narratives and societal structures they are part of.

These experiences, in line with the social constructionist paradigm, are not just personal experiences but are linked to social factors, considering gender, the experience of gender is not just about individual identity but is also about how society defines and interacts with gender roles (Pervin & Mokhtar, 2022).

This study investigates the experiences of sexually diverse students regarding their social acceptance in a South African university. Social constructionism becomes relevant as it provides a framework for understanding how social interactions and norms within a university space shape their experiences and perceptions of acceptance.

Social constructionism according to Galbin (2014) provides a similar perspective to minority stress theory by focusing on how social contexts and interactions shape individuals' identities and experiences. The difference between the minority stress theory, which examines the negative impact of societal attitudes and discrimination on marginalised groups, to social constructionism is that it explores how these identities are socially constructed and negotiated within specific cultural and historical contexts (Phillips, 2023).

However, as much as social constructionism speaks of reality and knowledge that is socially constructed, Stutchbury (2022) speaks of realism that posits that there is an objective reality that exists independently of human perception, beliefs, or social constructs. Further stating that phenomena have realities that can be discovered and understood through observation, experimentation, and reason. This perspective by Stutchbury (2022) according to Lehrer (1990) maintains that knowledge reflects an external reality, and objective truths can be attained through empirical investigation and logical analysis.

### **3.3 Principles of Social Constructionism**

#### **3.3.1 Philosophical underpinnings of Social Constructionism**

The following section introduces social constructionism's philosophical underpinnings, including constructivist epistemology.

### ***3.3.1.1 Constructivist epistemology***

A foundational principle of social constructionism is found in constructivist epistemology (Gralewski, 2011). Constructivist epistemology according to Gerstenmaier and Mandl (2001) speaks on knowledge and reality as not being found but constructed by individuals through their interactions with the world and each other. This perspective argues that our understanding of the world is shaped by our experiences, social contexts, and cultural norms, rather than being an objective reflection (Olssen, 1995).

According to McKenna (2022) knowledge is then perceived as a product of human activity, as individuals formulate meanings and interpret their experiences based on the language and categories available to them in their specific social environments. These constructed meanings are continuously shaped and reshaped through social interactions, emphasising that what is true or real is influenced by the collective processes within a society. According to Charreire Petit and Huault (2008) constructivist epistemology focusing on the socially constructed nature of knowledge challenges objectivity, as it suggests that different groups and cultures can have different understandings of reality.

## **3.4 Epistemology, ontology, and methodology underpinning social constructionism.**

Epistemology has been defined in different ways from different perspectives (Cunningham & Fitzgerald, 1996), for instance, Auerswald (1986. p.1) described epistemology as “thinking about thinking,” which is primarily focused on the origin and limits of human knowledge. For Blanche and Durrheim (2002, p.6) “epistemology is the nature of the relationship between the researcher and what can be known”.

Social constructionism stance regarding epistemology is that knowledge and reality are not objective or fixed but are instead constructed through social processes, interactions, and cultural norms (Zhao, 2020). It challenges the narrative of an absolute truth, arguing that what we come to understand as knowledge is shaped by historical, social, and cultural contexts (Phillips, 2023). Accordingly, social constructionism seeks to understand how the research participants perceive and experience social acceptance in university spaces.

With the context of this study, social constructionism looks at how students’ feelings of acceptance are shaped by their interactions with others, the culture of the university, and the policies in place. Further suggesting that what sexually diverse students experience and understand about being accepted is built through these social processes rather than being a straightforward fact. Fernández et al. (2023) encourages the use of this perspective as it

explores how different individuals may feel accepted or excluded based on their unique backgrounds and experiences, recognising that everyone might see and feel things differently.

Ontologically, Nightingale and Cromby (2002) asserts that social constructionism refers to the nature of reality and being, further stating that reality is not something that exists independently of human perception but is constructed through social processes. That would then mean that what is real is due to collective human interactions. Aligned to this study, this means that the sense of sexually diverse individuals being accepted or excluded is shaped by the social structures and cultural norms of the university, this further speaks to understanding how the presence of support groups, diversity policies, and campus culture contribute to the construction of a reality where sexually diverse students may feel either included or marginalised. For instance, the visibility, acceptance, and inclusivity of LGBTQ+ identities in campus events and the availability of safe spaces all shape these students' realities.

Researchers using this approach employ qualitative methods, such as interviews, focus groups, and ethnography, to explore ways people construct their understanding of the world. By these methods, the researcher can explore participants' perspectives, emphasising the context and meaning they attribute to their experiences. In this study, the researcher used semi-structured interviews to gain insights into shared experiences and understanding among sexually diverse students. Allowing the researcher to capture the subjective experiences of sexually diverse students, recognising that their perceptions and feelings about social acceptance are constructed through their daily interactions and the university climate.

Therefore, the use of social constructionism as a paradigm in this study provided a framework that speaks to the importance of social context, interaction, and cultural norms in the university in shaping the experiences of sexually diverse students. The researcher, gaining understanding through this paradigm that knowledge and reality are constructed, allowed the exploration of how these students perceive and experience social acceptance in a university context.

#### **4 Chapter Summary**

This chapter explored the theoretical framework and research paradigm guiding the study of the experiences of sexually diverse students regarding their social acceptance at a South African university. The theoretical framework employed is Meyer's minority stress theory to understand how societal discrimination and internalised stigma contribute to stress among marginalised groups like LGBTQ+ students. Concurrently, the study adopted a social constructionist paradigm, asserting that identities and realities are socially constructed through

interactions and cultural contexts. This paradigmatic choice allowed an exploration of how these students perceive and navigate social acceptance within the university environment, further emphasising the role of social interactions, institutional policies, and cultural norms in shaping their experiences. The chapter shows the relevance of these frameworks in contextualising the experiences faced by sexually diverse students, providing a platform for understanding their lived experiences. In the following chapter, the methodology section will be explored, outlining the research design, data collection methods, participant recruitment strategies, and data analysis techniques used to capture and analyse the perspectives and lived experiences of the study participants.

## Chapter 4 Research Methodology

### 4.1 Introduction

The previous chapter reviewed related literature on the experiences of sexually diverse students regarding their social acceptance in university settings. This section investigates the methodology employed in this study. It includes the research approach, design, targeted population and sampling techniques, data collection and management methods, data analysis, and ethical considerations. This includes details on participant recruitment, the number of individuals involved in the study, the interview sample, and the length of the interviews. Finally, ethical consideration of the study is emphasised due to the study being of a sensitive nature.

### 4.2 Research approach

According to Creswell (2009), a research approach involves plans and procedures ranging from broad assumptions to detailed data collection, analysis, and interpretation methods. With the study interested in the experiences of sexually diverse students regarding their social acceptance in a university in Pretoria, further capturing the in-depth experiences of participants, the qualitative research approach was then used in this study.

The qualitative research approach according to Polkinghorne (1990) aims to describe and clarify human experience through data primarily gathered in the form of spoken or written language instead of numbers. Using this approach allowed the researcher to attain an in-depth study of the phenomenon under investigation, further allowing the researcher to build a thorough picture of the participant's experiences as they have experienced the phenomenon (Durrheim, 2010). Further allowing the researcher to interact with participants in data collection through interviews for detailed and subjective data (Sutton & Austin, 2015).

The researcher, making use of the qualitative research approach, was to develop an explanation of the phenomena under investigation, as it is concerned with individuals' subjective experiences and opinions (Dannels, 2018). The use of such an approach was then suitable for achieving the objectives of the study, further suiting the nature of the research problem as addressed in this study (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). According to Ahmad et al. (2019) this approach allows flexibility, contrary to the quantitative research approach, which is considered rigid and more scientific. Since the study focuses on the experiences of sexually diverse students regarding their social acceptance in a university in South Africa, a qualitative approach according to Moser and Korstjens (2017) then became more suitable as it allows the exploration of subjective experiences through interviewing to obtain descriptions.

Making use of the qualitative research approach according to Cleland (2017) is deemed beneficial based on the nature of the study as it produces a well-detailed description of participants' narratives of their experiences of the phenomenon under investigation, further interpreting the meaning. Rahman (2016) and Sultan (2019) further add that the qualitative research approach achieves more in-depth insight into issues related to the phenomenon of study and attempts to understand human experiences holistically.

Furthermore, according to Rahman (2016) the qualitative research approach is considered ideographical research, as it focuses on individual cases or events. This allows the researcher to understand various meanings among people's voices and discover the participants' inner experiences. Busetto et al. (2020) further added that the qualitative research approach achieves more in-depth insight into issues related to the phenomenon of study.

Finally, the qualitative research approach is composed of a flexible structure as its design can be constructed and reconstructed to a greater extent (Tracy, 2020). Therefore, using the qualitative research approach is considered appropriate for an issue that can be constructed further, allowing the participants sufficient freedom in determining what is consistent for them.

In contrast, considering the qualitative research approach producing a detailed description of the research participants, in this context of sexually diverse students, Silverman (2010) argues that the limitation of such an approach is that the qualitative approach possesses a small sample size. Sample size according to (Andrade, 2020) becomes an issue of generalisability to the whole population of the research, however, the sole aim of this study is not to generalise its findings but to explore the participants' narratives.

Additionally, the use of the qualitative research approach according to Mack and Woodsong (2005) produces a case-by-case analysis of individuals, which consumes time. The study aims to gather in detail the understanding, perception, and experiences of the selected sample, intending to avoid making premature general claims. The researcher's questions aim to address a targeted sample regarding their experiences.

### **4.3 Research design**

The nature of this study is to comprehend the narration of sexually diverse students' experiences. A tool that allowed participants to narrate their stories was used, which is a narrative research design. According to Smith and Sparkes (2009), narrative research design is a qualitative approach that looks into individuals' stories about their lives and experiences. For Ntinda (2018a) narrative design is based on the premise that storytelling is a primary way people make sense of their world. Smith and Sparkes (2009) further state that the use of the

narrative research design by the researcher is for the collection and analysis of the participants' narratives to reveal an understanding of the lived experiences, meanings, and identities of individuals.

Employing narrative research design, the researcher, according to Kim (2016) is to select from several different types, each designed for research objectives and contexts. Riessman (2005) further adds that there are diverse ways to categorise narrative research methods that work well for spoken stories about subjective experiences. These are narrative thematic, performative, and structural research approaches.

Narrative thematic approach according to Bleakley (2005) is a type of qualitative research design where stories people tell become the raw data. Instead of making use of numbers or direct observations, this method focuses on personal stories to understand people's experiences (Ugwu & Eze, 2023). Making use of this approach, the researcher listens to and analyses these stories to understand how individuals understand and give meaning to their lives (Moen, 2006). Hoshmand (2005) further adds that the narrative approach in research focuses on examining existing stories about human experiences or generating new data through storytelling, intending to understand how people perceive and explain their lives and the events they go through.

For Riessman (2008) narrative thematic design focuses primarily on the content of texts, emphasising on what is said rather than how it was said; the told rather than the telling. An example by Gareth William's narrative on illness, where he explores how individuals construct narratives to make sense of their illnesses (Hydén, 2007)

According to Riessman (2005), performative narrative design views storytelling as more than just recounting events but involves representing a past self, using language and gestures to engage, persuade, and potentially move an audience. A study by Peterson and Langellier (2006) demonstrates this approach through the provision of examples, such as analysing family storytelling dynamics and narratives from breast cancer survivors, and by examining how storytellers position themselves, their audience, and their characters within their narratives.

The performative narrative design as stated by Ala-Kortesmaa et al. (2022) is suitable for studying communication practices and identity construction, as it explores how narrators shape their identities through storytelling and how audiences become engaged by participants in this process.

Another technique as stated by Squire (2008) is the structural approach, which examines how a story is constructed and conveyed. Instead of focusing on the content of the narrative,

structural analysis looks into the form and organisation of the story (Sandberg, 2022), this includes looking at elements such as the sequence of events, the use of language, the narrative style, and the way different parts of the story connect and interact. Using this technique assists the researcher in analysing how these structural components influence the meaning and impact of the story (Rejnö et al., 2014). Boyd et al. (2020) further add that structural narrative helps to understand the patterns and strategies that shape how narratives are experienced and understood by both the storyteller and the audience.

In the case of this study, a narrative thematic design then became relevant, as it described the lives of individuals through collecting and retelling stories about people's lives and experiences further emphasising the importance of the context within the narration, further allowing research participants to share their personal stories in a way that is authentic, revealing the rich details of their identities and challenges; respectively (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Wilt et al., 2019). In line with Connelly and Clandinin's (1990) definition of narrative enquiry, Ntinda (2018a) further defined the narrative research design as aiming to uncover significant stories of people's lives as told by them in their own words and worlds, to give meaning to their lives through the stories they tell, mainly focusing on their small stories.

Small stories according to Grele (2016) are more concerned with specific events, interactions, or moments in an individual's life, looking into their subjective experiences and perspectives, whereas big stories, according to Freeman (2006) these are derived from interviews, clinical encounters, autobiographical writing, and other interrogative venues. In the case of this study, small stories were valuable as they provided insight into the lived experiences of sexually diverse individuals and the meanings they ascribe to their experiences.

Through the use of such design according to Nyirenda et al. (2022) it facilitates the empowerment of the research participants, by providing a platform for individuals to narrate their own stories, further asserting control over their narratives and ensuring their voices are heard. This aspect, according to Adabanya et al. (2023) is significant, especially for the marginalised population, in this study, the sexually diverse population, as it creates a sense of ownership and self-representation.

Furthermore, emphasising the participant's small stories led to the gathering of an in-depth understanding that might be unnoticed (Kendall & Kendall, 2012) by focusing on the sexually diverse students' experiences regarding their social acceptance, the researcher uncovered insights into participants' lived experiences. By using this design, it further allows the researcher to holistically explore the complexities of individuals' lives by capturing the details that contribute to their identities and experiences (Ntinda, 2018).

Additionally, using narrative thematic design according to Ntinda (2018b) encourages cultural sensitivity in the research process, as it focuses on the participant's own words, allowing the researcher to understand better the contexts that shape the research participant's experiences, further allowing the avoidance of imposing external interpretations or assumptions, ensuring that the research remains respectful and inclusive of diverse perspectives. As this design creates a platform for research participants to engage and collaborate with the researcher (Malpass et al., 2023). This design, according to Sargeant, (2012) enhances the quality of the research findings and contributes to a more meaningful research experience for the researcher and the research participants.

However, subjectivity through the use of such design can serve as a limitation (Jørgensen, 2022), as research participants may interpret their experiences in ways that are influenced by their own biases, perceptions, and social contexts. This subjectivity can introduce difficulties in data interpretation and analysis, requiring the researcher to proceed by further ensuring the validity and reliability of their findings (Morse et al., 2002).

Additionally, Butina (2015) states that conducting narrative research can be time-consuming due to the process of collecting, transcribing, and analysing narrative data demanding time. As the researcher is required to collect extensive information about the participant to fully understand the context of that individual, further making the analysis process extremely slow and detailed (Cresswell, 2013; Huberman & Miles, 2002).

While subjectivity introduced using performative narrative research design posed a threat to the research study, the researcher adopted a reflexive approach throughout the research process, acknowledging and reflecting on their own biases, assumptions, and interpretations. Through adopting a reflexive approach, the research according to Olmos-Vega et al. (2023) can lessen its influence on data interpretation and analysis.

Addressing time consumption by narrative thematic and performative narrative analysis, the researcher used techniques and tools for data collection and analysis processes, such as Microsoft Teams for data collection as it recorded and transcribed the data and ATLAS.ti for data analysis, which further facilitated the organisation and coding of narrative data.

#### **4.3.1 Population and sampling procedure**

Shukla (2020) refers to a population as a set of units, such as individuals, organisations, and groups, to which the study can be applied. This study's population consisted of university students in South Africa in the economic and management science, humanities, law, natural and agriculture, and theology faculties, regardless of their year of study.

#### 4.3.1.2 Sampling

Martínez-Mesa et al. (2016) define sampling as the process of choosing research participants from the entire population. Numerous sampling methods can be employed in selecting the study participants by the researchers, however, for this study, the researcher utilised a non-probability purposive sampling technique to obtain various perspectives from participants who shared similar experiences regarding their social acceptance at a university in South Africa. The selection of such a technique according to Showkat and Parveen (2017) is based on the accessibility and availability of participants, as opposed to the probability sampling method.

The researcher used the purposive sampling element to identify and select individuals knowledgeable about or experienced with a phenomenon of interest, further selecting from a homogeneous sample pool of individuals that comprehend the phenomenon being studied (Cresswell, 2013). The researchers identified specific criteria for inclusion in the study, focusing on individuals who identified as sexually diverse, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students. Considering this criterion was important as it allowed the researcher to capture the diverse experiences and perspectives of individuals identifying as sexually diverse.

This study deals with a sensitive topic; selecting participants who have experienced the phenomenon of interest was complicated, based on the accessibility of participants who shared the same experience concerning social acceptance in the university environment, the snowball effect was then used to refer to other participants willing to participate in the study. Based on the availability of research participants, a maximum of 9 participants was used, allowing the gathering of an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (Dworkin, 2012), data was collected until the saturation point (Saunders et al., 2018).

This study used a sample size of nine participants to detail the narration of their experiences. Narrative research focuses on the stories individuals share, emphasising their subjective experiences and interpretations (Riessman, 2008). The purpose was to explore the experiences of each participant's narrative rather than aiming for generalisation, allowing an understanding of their lived experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990).

The study consists of nine participants, ranging from undergraduates and postgraduate levels and aged between 20 and 28 years. This was followed by a detailed discussion of the findings, which outline the major themes identified by narrative thematic analysis. The sample includes participants from the Hatfield and Groenkloof campuses. It comprises 2 Gays, 2 Lesbians, 1 Transgender women, 1 Asexual, 1 Non-binary, 1 Pansexual, and 1 identifying as Agender, with most being undergraduates and one postgraduate. All sexual orientation labels are those stated

by the participants themselves in their introduction during the interviews. All participants attend at the University of Pretoria.

*Table 1: Summary of characteristics of participants.*

Participants*		Race	Age	Gender identity	Faculty
1	Thabo	African	20	Gay	Education
2	Nomvula	African	29	Lesbian	Commerce
3	Ayanda	African	25	Transgender Women	Commerce
4	Nala	African	27	Lesbian	Law
5	Sipho	African	21	Asexual	Humanities
6	Bongani	African	22	Gay	Natural and Agricultural Science
7	Amani	African	24	Non-binary	Education
8	Zola	White	28	Pan-Sexual	Natural and Agricultural Science
9	Zuki	White	23	A-gender	

**\* pseudonyms have been used.**

The interviews with participants took place on an online platform, Microsoft Teams, which was convenient for them, and therefore, these participants felt more relaxed about the interview process and became open to sharing their experiences. Participants would seek clarity on some questions for them to respond appropriately. This helped to improve both the interview schedule and the researcher as a key instrument in the research process. The interview schedule was designed in such a manner that conducting it was possible. The data gathered through the use of semi-structured interviews, according to Alshenqeti (2014), reflects on respondents' views of the subject and additional information relevant to the research matter. The research process was flexible in that it had space for respondents to seek clarity when they did not

understand and further allowed them to provide additional information relevant to the study that they felt pertinent to mention.

Making use of such a technique in this study allowed the researcher to ensure that the study sample includes individuals who represent the diversity of individuals that fit the criteria under investigation (Palinkas et al., 2015), that is, individuals identifying as sexually diverse. Using this technique, the researchers ensured that the sample included individuals from different sexual orientations, further enhancing the representativeness of the findings.

However, the use of purposive sampling to select individuals knowledgeable about or experienced with the phenomenon of interest may introduce bias into the study (Palinkas et al., 2015). Through the researcher targeting individuals who identify as sexually diverse, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students, the researchers may unintentionally overlook the perspectives of other marginalised groups within the university community. This narrow focus limits the range of experiences represented in the study and skews the findings towards the experiences of a specific subgroup (Cypress, 2017).

Moreover, the incorporation of the snowball effect, which relies on referrals from initial participants to identify additional participants who meet the study's criteria, to recruit additional participants, can introduce potential biases into the sample selection process (Johnson, 2014). While this approach may be suitable for accessing a population that can be challenging to reach, it can also lead to the over-representation of specific experiences within the sample, as participants may be more likely to refer others who share similar perspectives (Johnston & Sabin, 2010).

Addressing such limitations to this study, instead of targeting individuals who identify as sexually diverse, the researcher further considered intersectionality by seeking out participants from various backgrounds, identities, and experiences within the university community. Through this approach, it ensured that the sample reflects the heterogeneity of the population under study, further minimising the risk of bias and ensuring a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of interest (Garg, 2016).

In addressing the limitation introduced by the incorporation of the snowball effect the researcher implemented strict criteria for participant referrals, by seeking out diverse perspectives, that is, by encouraging initial participants to refer individuals from different social circles, academic disciplines, or demographic backgrounds to ensure the inclusion of a wide range of voices and experiences (Marcus et al., 2017). Through diversifying, research participant referrals according to Kirchherr and Charles (2018) can address the risk of over-representing specific experiences and promote greater inclusivity within the sample.

#### 4.4 Data Collection and Management

Data collection in research refers to the systematic process of gathering information or evidence to address a research question (Tikito & Souissi, 2020). Igwenagu (2016) further stated that data collection is a crucial step in the research process, as it provides the data the researcher can analyse and interpret the phenomena under investigation. A blended approach, that is, face-to-face and semi-structured online interviews, was used to collect data from nine university students, and the interview duration was between 35 and 60 minutes. Data was mainly collected using Microsoft Teams interviews.

The use of semi-structured interviews, which, according to Adams (2015) allows a flexible technique for obtaining data. Semi-structured interviews according to DeJonckheere and Vaughn (2019) allow a thorough description of the participant's narrative concerning interpreting the meaning of the described phenomena. Through the use of such a data collection method, the researcher captures the qualitative data that can be systematically analysed to find patterns and themes, further providing an understanding of the phenomena under investigation (Jamshed, 2014) in the case of this study, the experiences of sexually diverse students regarding their social acceptance are discussed.

This study used an interview schedule in which questions were formulated in line with the existing literature on the experiences of individuals identifying as sexually diverse within higher education institutions to provide as much detail and understanding as possible. An interview schedule (**see Appendix A**) was used to gather information; thus, making use of semi-structured interviews provides a more relaxed space for research participants, allowing them to be able to share with the researcher in a comfortable manner (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019).

The researcher engaged with the research interviewee flexibly, allowing the researcher to interpret relevant meanings to make sense of the phenomenon under investigation (Mashuri et al., 2022). Online interviews mainly were used here, allowing the researcher and interviewee to establish rapport, and giving the participant room to think and communicate (Mashuri et al., 2022). Open-ended questions allowed participants to discuss questions in more detail about their experiences regarding social acceptance in a university environment. The interviews took place online using Microsoft Teams and, in a location, chosen by the interviewee, in Pretoria, depending on their comfort level. Data was collected using an audio recorder feature on Microsoft Teams with the participant's permission; transcription was done as the interview was conducted; and later, it was verified to match the participant's responses. Data was stored in

encrypted files on locked devices. The tapes will be destroyed after 10 years, and the transcribed documents will be deleted as soon as the data analysis is completed.

#### 4.4.1 Data Collection Procedure

With the study utilising a qualitative research approach to obtain in-depth experiences of sexually diverse students regarding their social acceptance in a South African university, interviews became the most dominant method in qualitative research used to gather information and collect data. For this study, semi-structured interviews were chosen as a data collection method to address the research questions and the objectives of the study (Flick, 2007).

The narrative thematic approach aims to understand and convey the stories and experiences of individuals in detail, making flexible data collection methods essential (Kim, 2016). For this research, semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary data collection method to address the research questions and fulfil the study's objectives (Flick, 2007). The primary goal was to understand the experiences of sexually diverse individuals regarding their social acceptance at a university in South Africa.

Data collection involved semi-structured online interviews, a method described by Williman (2005) as helpful in gathering data, these semi-structured interviews enabled an in-depth exploration of participants' narratives and how they interpreted their experiences, particularly regarding social acceptance in a university environment. Further making use of open-ended questions based on the topic areas to be covered by the research study. The open-ended questions outlined the topic under investigation, further providing opportunities for both interviewer and interviewee to discuss the topics in more detail (Widiger, 2001).

During data collection, interviews began with a brief session where the researcher explained the research's aim and the purpose of the interviews to the participants. The participants were informed that each interview would be recorded using a recording feature on Microsoft Teams, with justifications provided for this approach. As recommended by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) in *Doing Interviews*, participants were allowed to ask questions before starting the interview.

Moreover, using semi-structured online interviews in this study allowed the researcher to follow a set of questions designed to establish rapport with participants while being flexible enough to cover topics of particular interest or concern to them (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019). This approach was suitable for achieving the study's objectives. Each interview lasted approximately 50 minutes to 1 hour. Online interviews using Microsoft Teams made it easy for

the researcher to conduct interviews, as it provided built-in features for recording and transcribing the data shared during the interviews.

However, using online interviews for collecting data can be met with challenges as some participants can lack access to stable network connections, participant disengagement and fluctuating audio. In the data collection process, the researcher experienced the risk of participant disengagement, whereby the participant's responses were short, less engaging and lowered their voice, which prohibited the researcher from clearly hearing what the participant was saying.

To ensure that this study did not meet these limitations, the researcher conducted a pre-check of the online platform, allowing the identification of any system errors. In cases where the research participant's voice was lower, the researcher politely asked participants to repeat themselves and further used noise-cancelling headphones to improve audio. In addressing participant disengagement, the researcher probed using follow-up questions based on the responses given by research participants.

#### **4.5 Data Analysis**

Data analysis is defined as the process of bringing order, structure, as well as meaning to the entire data that the researcher has collected (Flick, 2014). Data analysis, according to Dibekulu (2020), is a crucial part of any research process, as it establishes meaning to the data collected by the researcher. This step is essential to transform raw data into valuable insights that can inform conclusions and support or contradict the research hypothesis (Thorne, 2000).

The analysis process according to Sutton and Austin (2015) involves examining the data, intending to find answers to research questions and uncover new insights. Researchers choose from various methods and techniques to identify significant findings (Renjith et al., 2021). In the case of this research study, Narrative thematic analysis in conjunction with performative narrative analysis was used. Narrative thematic analysis, according to Smith and Sparkes (2009) is a method used to analyse data by focusing on the stories that people share. Narrative thematic analysis further explores how people construct their stories, the contexts in which these stories are told, and the meanings they give (Nasheeda et al., 2019), the use of this method by the researcher allowed the researcher to gain in-depth insights into the experiences and perspectives of the research participants, that is, sexually diverse individuals.

Different from narrative analysis, performative analysis focuses on the dialogic process between the teller and listener (Smith et al., 2009). Riessman (2005) further explains narrative thematic as focusing on how conversations and stories are created and shared within

interactions among speakers, as it directs the researcher's attention to the interactive dynamics involved in producing and performing narratives. Thus, this means, the researcher does not only examine the content of what is being said but also how the storytelling process unfolds between people. Espedal and Synnes (2022) describe performative narrative analysis as a method that looks at the conversation between the person telling a story and the person listening to it, instead of just focusing on the story itself, this approach pays attention to how the narrator and listener interact during the storytelling process.

Utilising both narrative thematic and performative analysis to explore the experiences of sexually diverse students in a university in South Africa allowed the researcher to capture the depth of their lived realities, further allowing the researchers to understand these students' personal stories, revealing how they navigate their identities within levels of support or discrimination within the academic community. Performative analysis adds another layer by examining how these identities are expressed and interpreted in interactions with peers, faculty, and institutional systems, shedding light on the ongoing negotiation of visibility, acceptance, and belonging.

Together, these approaches provide a broad understanding of the challenges and resilience of sexually diverse students, informing more inclusive and supportive university policies and practices. The narrative thematic analysis process used in this study consisted of five stages: (a) organisation and preparation of the data, (b) obtaining a general sense of the information, (c) the coding process, (d) categories or themes, and (e) interpretation of the data (Cresswell, 2014). Through the organisation and preparation of the data by the researcher involved ordering and structuring the raw narrative data, ensuring it was accessible and ready for analysis.

Obtaining a general sense of the information involved, immersing oneself in the narratives, to get primary themes and initial impressions communicated by the participants. The coding process followed, where specific bits of the narratives were labelled or tagged based on recurring ideas, emotions, or events, which facilitated the identification of patterns. These codes were then grouped into broader categories or themes during the categorisation stage, where similarities and differences across narratives were created to form coherent thematic clusters. Finally, interpretation of the data was done so to critically analyse these themes within the context of the research objectives, offering an understanding of the underlying meanings and potential theoretical contributions of the findings.

However, even though the use of both narrative and performative narrative analysis provides an understanding of the lived experiences of sexually diverse students in a South African university, it also introduces potential methodological contradictions. However, according to

Meraz et al. (2019) combining these analytical approaches can lead to conflicting interpretations, as the use of narrative analysis can lead to the treatment of research participants' stories to some extent stable matters that offer fixed insights into individual experiences and identities, and performative according to Sevilla-Liu (2023) which perceives narratives as evolving, as they are shaped by the changing aspects of social interaction and performance. Bailey and Tilley (2002) further adds that performative analysis recognises that storytelling is flexible and changes with different social situations and audiences, as the same story can be told and understood in numerous ways depending on who is listening and the context in which it is shared.

This disagreement, according to Hyvärinen (2009) can make it challenging to combine findings from both methods, as narrative analysis looks for stable, consistent themes, while performative analysis focuses on the changing and interactive aspects of storytelling. In the context of this study, the narrative analysis aspect provides personal insights into the lived realities of sexually diverse students, emphasising their perspectives and experiences, further capturing the unique ways these individuals make sense of their identities and navigate their academic environments (Roux & Groenewald, 2023). In contrast, performative analysis looks into how stories are shaped by social interactions and the presence of an audience, focusing on how narratives are created and performed in social contexts, which can sometimes dominate the personal details and meanings by emphasising how the story is told and received in different settings (Peterson & Langellier, 2006). Thus, combining these methodological approaches can create tension that can lead to different understandings of how sexually diverse students experience and express their identities within the university space.

In addressing the limitations raised by the combination of these analytical methods, that is, narrative and performative analysis, the researcher considered the objectives and context of the study (Lê & Schmid, 2022), further using the narrative analysis approach to identify core themes and personal insights and performative analysis to explore how these narratives are presented and received in various social settings. Through the researcher balancing the use of narrative and performative analysis techniques in this study as stated by Barsigian et al. (2020) gained a more holistic understanding of the experiences of sexually diverse students, capturing both the personal meanings and the social dynamics that shape their experiences.

#### **4.6 Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness of a study as stated by Forero et al. (2018) refers to the degree of confidence in data, interpretation, and methods used to ensure the quality of a study. In establishing

trustworthiness, Lincoln and Guba (1986) created a criterion in qualitative research, known as credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability. The establishment of such criteria by Lincoln and Guba, according to Korstjens and Moser (2018), ensures that the data is credible, dependable, confirmable, and transferrable.

Ensuring trustworthiness in a research study is crucial to maintaining the research findings' credibility and integrity. Credibility refers to the extent to which the findings of this study are believable and accurate from the perspective of the participants and the researchers (Forero et al., 2018). In establishing credibility in this study, the researcher ensured that the data collection and analysis processes were systematic and well-documented. The interview process was conducted using the same questions until data saturation was achieved. The analysis process, through narrative thematic analysis in collaboration with a performative narrative analysis process, was stipulated to ensure transparency of the used process, further ensuring credibility within the study.

Lincoln and Guba (1986) further defined transferability as the extent to which the findings of a qualitative study can be applicable or relevant to other contexts or settings. In ensuring that the researcher achieved this, a representative sampling method was used, that is, a purposive sampling method, which allowed the researcher to identify and select individuals knowledgeable about the phenomenon under investigation, that is, sexually diverse student experiences regarding their social acceptance in a university context.

The researcher's detailed and precise documentation of the research procedures and analysis techniques ensures that dependability is established in this research study. To ensure this, the researcher provided a detailed description of the research methodology employed to conduct the study and the data, which was organised into themes after transcribing the recordings received during the interviews.

Confirmability is related to objectivity and the extent to which the researchers' biases, perspectives, or values influence the findings. To ensure that the researcher did not influence the study's findings, the researcher applied reflexivity, and peer examination, which is seeking external reviews from the research supervisor and peers to determine that the researcher did not influence the study, was done to enhance the credibility of the study.

#### **4.7 Ethical Consideration**

Ethics are regarded as the quality of the research procedure followed within the research, regarding adherence to a professional, legal, and social obligation to the research participants (Polit & Beck, 2004). Ethics in research primarily aims to protect the rights and welfare of

participants involved in the study (Gordon, 2020). Before conducting such a study, the researcher applied through the University of Pretoria Survey Coordinating Committee for the management of the data across the data lifecycle for the success of the research project and then received an approval letter from the office of the Registrar at the University of Pretoria for this study (see **Appendix B**). The letter was used to apply for ethical clearance at the University of Pretoria Ethics Committee (see **Appendix C**). Ethical clearance was obtained with the protocol reference number: **HUM037/0923**.

Since the research study involves human participants, it may unintentionally harm them by retelling and reliving traumatic experiences. Hence, strict ethical constraints and principles ensure that no human rights are violated. In accordance with these regulations, the researcher followed the necessary steps in gaining participants and collecting data. These are outlined and discussed below.

#### **4.7.1 Informed Consent**

According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), informed consent ensures that research participants are given adequate information regarding the research, ensuring that they understand what is required of them to participate in the research, any threats and benefits of participating in the study, enabling them to participate in the research voluntarily. Participants were informed that they had the right to withdraw from the study without explanation or consequence. To ensure that voluntary participation is acknowledged, a written informed consent form was provided to participants (see **Appendix D**), giving them a platform to consent to participate in this study voluntarily. Consent forms were written and translated according to the participant's level of understanding. The researcher communicated the purpose of the research further, providing participants with the participant's information sheet (see **Appendix C**) detailing the study and the aim of the research, further allowing the participants to ask questions concerning the study.

#### **4.7.2 Right to Confidentiality**

Since sensitive information is gained through interviews, the study must protect the participant's privacy. Lewis (2003) claimed that the researcher should highly emphasise confidentiality to the research participants. Keeping participants' identities anonymous is one method that protects the research participants' rights (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

The current study guaranteed the maintenance of confidentiality through the researcher and research participants being the only people in the Microsoft Teams meeting during the interviews. Furthermore, pseudonyms were used to avoid using the participant's names and

revealing materials, respectively (Burns & Grove, 2001). The researcher ensured that no unauthorised access to the data was allowed and that the research data was only made available to the researcher and the supervisor.

#### **4.7.3 Referral Option for Support**

At the end of the semi-structured interviews, the researcher and participant debriefed by discussing the interview process. Debriefing allowed the researcher to identify whether the participant was not left emotionally harmed or traumatised from the interview. The researcher minimised harm by ending the interview positively and focusing on the participants' strengths. To avoid re-victimisation as research participants retold their lived experiences, an option to refer them to the University of Pretoria Psychological Service Centre (PSC) and counsellors from the selected social service centres was suggested to the participant should they need it at any time after the research.

#### **4.7.4 Benefits and Risks**

There are some benefits and risks associated with the method used in this study. Barsigian et al. (2020) asserts that the use of narrative design helps researchers explore the research participant's personal stories and experiences in depth, which offers insights into their challenges, successes, and how they navigate their identities at university. The researcher focusing on individual narratives, Stroud (2023) stated that it uncovers the unique ways in which sexually diverse students navigate social acceptance, discrimination, and support networks at the university. Furthermore, narrative design empowers marginalised voices by enabling participants to express their experiences in their own words, ensuring their perspectives are both heard and understood (Cunsolo Willox et al., 2013), this study allowed research participants to share their experiences and feelings from their perspectives regarding social acceptance at a university in South Africa. Due to the sharing of information, awareness regarding possible coping mechanisms was also attained.

Through participating in these types of studies, participants contribute to a broader understanding of the challenges and successes faced by the LGBTQ+ community within the university context. They also provide insights that raise awareness on specific issues affecting sexually diverse students, helping to fill gaps in knowledge and potentially leading to more informed policies and support services.

Nevertheless, using narrative design in this context also comes with risks. Simundic (2013) speaks of the potential for the researcher being biased in interpreting and presenting the analysed narratives, Simundic (2013) further states that using such a method, the researcher

can over-emphasise certain aspects of the stories while neglecting others, which can potentially distort the representation of the participants' experiences. According to Salkind (2010) the nature of the narrative design would then mean that findings may not be easily generalisable beyond the context of the study participants. In line with Salkind's (2010) argument, Queirós et al. (2017) concurs, stating that even though narrative design provides in-depth insights into individual experiences, it may lack the statistical rigour and generalisability of quantitative methods, which limits the broader applicability of the findings to other settings or populations.

In mitigating the risks associated with the design used in the study, the researcher selected a diverse and representative sample to help ensure that the perspectives and experiences of different groups are adequately represented (Cash et al., 2022). The researcher further established a clear criterion for data collection, analysis, and interpretation, which reduces the chances of subjective interpretation (Johnson et al., 2020). The involvement of the research supervisor as a peer reviewer in this study further minimised the chances of the research being biased (C. J. Lee et al., 2013). The researcher ensured transparency in reporting methodologies and analytical decisions, which ensured the fairness of the interpretations presented (Moravcsik, 2020). Addressing the challenge of generalisability in narrative research, as highlighted by Salkind (2010) and repeated by Queirós et al. (2017), the researcher used purposive sampling to ensure diversity among participants, in so doing enhancing the potential transferability of findings to similar settings or populations (S. Campbell et al., 2020).

#### **4.7.5 Participant consideration**

Participating in a research study according to Alexander et al. (2018) involves both benefits and risks that need careful consideration. Nass et al. (2009) further states that participants taking part in a research study provide valuable data that can lead to new discoveries and interventions that benefit everyone, as participants get a platform to reflect on their own behaviours, attitudes, and social contexts. However, Wendler (2020) declares that there are also risks to consider. For instance, privacy and confidentiality then become a significant concern, as research involves sharing personal or sensitive information (Mobolaji, 2021).

In the context of this study, participants can provide valuable insights into their experiences and perspectives, which are often underrepresented or misunderstood, further helping shed light on the challenges and successes they face in the university environment and encouraging a more inclusive and supportive academic community. Through their narratives, the research can inform university policies and practices, promoting greater understanding, acceptance, and equity for all students, regardless of their sexual orientation. Furthermore, participants may

find value in reflecting on their experiences and feeling that their stories contribute to broader societal change.

However, there are risks associated with participating in such sensitive research, one potential risk is the breach of privacy and confidentiality, as sharing personal information about one's sexual orientation and social experiences can be deeply sensitive, in this case, the researcher ensured that confidentiality is kept as the researcher and the research supervisor only have access to the data, further, the researcher implemented a strict data protection measure, such as using pseudonyms instead of using participants names and using secure, encrypted systems for storing and handling personal information. Emotional risks in such a study can be evoked; as discussing personal experiences related to sexual orientation and social acceptance can evoke strong emotions, potentially causing stress, anxiety, or discomfort, in countering such risk the researcher provided alternatives such as redirecting research participants to supportive counselling services to ensure a sensitive, non-judgmental approach throughout the study.

#### **4.7.6 Reflexivity**

A rigorous and objective method in the research study must be in play to establish trustworthiness and credibility (Teh & Lek, 2018). Reflexivity within qualitative research can be determined as one of the most challenging and crucial factors (Dodgson, 2019). The researcher's description of the intersecting contextual relationship between the participants and themselves not only increases the credibility of the research findings (R. Berger, 2015) but also enhances the comprehension of the study.

Researchers are to consider self-knowledge and sensitivity, with a better understanding of their role in knowledge creation, self-monitoring their biases, beliefs, and subjective experiences on the phenomenon under investigation, and maintaining a balance between personal and universal knowledge (Berger, 2015). The researcher's position as an insider or outsider, or whether they have shared experiences with the research participants, is important when considering the similarities and differences between the researcher and the participants (Berger, 2015; Teh & Lek, 2018). Therefore, the researcher must be aware of these similarities and differences.

Reflexivity, according to Berger (2015, p. 221), is a "researchers' conscious effort to be familiar to one's reactions to research respondents; it assists in identifying and clarifying potential or actual effects of personal, contextual, and circumstantial aspects on the research

process and findings of the study and maintain their awareness of themselves as part of the phenomenon they study.”

Finlay (1998) references the importance of a reflexive stance that the researcher considers during the research process, which may lead to a good understanding of the data collected. A key point of reflexivity concerns an exploration of the researcher’s role in the research process, as reflexivity recognises that knowledge cannot be separated from the knower, in this case, the experiences of sexually diverse individuals (Ide & Beddoe, 2023). Patnaik (2013) offered caution about the dangers of reflexivity, which might turn into the researcher’s subjective experiences.

As a researcher, it is important to critically reflect on your own positionality and its potential impact on the research process and outcomes (Mthombeni, 2024). Taking into account the South African context, according to Gyamerah et al. (2019) South Africa has a unique socio-political landscape, with a progressive constitution regarding sexual orientation, however societal prejudices persist, which then requires an approach to understanding and interpreting the lived experiences of individuals identifying as sexually diverse.

In conducting this research, I recognised that my own identity played a significant role in shaping how I approach this study and how I understand the experiences of LGBTQI+ students. As a black, heterosexual man, I do not share the lived experiences of sexually diverse students. However, I chose to focus on this topic because I believe it is important to understand how these students navigate their lives within a university setting where stigma and discrimination are still present. Many students hold onto cultural and religious beliefs that see homosexuality as something wrong, and this can create a challenging environment for LGBTQI+ students.

My goal in this research is to offer a voice to those who may feel marginalised in these spaces. Although I come from an outsider’s perspective, I aim to learn from their stories and better understand their experiences of acceptance, rejection, and resilience. I am aware that my position as a heterosexual man may affect how my participants interact with me. Some may feel less comfortable sharing certain aspects of their experiences, while others may feel more open. For instance, as I conducted interviews, some participants were free and open to sharing their experiences, and some were holding back and not sharing some of their experiences. This is something I reflect on as I conduct this research, knowing that my identity may shape the way participants express themselves.

It is essential for me to stay open-minded and sensitive to their stories. My aim is to provide a safe space where they can speak freely, even if I do not share their background. I understand that I am coming from a place of privilege, and I want to ensure that their voices are heard in a

way that respects their unique experiences. At the same time, I acknowledge that my perspective influences how I interpret their stories, which I must be mindful of throughout the research process.

This research taught me that awareness of one's identity is important. As a researcher, I must constantly think about how my background shapes the questions I ask, how I interact with participants, and how I make sense of the data. I recognise that my perspective as an outsider could influence the findings. However, my hope is to use this position to gain deeper insight into the challenges and successes LGBTQI+ students face in navigating university life. This reflexivity is an ongoing process, and it helps me remain committed to ensuring that the participant's voices are represented as honestly as possible.

#### **4.8 Chapter Summary**

This chapter covered the research methodology relevant to the study. The research approach, namely the qualitative research approach, and research design, namely narrative research design as suitable for the study of the phenomenon of investigation. Discussed the sampling method, as well as the procedure for data analysis, were explored. The data were collected using a blended approach that involves semi-structured face-to-face and online interviews using Microsoft Teams, allowing flexibility in obtaining information. An audio recorder was used as a data collection method, capturing all information provided by the research participants with follow-up questions that provided rich data for transcription and analysis. The chapter concluded with ethical considerations that ensured that the researcher adhered to the institutional ethics regulation as stated in the chapter and, finally, a reflexivity evaluation of the data collected by the researcher. The following chapter explores the results of the study.

## Chapter 5: Findings and Discussion

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the findings and discussion from the data collected through semi-structured interviews with individuals identifying as sexually diverse at a university in South Africa. This study aimed to explore the experiences of sexually diverse students regarding their social acceptance in a university in South Africa. The minority stress theory by Meyer (2003b) was employed to provide a clear interpretation and application for this study, and findings were then supported by previous literature.

The presentation of the data will consist of direct quotes from the transcriptions to demonstrate the participants' narratives and experiences. These narrations will be discussed with reference to existing literature. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of sexually diverse students at a university in South Africa, providing an understanding of their social acceptance and how they navigate their identity in an educational context.

The following section presents data analysis aligned with the research objectives to identify recurring themes among the participants. This approach allowed the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of shared experiences among the participants. The analysis explored in line with these research objectives, the challenges faced by sexually diverse students in accessing social networks that contribute to their acceptance and inclusion on campus, how sexually diverse students cope with heteronormative discourse and practices in the university space, how the sense of belonging and feelings of alienation among sexually diverse students impact their psychological well-being and understand how sexually diverse students utilise their agency to resist heteronormativity within educational settings. These objectives shape the direction of the analysis, ensuring that the findings are aligned with the main aim of the study.

The table below demonstrates common themes and subthemes identified from the narrative of research participants when collective analysis was done.

Table 2: Research objectives aligned with main themes and sub-themes of the study.

Research Objectives	Main Themes	Sub-themes
<b>1. To explore challenges faced by sexually diverse students in accessing social networks that contribute to their acceptance and inclusion on campus.</b>	Support and Representation through student organisations and visibility on campus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Institutional support and visibility</li> <li>• Peer support</li> <li>• Lack of representation</li> <li>• Role of queer societies</li> </ul>
<b>2. To explore how sexually diverse students cope with heteronormative discourse and practices in the university space.</b>	Peer-based Discrimination	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Experiences of Transphobia and Discrimination               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Indirect and subtle discrimination</li> <li>• Lack of emotional acceptance</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
	Coping mechanism	
<b>3. To explore how the sense of belonging and feelings of alienation among sexually diverse students impact their psychological well-being</b>	Experiences of belonging and exclusion.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A place of belonging</li> <li>• Feeling of belonging and exclusion</li> <li>• Comfort versus Discomfort</li> </ul>
<b>4. To explore and understand how sexually diverse students utilise their agency to resist heteronormativity within educational settings.</b>	Challenging heteronormativity through education and advocacy.	

The initial objective of this study was to explore challenges faced by sexually diverse students in accessing social networks that contribute to their acceptance and inclusion on campus. This section focused on presenting the findings of the first objective. Under this objective, one theme emerged: Support and Representation. Under the theme of Support and representation, the following subthemes emerged: Institutional support and visibility, Peer support and the Role of queer societies.

## 5.2 Support and Representation

Support and Representation as a theme emerged as most participants provided similar responses when describing their experiences with support and representation at the university. The findings revealed that nearly all participants recognised the importance of safe spaces and visible support, noting how these contribute to their sense of belonging on campus. According to participant's explanations of their experiences, this section discusses the following subthemes: Institutional support and visibility, Peer support and the Role of queer societies.

### 5.2.1 Institutional support and visibility

During the interviews, the participants stated that as institutional support for LGBTQIA+ students was present in their university environment, many still faced challenges related to visibility and inclusivity on campus.

For instance, Ayanda mentions the presence of an LGBTQI society and a pride wall on campus, *“Ever since we installed the pride wall on all our campuses, it was the representation that the queer people needed. But we need more seminars on inclusivity and diversity”*.

This participant emphasised the importance of creating opportunities to discuss gender and inclusivity, suggesting that more regular campus talks, or a compulsory module could better inform students about LGBTQIA+ issues.

Building on Ayanda's narration, Nala has a positive view on how the campus environment had been accommodating, also noting the role of support,

*“There was an SRC member who was part of the homosexuals, and she invited me to an event discussing sexual orientation and gender identities, which was informative.”*

This response shows that some supportive initiatives exist, and they are often student-led, leaving room for institutional involvement.

While Nala's narrative points out their positive experience, Siphos spoke about one of the challenges they faced due to peer's lack of comfort sharing space, stating that.

*“I was once allocated in a room with someone who did not want to stay in the same room with me because I was not straight. He even called his parents and caused a fuss about it”*.

They further speak of the interventions by the residence department from the university in addressing the matter *“He ended up in the same room with me because the residence department here is a bit more open.”*

Siphos's experience further shows a gap in peer acceptance and suggests that further awareness and sensitivity training could prevent such discriminatory actions. It also highlights the

institution's involvement in providing support in addressing what seemed to be indirect discrimination.

Expanding on the importance of awareness programs, Bongani spoke of the need for increased institutional efforts in awareness programs for students transitioning from high school environments, where discrimination was more prevalent.

*“Maybe they can do this like what we are doing right now and raise that Yeah Guys like to feel to make about the LGBTQ people, to feel comfortable. We can do this and this and this and this. Like ngekhe singakwazi u joiner sonke kule zoom meeting (We cannot be able not to join such platforms like zoom meetings) for those that are interested”.*

This recommendation by Bongani aligns with the need for consistent visible support structures on campus.

Similarly, Amani suggested that LGBTQIA+ visibility was still limited and that *“visibility campaigns on campus, especially in common spaces like the Piazza, could promote awareness and acceptance.”*

Amani felt that although peer interactions were often neutral, the lack of formalised visibility efforts made it difficult to determine the prevalence of acceptance or support.

Lastly, Zuki spoke of an experience of perceived discrimination, which impacted their comfort in social settings.

*“I’m hesitant to speak to people unless they seem sexually diverse as well, as I’m not sure how others will react.”*

Zuki’s experience demonstrates the importance of a supportive university culture to address the feelings of alienation among LGBTQIA+ students.

Participants acknowledged the presence of institutional support for students identifying as sexually diverse, such as pride walls, societies, and interventions, however, certain challenges remained visible regarding visibility, inclusivity, and peer acceptance. They further emphasised the need for more initiatives such as seminars, compulsory modules, visibility campaigns and transition campaigns intended to create understanding and acceptance and address discrimination and alienation in campus spaces.

These findings are in line with studies by Arndt and de Bruin (2006) and Mwaba (2009) which report an increase in homophobic behaviours both within communities and reflected in campus settings. University campuses reflect societal structures, often repeating the prejudices and biases students bring with them. As noted by Munyuki and Vincent (2017), university life in South African residences presents mixed experiences for LGBTQIA+ students, with specific spaces, such as male residences, sometimes amplifying homophobia.

A study by Kiguwa and Langa (2017) further suggest that heterosexual students still hold homophobic attitudes toward LGBTQIA+ students. Through the work of Singh et al. (2013) which demonstrates systemic oppression, these findings reveal underlying structures within universities that continue to impact LGBTQIA+ students' experiences. This perspective then provides a framework for addressing these systemic barriers, advocating for changes that support a more inclusive campus culture for LGBTQIA+ students.

### 5.2.2 Peer Support

Peer support as a sub-theme to the research participants revolves around a sense of acceptance and understanding shared amongst peers within the university. For these participants, peer support is not only about being accepted but also about having a safe space to interact with friends and other students who acknowledge and respect their sexual identities. Such form of support for these individuals creates a sense of belonging, further reducing isolation.

In line with the context of this study, peer support as a sub-theme shows how sexually diverse students navigate social acceptance. Some positive relationships create a sense of confidence and resilience in the university, but sometimes acceptance can be inconsistent. This theme emerges as it reflects how these participants feel included and valued and how it assists them in facilitating their social and emotional being in the university.

For instance, Thabo's narration shows positive experiences navigating social connections within the university environment. This further suggests that their sexual identity has not been a barrier in forming friendships and engaging with peers. Thabo's ability to easily access social networks demonstrates the importance of a supportive community that allows individuals to connect without fear of discrimination.

*"I have never had a problem accessing social networks, I've never."*

Similarly, Ayanda's perspective illustrates the importance of having a supportive social space where friendly interactions occur. This further demonstrates how Ayanda engages with others, creating an environment of acceptance that contradicts hostile environments. This shows how peer support through positive interactions creates a sense of being included in the student community.

*"When I create or rather when I engage with people, I believe that I'm only mostly approved by people that are quietly friendly."*

Nala's narrative speaks on their experience of being accepted without the need for special consideration, which demonstrates a community where individuals are accepted for who they

are rather than their sexual identity. This treatment creates a sense of belonging, further promoting the idea that peer support thrives in environments where everyone is treated fairly.

*“I was not special. I was not that egg that they had to protect because I’m gay, so I can’t say I had special treatment, but I was treated equally the same way that all other people have been treated, were treated rather.”*

Sipho’s consideration of their friends and the LGBTQIA+ society at the university emphasises the importance of peer support as a support system. This narrative demonstrates how community ties with such organisations can provide emotional and social support, further creating a sense of belonging and identity among members. Sipho’s experiences show the role played by peer support in creating a network of understanding within LGBTQI+ spaces.

*“The main support system is still my friend group. I found lots of community with them in a LGBTQIA+ society at the university.”*

Bongani's narrative also emphasises the importance of supportive friendships in navigating university life, as reflected in their roommate's support. Their narrative reflects the comfort and security that comes from having a reliable support system. Their use of the phrase *“he’s got my back”* shows the mutual support that characterises strong friendship and the importance of peer relationships in creating confidence in them.

*“I enjoyed being around him because he’s the best. He got my back and he’s the best guy I ever ordered.”*

Amani’s narrative shows the challenges of initial social anxiety and recognises the accessibility of peer support groups like the LGBTQIA+ society at the university. Regardless of the anxiety, Amani’s participation reflects how such groups welcome further demonstration of the importance of looking for communities that enhance personal growth. This indicates that peer support can help address feelings of isolation, encouraging individuals to engage with others without hesitating.

*“That is, that aren't really a lot of barriers, because I found a LGBTQIA+ society at the university and I joined the group, but I only joined it later in the year. So, I guess the only barrier would be that I'm too nervous to go and socialise with them. That would be the only barrier, I'd say.”*

Zuki’s experience, on the other hand, speaks of small gestures of acceptance, showing how simple acts can significantly impact feeling belonging within a community. This quote illustrates the idea that peer support is not only about big gestures but can be found in everyday interactions that can create a welcoming environment. Zuki’s experience further emphasises

the idea that inclusivity and support are created through respect and acknowledgement among peers.

*“It’s more like small things where I just feel welcomed, or I feel accepted. Rejection is usually a lot more intense things, but in that case, I guess there is also a mirror of or sometimes they can co-occur because as I said. I have sometimes people just intensely glare at me for being present and then sometimes I have had other people criticise those People expressing judgement. So, it is kind of balanced out.”*

Peer support emphasises the importance of acceptance and understanding among peers in creating a safe and inclusive university environment for students identifying as sexually diverse. Research participants view peer support as a way to feel accepted and reduce feelings of isolation. The experiences shared by participants emphasise inclusive communities where individuals are treated equally. The presence of LGBTQI+ organisations provides emotional and social support.

A study by Kia et al. (2021) asserts that peer support is considered a source of acceptance and goes against external prejudice and discrimination. Such experience goes hand in hand with Tajfel and Turner (1979) theory of social identity, which suggests that belonging to a supportive social group creates one capability for dealing with identity-related stressors.

Finding by Bregman et al. (2013) note that social connections within supportive groups can create a sense of belonging and relieve the experience of alienation for individuals identifying as sexually diverse in academic spaces. *“Small gestures of acceptance”* as stated by Zuki can have a more significant impact in establishing a sense of identity and well-being, this is shown in a study by Topor et al. (2018) focusing on how small things or micro-affirmations can be helpful for one's mental health.

Hence, peer support for students identifying as sexually diverse emerges as a sub-theme since, for them, it is an important factor for creating identity affirmation and socially integrating themselves in the university environment. This further demonstrates the need for the university to enhance inclusive policies and support networks that empower sexually diverse students, promoting an academic and socially friendly environment for all students.

### **5.2.3 Role of Queer Societies**

The role of queer societies as stated by seven participants is to create a supportive community for sexually diverse students within the university. These societies act as a safe space where students can freely express their identities without the fear of being judged or discriminated.

These societies provide important resources, peer support, and social networking opportunities for sexually diverse students, which help them navigate the challenges of university life. In the context of this study, most of the participants stated that these societies are important in enhancing social acceptance by creating an inclusive and visibility on campus, through the painting of the wall with representative colours and having campaigns on campus, this helps sexually diverse students feel more included and accepted in the university space.

Thabo describes gatherings at the university where LGBTQ+ students and anyone under the “rainbow nation” come together to celebrate events like festivals. These spaces provide an atmosphere where students feel free to express their identities and connect with others, creating inclusivity and visibility within the university environment.

*“In the University, there are platforms where gay people meet, not really gay people, everyone who fall under the rainbow nation, they all meet and have more like festival and stuff.”*

Ayanda speaks of being part of the LGBTQ+ society on campus, which offers a protective and support network. This sense of community has helped Ayanda not feel discriminated against, suggesting that the group has played a significant role in building resilience and offering social support for individuals who might face marginalisation.

*“Being part of the LGBTQI and transformation society on my campus, it’s a group, right. So, I think that also helped me and not get any discrimination or anything.”*

Building on the sub-theme of the role of queer support, Nala mentions attending an event organised by members of student representative council who identify as part of the LGBTQI+ community. This event provided information on sexual orientation, gender diversity and transgender identities, further highlighting the educational role such gatherings play in promoting awareness and understanding of LGBTQI+ issues among students.

*“There was an SRC who was part of the homosexuals. So, she invited me to this other event where they were just talking about sexual orientation and different genders. They even educate you about transgender.”*

Similarly, Siphonotes recent initiatives, including LGBTQI+ meetings and a LGBTQIA+ societies office, a space for sexually diverse students. This kind of support networks for sexually diverse students at the university suggests an institutional acknowledgement and support of LGBTQI+ students, creating a sense of inclusivity and support from the university.

*“There are initiatives like LGBTQI meeting on campus, which I think started the previous years and they are also in societies and year, they are programmes, there’s even a sexually diverse students office, which they call it a LGBTQIA+ society office.”*

In addition, Bongani mentions receiving invitations to LGBTQI+ community talks, which serve as a signal of acceptance and support from the university. This outreach speaks to the university's commitment to inclusivity, further providing LGBTQI+ students with opportunities to feel recognised and welcomed.

*“They will send us the invitations that we should join the LGBTQI talk community group. I’m not sure but there is that for you like to indicate that they’ve got our support, and they accept us.”*

Also, Amani speaks about the LGBTQIA+ society at the university, which is a queer society that facilitates socialisation among queer students. This society provides an important social space, where queer students meet, build friendships, and find sense of belonging in a community that understands their experiences and challenges.

*“There’s a LGBTQIA+ society, so that society is actually really cool. But that’s just for queer students to meet other queer students and just socialise.”*

Zuki’s narrative emphasises the importance of the feeling of belonging to the LGBTQIA+ queer society. This quote shows the importance of a dedicated LGBTQI+ society in creating a space where students can feel accepted and comfortable within the university environment.

*“Belonging, I’d say, is at the LGBTQIA+ society at the university, a queer society at the university.”*

The participants describe the university as creating inclusivity and support for students identifying as sexually diverse through various initiatives, societies, and events. Organisations such as the LGBTQIA+ society create a safe space for socialising, celebrating diversity and a sense of belonging. They further highlight the importance of these initiatives in enhancing visibility and awareness of sexual and gender diversity.

The findings of this study show the key role that queer societies play in promoting the acceptance and inclusivity for sexually diverse students within the university setting. Most participants emphasised that the involvement in sexually diverse societies and campus initiatives provided them with important support networks and safe spaces where they could express their identities freely without the fear of being judged or discriminated. This is reflected in a study by Woodford et al. (2015) who noted that the presence of LGBTQIA+ organisations on campus contributed to the well-being and sense of belonging among sexually diverse students.

Furthermore, these organisations provide platforms for advocacy and education, assisting in raising awareness and challenging heteronormative norms within the university community (Renn, 2010). By organising events, meetings, and open dialogues, these societies increase

visibility and create a more inclusive campus. Hence, active engagements and the presence of queer societies are important in improving university experiences for sexually diverse students.

The second objective of this study was to explore how sexually diverse students cope with heteronormative discourse and practices within the university environment. This section presents the findings related to this objective, with two main themes: Peer-based Discrimination and Coping mechanisms. Within the theme of Experiences of discrimination, three sub-themes emerged: Experiences of transphobia and discrimination and Indirect and subtle discrimination.

### **5.3 Peer-based Discrimination.**

The experiences of discrimination for six participants speak of them facing both subtle and clear discrimination based on their sexual and gender identities. Discrimination is indirect and manifest through avoidance or discomfort from peers. Some participants reported more explicit instances, like *derogatory comments* or even being excluded from social networks, leading to the feeling of isolation or alienation. They further describe such experiences as reminders of societal biases that continue to influence their social interactions in an academic space.

#### **5.3.1 Experiences of transphobia and discrimination**

The findings indicate the experiences of transphobia and discrimination, which the participants found hurtful and often offensive because of their gender identity. For many, discrimination is not always clear but can show in subtle ways, that is, through indirect comments, avoidance, or even hostile shared spaces. Some incidents are more direct, involving verbal harassment and confrontational situations that emphasise lack of acceptance and discomfort in shared facilities.

Ayanda's quotes show the emotions of facing unwelcoming and harmful comments due to their gender identity. Their narrative further demonstrates the transphobia that affects their daily interactions, as people felt the need to voice prejudiced opinions. Such exposure to hurtful remarks, according to Ayanda, is not only hurtful but also creates a sense of isolation as these can affect one's sense of belonging in public spaces.

*"I'd get transphobic remarks from people outside, people feel they need to say something, something that's hateful. And it hurts. I don't wanna lie. It does hurt."*

Ayanda further notes an incident in the restrooms, which demonstrates how gendered spaces can initiate discriminatory remarks, where individuals identifying as sexually diverse can face direct attacks that question their right to occupy specific spaces. The verbal aggression of

Ayanda's gender identity of being called a man, emphasises the lack of acceptance and security that transgender individuals often experience in settings that should feel safe.

*“On Saturday, I was using the ladies restrooms, another lady was mimicking what I was saying. She started attacking me with words, kept on saying ‘Hey you’re a man. Why are you using the ladies restrooms?’”*

Similarly, Zola's experiences in the classroom show the discomfort and alienation that can arise from overhearing discriminatory remarks. The bigoted conversation among classmates forced Zola to adopt strategies of avoidance, such as sitting in specific spots so as to minimise interactions with those who made them feel unsafe. This shows how transphobia and discrimination can create barriers to fully engaging in academic and social experiences, leading to isolation and limitations.

*“There was a moment in second year, we had to do field work, and two guys started talking about queer people in a very discriminatory way or like bigoted ways, and that just made me avoid them. I would sit in specific places in class, so I don't get paired with them.”*

Zola's narration further speaks on the discriminatory comment made by a faculty member, which left an impact on Zola, shadowing their experience in the module. This shows how the power dynamics effects of discriminatory behaviour within educational institutions, especially when coming from authority figures.

*“I remember one member of the faculty made a very unnecessary comment about gay people, and I just didn't enjoy the module at all for the rest of the year.”*

This quote shows the subtle discrimination that can occur when others learn about one's sexuality. The *“invisible barriers”* mentioned by Zola reflects how social interactions become avoided, showing lack of acceptance that creates isolation. Zola's experiences speak on the social consequences of disclosing one's identity and the fear of rejection from peers.

*“When people find out I'm not straight, they sort of avoid me. It's like there's this invisible barrier that goes up between us.”*

From the context of high school, Bongani's narration of their high school abuse shows the reality of many LGBTQI+ youth who experience discrimination. Regardless of focusing on their studies as a coping mechanism, the abuse still has an impact, this shows how discrimination affects people's emotions and mental well-being.

*“In high school, I experienced an incident of discrimination, boys there were abusing me, it was hard. I would just focus on my schoolwork, but it still affected me.”*

Lastly, Siphos experience with their roommate who refused to live with them, which escalated the situation by involving their parents and the residence department, shows the stigmatisation LGBTQI+ individuals face in shared living arrangements. This incident shows the lack of support and the challenges LGBTQI+ students face in residential settings, where personal biases can disrupt their comfort and sense of home.

*“I had a roommate who refused to stay with me because I was not straight. He even called his parents and made a complaint to the residence department.”*

The narrative shared by participants shows how discrimination and prejudice affect individuals identifying as sexually diverse in their everyday life. The participants face challenges like feeling unwelcomed in public spaces, uncomfortable in the university space and unsupported in places where they live.

Some avoid certain situations or people to protect themselves, leading to feelings of isolation and exclusion. Hurtful words, hostile treatment, and lack of support from others create emotional pain and pain. These narratives show the need for institutional spaces to be understanding and supportive in helping individuals identifying as sexually diverse for them to feel safe and included.

The findings from this study reveal that sexually diverse students encounter discriminatory and transphobic behaviours from their peers in the university space. This discrimination is sometimes shown as rooted in heteronormative ideals, which then reflect the broader societal attitudes that prioritise male-dominated norms. For some students, these behaviours are portrayed in both subtle and clear ways. These behaviours create a challenging environment where sexually diverse students feel alienated.

Experiences of being discriminated against reported by some participants are not from peers only, but also institutional challenges. Some students noted discriminatory comments from academic staff. This emphasises a need for institutional policies that actively support inclusivity and create a safer educational environment. This is further emphasised by Dessel et al. (2017) and Woodford et al. (2018) stating that institutional cultures affect the inclusivity experienced by sexually diverse students, they further illustrate that the presence of active policies and awareness-raising initiatives are important for reducing discrimination and creating supportive spaces.

Moreover, according to Meyer's (2003b) minority stress theory, sexual minorities often encounter stressors related to discrimination, which affects both their mental health and social connections. The experiences stated by some of the participants show that discrimination and transphobia are not limited to confrontation but have instead a hidden impact. The discomfort

expressed by some participants shows the long-term impacts of such experiences, as they may hinder their sense of belonging within the university space.

In summary, these findings demonstrate the need for the university to implement and sustain active initiatives that support students identifying as sexually diverse, further creating an environment that respects and celebrates sexual diversity.

### 5.3.2 Indirect and subtle discrimination

Three participants in this study reported experiencing indirect and subtle discrimination through their social interactions, which appeared as a hidden method for excluding and causing discomfort. These participants saw avoidance behaviours and unwelcoming remarks, creating a feeling of an outsider status. Indirect discrimination by some participants was encountered in academic spaces, with some participants citing subtle comments and jokes from lecturers that made them feel unwelcome. In addition, social interactions demonstrated that some peers would change their behaviours after discovering that a particular participant in this study is sexually diverse. For instance, some peers even changed seating arrangements to avoid them.

In Zola's narration, comments and jokes made by the lecturer towards individuals identifying as sexually diverse show indirect discrimination through "plausible deniability." The lecturers' hidden remarks that cannot be considered as acceptable and inappropriate as they did not show explicit homophobic language, allow them a possibility to deny any discriminatory intent. This subtle bias reflects how prejudice can be perpetuated in academic settings under humorous interactions, making the impact of such discrimination harder to challenge or address.

Although this form of discrimination is subtle, it can cause harm. Just like overt discrimination, it can affect the student's mental health, sense of belonging, and academic success. Thus, the university needs to take such issues into account and further ensure that the university space is safe and accommodative to everyone.

*"It would mostly be comments in passing of when a group of queer presenting people would be together, lecturers would make comments and jokes that aren't like specifically homophobic, but it's like plausible, not deniability of. Well, they didn't really say anything. They didn't use slurs, so it's not really that serious."*

With regards to the "unnecessary comment" by an older researcher, it shows how casual remarks about sexuality can impact an individual's comfort and experience within educational spaces. This comment negatively impacted Zola, changing their enjoyment and engagement with the module for the rest of the academic year. Such comments show bias that LGBTQI+

individuals may encounter in academic settings, further showing how minor comments contribute to feelings of isolation and disconnection.

*“There was an older researcher; I can’t remember the comment they made, but I just remember that he made a very unnecessary comment about gay people, and I just didn’t enjoy the module at all for the rest of the year.”*

Looking into Bongani’s narration of being targeted by boys in high school asking him about traditional rites of passage *“when are you going there? To the mountain”* shows how cultural practices and expectations can be used as a tool of subtle discrimination. In this case such remarks suggest that they were failing to conform to traditional masculine ideals, which emphasise heteronormative standards.

*“In high school boys there were abusing me, for example, when I go drink water, then you find boys who would ask ‘when are you going there?’ to the mountain. That was hurting me.”*

The experiences of sexually diverse individuals within South African universities as per the findings of this study, align with the study by Sithole (2015) stating that challenges faced by gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender individuals highlight the subtle forms of discrimination that exist within higher education spaces. Education institutions pride themselves on inclusivity, the indirect discrimination faced by sexually diverse students arises from biases, societal expectations and lack of awareness among peers and faculty (Msibi, 2012).

Subtle forms of discrimination such as microaggression and dismissive comments create a ‘chilly climate’ (Garvey & Rankin, 2015, p.199) that may not openly violate policies but impact the well-being of sexually diverse students. In line with research conducted by Sue (2013), these microaggressions can reduce a student’s sense of belonging and later their academic performance.

According to Rankin and Reason (2005), universities lack targeted policies that openly address the unique needs of sexually diverse students, but instead rely on broad inclusivity policies that fail to recognise the specific experiences and challenges faced by these individuals. The minority stress theory further explains how environments dominated by subtle discrimination contribute to increased levels of stress and anxiety among sexually diverse students, impacting their academic performance and psychological health (Meyer, 2003b). In a university context, where academic achievements are considered, such incidents can have an impact on students both academically and personally (Woodford et al., 2018).

## 5.4 Coping mechanism

Coping mechanism as a theme emerged frequently in six participants. This involves the strategies they developed to navigate feelings of alienation and build resilience within the university environment. Coping for some includes selective engagements, as they choose to associate themselves with those who also are part of the LGBTQ+ community or those who are accepting of their gender identities without judgment or conflict. Some participants managed how they are seen based on context, that is, through changing expressions of identity, like how they dress or the tone of their voices, to avoid uncomfortable interactions.

For instance, Nomvula's narrative reflects self-acceptance when faced with societal challenges. This demonstrates how embracing and expressing one's identity can be a coping strategy against judgment. Their choice to be "loud and proud" removes the need for others to accept them, as they refuse to internalise negative expectations that do not align with the self.

*"So, I just believe in being myself, that was my coping mechanism. I was myself; I was loud and proud. That's how I coped. I took it as this who I am and if you have a problem with that, that is on you."*

In contrast, Ayanda's narrative shows the importance of building a supportive network and seeking community as a method of navigating the challenges they face. Through them using platforms like group chats on WhatsApp and Instagram, these create a safe space to express their feelings and connect with others who share similar experiences. Engaging with queer literature and interacting with individuals in other institutions demonstrates the proactive steps they took in creating a sense of belonging and understanding.

*"We have a group chat, we have Instagram, we talk on our WhatsApp chat, and whenever you feel like you're not okay, you talk there. I read a lot of queer stuff. I engaged with other queer people outside my institution and outside my friend's circle."*

Nala, however, emphasises personal authenticity and demonstrates that change should be a personal decision rather than a reaction to pressure exerted by others. Their statement that they will only change "when it suits me" shows the importance of staying true to themselves and living a life that is controlled by themselves rather than seeking validation from others.

*"One thing I've always told myself is that you can't change who you are for someone because it's only you who's living your life. I will never change. I'll only change when it suits me."*

On the other hand, Amani's narrative shows an unstructured strategy for coping with challenges in the university space, unlike others that seek support networks. Amani's perspective shows that each individual has their own coping strategy, as some individuals prefer to use structured methods while others rely on an unstructured approach.

*“Oh, I don't have any strategies, to be honest. I just go about my day.”*

Similarly, Zola's narrative shows how complex coping mechanisms are and their impact on their well-being. Zola speaks of avoidance *“other than avoidance”* as a coping technique to minimise being exposed to discomfort. This quote shows the relationship between coping mechanisms and the challenges faced. Coping mechanisms provide short-term relief while they struggle to find spaces where they feel safe and accepted.

*“I don't know if I have developed any coping mechanisms. Other than avoidance, I would just avoid places that I don't feel comfortable in, which is a lot of places. So that's why I don't think it's really a coping mechanism. It's more just a symptom.”*

Finally, Zuki narrated their journey towards acceptance through moments of courage. Their approach to coping involved accepting their identity even though they were faced with fear. This perspective shows the role of acts of courage in building one's confidence.

*“Coping strategies, I suppose I just learned to be less scared or commit to being myself. If I had like a moment of courage or something, I'd take that and kind of force myself to be more myself.”*

The participants shared different coping strategies for coping with the challenges they face. Some participants' narration focused on self-acceptance and the importance of embracing their identity as a method of resisting judgment. Others highlighted the role of supportive networks, using social media platforms to interact with other peers, express their emotions, and find belonging through shared experiences.

Being true to oneself also emerged as another method of coping rather than conforming to external pressures. Though others relied on support systems, others adopted an informal method to navigate challenges. Avoidance was mentioned as a method of minimising discomfort, even though it was recognised as a temporal solution.

Coping mechanisms among students identifying as LGBTQ+ are fixed in the need to navigate the campus environment that reflects the broader societal challenges and acceptance (Ganbaatar et al., 2024). Based on the experiences of the participants, the mechanisms they adopted serve as a response to homophobia, discrimination and labelling that LGBTQI+ students encounter on campus. The participants' coping strategies demonstrate the importance

of institutional efforts to deal with the issues they face through social awareness campaigns and support.

Sexually diverse students according to Van Gijn-Grosvenor and Huisman (2020) use safe social networks to create connections, reduce isolation, and create self-acceptance and belonging within university settings. Such networks are justified by the critical social work theory by Mullaly (2010) as they advocate for the transformation of social structures through challenging homophobic attitudes by creating inclusive spaces. The critical social work theory suggests that social change involves changing the oppressive laws and practices that reinforce marginalisation, further providing a framework for changing the societal and institutional barriers encountered by sexually diverse students.

The objective is to explore the impact of a sense of belonging and feelings of alienation on the psychological well-being of sexually diverse students and investigate the experiences these students encounter as they navigate feelings of acceptance or exclusion within the university environment. The emerging theme includes the feeling of belonging and inclusion, within this theme recurring themes between participants include a place of belonging, a feeling of belonging and comfort versus discomfort.

## **5.5 Experiences of belonging and exclusion**

Some participants in the study indicated that the feelings of belonging and inclusion are different based on the experiences of acceptance within the university setting. Many participants felt a sense of comfort and acceptance from their peers, which allowed them to navigate campus life without fear linked with being openly LGBTQI+. These feelings were created by supportive friends who embraced them without judgment. However, others experienced a sense of exclusion stemming from interactions where they were met with judgement and lack of understanding from specific individuals within the university space.

For some, the university LGBTQI+ events and social groups played a significant role in creating this sense of belonging. These events and groups provided safe spaces for connection and support, helping students feel acknowledged and seen. Though this theme speaks of the feelings of belonging being mixed, as some participants felt that these initiatives are limited, as they connect queer students rather than bringing interactions with the broader student populace.

### **5.5.1 A place of belonging**

Participants in this study expressed a sense of acceptance and comfort within the university spaces, which helped create a secure environment for sexually diverse students. Many

participants described university spaces, including LGBTQIA+ groups and social circles, where they felt welcomed and could freely express their identities without fear and judgment. These inclusive spaces allowed participants to experience support, making campus life more affirming and less isolating.

Thabo's experiences demonstrate the importance of acceptance in creating a sense of belonging for individuals who feel vulnerable about their identity in the social environment. Based on their first day at the university, their fear about being judged because of their sexual orientation was different as they received support and understanding. This shows how acceptance and open communication can challenge the assumed fear further creating an inclusive space where individuals feel accepted for who they are.

*“On my first day, I had a lot of straight friends they were able to see that I'm not straight. They told me that I shall be fine. Then, like from that day, we started to talk about everything, they did not really discriminate against me the way I thought they would, but instead, they accepted me the way I am.”*

Thabo further emphasises the importance of visibility and representation within the university environment, especially for individuals identifying as LGBTQI+. They speak of how seeing others, including staff members, embrace their identity creates an encouraging space for those that may feel hesitant to express themselves.

*“In the university, even people who are working in the university, some of them identify themselves under the LGBTQI+. It's more like, which is encouraging. It's trying to help each other as other people were not free to show that they fall under the rainbow nation.”*

In addition to Thabo's experience, Bongani's quote shows the importance of the unexpected support received by Bongani in building a sense of trust and belonging. Bongani speaks of the support they received from someone they considered a stranger. This shows the importance of meaningful relationships for individuals navigating challenges of acceptance as they are part of a minority group.

*“I never met a stranger who supports me like the way he does, he got my back and he's the best guy I ever had.”*

From a broader institutional context, Thabo's narrative speaks on the role of universities as spaces that promote inclusivity for individuals to express their identities without fear of being discriminated against. Thabo further recognises how the institution created an environment where individuals identifying as sexually diverse feel safe and supported in being themselves. This shows how the university can be a progressive space for encouraging diversity and inclusivity, which is important for creating a sense of belonging.

*“The universities are still doing a very nice thing here, in all the universities, that’s where people are more like having a place of comfort. And showing up everything that want to show up whether they are under the rainbow nation.”*

Moving from institutional support to personal empowerment, Amani’s narrative shows the declaration of self-acceptance motivated by the words of a public figure. Amani further shows a sense of pride in their identity and their determination to assert themselves *“I’m taking up space and cementing myself”* in spaces they have felt marginalised. Quoting the message of Ms Universe Zozibini Tunzi, a former Ms universe 2019 in her Ms Universe speech *“We should be teaching young girls to take up space. Nothing is as important as taking up space and cementing yourself.”* demonstrates their journey towards claiming their place in their community and the importance of visibility.

*“I see that I belong, I’m taking up space. As what former Ms. Universe said. I’m taking up space and cementing myself.”*

The narration provided by participants demonstrates the importance of acceptance, support, and representation in helping individuals identifying as sexually diverse to feel like they belong. Support from friends, according to them, reduces the fear of being judged further, creating a safe, welcoming space where they feel understood. The observation of other students and staff openly embracing their sexual identities also helps individuals feel confident about their sexual identities.

These findings illustrate the significant role that an inclusive and supportive environment plays in creating a sense of community for sexually diverse individuals. A study conducted by Garvey et al. (2015) suggested that the presence of societies and pride symbols representing LGBTQ+ individuals enhances their feelings of acceptance and security. These initiatives provide more than safety but also create psychological comfort as they allow students to express their identities freely without discrimination (Woodford et al., 2015). Such findings emphasise the importance of visible support structures within educational institutions.

### **5.5.2 Feeling of Exclusion**

Some participants' experiences show the realities of sexually diverse students in navigating university life. Exclusion as a subtheme is visible through discriminatory remarks, microaggression and exclusion in social spaces, which this often creates a sense of being unwelcomed or unsafe. For instance, subtle bias from peers, such as derogatory comments, creates a sense of apartness. These experiences often lead to students avoiding specific spaces or interactions, which further impacts their academic focus and social connections. For

example, Ayanda recalls of an incident where they were verbally harassed while using a women's restroom. Regardless of them standing up for themselves, things escalated into a public confrontation. This shows the challenges faced by sexually diverse individuals in asserting their rights to access gender-appropriate spaces without fear of being discriminated against.

*“She kept on saying, hey, you're a man. Why are you using the ladies restroom? And she just kept on pulling my hair. Whatever incident happened; it didn't really have to go any further. My family had to deal with her cause I just didn't want to engage.”*

Ayanda further points out the lack of institutional recognition for diverse gender identities at the university. Mentioning that application forms and housing assignment are based on binary gender categories, ignoring the existence of non-binary and transgender students. This kind of exclusion shows a structural issue that leads to feelings of being excluded and invisible for individuals identifying as sexually diverse.

*“When we apply for varsity, they put two genders, male and female. They've never put any gender-fluid options, transgender, or non-binary. It really reinforces that the institution doesn't fully see us.”*

On the other hand, participant 8 describes an incident during a group project in which two heterosexual male peers made derogatory comments about LGBTQI+ individuals. These comments created a hostile academic environment for Zola, as it led to them avoiding those individuals completely. This shows how discriminatory language from peers can alienate sexually diverse students in learning spaces.

*“Two guys started talking about queer people in discriminatory ways. That just made me avoid them. I would sit in specific places in class, so I don't get paired with them”*

These narratives show the exclusion faced by sexually diverse students in the university environment, shown through systematic, interpersonal interactions and structural barriers. Some speak of verbal harassment, discriminatory comments, being questioned and attacked for their gender expression. These scenarios create a hostile environment, leading students to avoid specific spaces and individuals to protect themselves.

Structurally, some sexually diverse students as per their narrative are seen in institutional practices such as binary gender options on application forms and housing allocations, which for them ignores the existence of non-binary identities, creating a feeling of exclusion. Academic settings are also seen as sites of exclusion, with discriminatory language from peers affecting the students' ability to participate fully.

A study conducted by Llorens et al. (2021) speaks on biases towards sexually diverse students in university spaces, stating that this is a reflection of societal biases and structural inequalities. In line with Llorens et al's (2021) study, Cech and Waidzunas (2011) adds that many universities, regardless of their commitment to diversity, perpetuate environments where heteronormativity dominates which marginalises LGBTQI+ students. As mentioned in some of the narratives by participants in this study, these exclusions manifest as lack of representation in the university curriculum, not enough support systems and also limited visibility of queer identities in leadership roles (Mkhize et al., 2024).

These exclusionary measures according to Heffernan (2023) leave individuals identifying as sexually diverse feeling isolated and unwelcomed, further affecting their ability to succeed academically and socially. The absence of active policies and practices further enhances this exclusion, creating a cycle where sexually diverse students are marginalised (Reygan & Swanepoel, 2018).

The physical environment within universities according to Boughey (2012) also plays a role in creating exclusion, for instance, campus facilities fail to fully accommodate the needs of sexually diverse students, this includes the absence of gender-neutral restrooms and housing options for non-binary students. These challenges are further enhanced by limited access to mental health services designed to accommodate individuals identifying as LGBTQI+, leaving students vulnerable to anxiety, depression and other mental health concerns (Moagi, Der Wath, et al., 2021).

### **5.5.3 Comfort versus Discomfort**

Some participants mentioned that the university environment has changing feelings of comfort and discomfort for sexually diverse students. Some participants noted inclusive spaces, such as social clubs, and societies where they felt welcome, which provided a safe space to express their identities. However, though a platform to express themselves was present, it was opposed by uncomfortable experiences in other areas of the campus, where derogatory remarks from peers or staff created a less welcoming environment. This made participants doubtful and led to seeking areas and groups that were accepting and avoided spaces that might make them feel judged or excluded based on their sexual orientation.

Thabo's experience shows the journey of moving from fear to freedom regarding their identity. *"On my first year, I had a fear that maybe I might be treated well"* their fear of rejection speaks to the challenges that sexually diverse students face when they are in spaces where acceptance is not easily visible. However, their narrative shows the influence of community and representation in creating a safe environment. Seeing others expressing their

identities openly gave Thabo the courage to embrace their own identity, *“I would see some, that’s when I started to feel free.”* This demonstrates how visibility can minimise the feeling of isolation.

*“On my first year, I had a fear that maybe I might not be treated well. But then I started to feel free about my sexuality, like I would see some, that’s when I started to feel free.”*

While Thabo’s experience shows the positive impact of representation, Nala’s experience is a combination of good and unpleasant experience. *“It’s quite queer-friendly. But then outside I’d get transphobic remarks”* even though some places make Nala feel accepted and safe, there are places that portray transphobic remarks as they are exposed to prejudice and discrimination which affects their well-being. These remarks cause pain, *“It hurts, I don’t wanna lie”* showing how hard it can be for sexually diverse students to feel accepted in society. *“It’s actually quite queer-friendly. But then outside I’d get transphobic remarks. It hurts, I don’t wanna lie.”*

Shifting from Nala’s mixed experiences, Bongani’s narrative speaks of past experience in high school and their transition to a more positive experience at university. In high school, they lived in fear due to the abuse they faced, however, the university brought a sense of acceptance. Bongani further states that *“In high school I was afraid, but here everyone around campus knows there are people who are sexually diverse,”* these words show how inclusive and accepting environments can make a difference from turning fear into a feeling of belonging. Bongani’s experience shows how the university has provided a sense of safety, free from discrimination as experienced in the past. This shows the importance of supportive spaces.

*“I was very happy. To think that in high school I was abused because I’m gay. Here at university, people are minding their own business.” “In high school I was afraid, but here everyone around campus knows there are people who are sexually diverse. That’s how I feel that I belong.”*

In Bongani’s narration, they express a sense of relief and happiness with their past experiences of abuse in high school due to their sexual orientation. Them mentioning “I was very happy” shows a positive change in their current situation, where they are more accepted for who they are, as they transitioned from discomfort in high school to comfort in university.

*“Since I’ve been at university, I don’t have commotion of having a conflict, we are happy, we are fine.”*

In contrast to Bongani’s sense of belonging across the university, Zuki’s narrative shows the limited sense of belonging within the university space. *“I feel like I only belong when I’m around queer students or around people in my department that I know are accepting”* this

shows that they find comfort and acceptance within certain groups since not all areas provide the same level of acceptance. Zuki continues to say, “*In my department, there are certain staff who aren't accepting,*” which shows them navigating unwelcoming environments where they have to show less of their identity to avoid judgment.

*“I feel like I only belong when I'm with queer students or around people in my department that I know are accepting. It's very pocketed ("pocketed" refers to a sense of belonging or acceptance that is limited to specific, isolated groups or spaces rather than being widespread or universal).” In my department, there are certain staff who aren't very accepting. So, I try not to stand out too much in those areas.”*

The above illustrates that the experiences of sexually diverse students at the university are conflicted with feelings of comfort and discomfort. While inclusive spaces and supportive groups offer a sense of belonging, sexually diverse students still encounter areas where discomfort arises from indirect discrimination, which limits their engagement on campus.

The findings of the changing environment leading to sexually diverse students feeling pocketed according to Rankin et al. (2019) create a feeling of moving towards safe spaces and remaining cautious in less accepting spaces. Such patterns according to Garvey et al. (2015) who perceived that the availability and LGBTQI+ student being part of the inclusive groups enhances their academic engagement. However, Seelman (2016) speaks on the inconsistency in inclusive campus areas that restrict the sexually diverse to fully feel accepted, further stating that the generic approach used by institutions does not create a consistent sense of belonging.

### **5.6 Challenging heteronormativity through education and advocacy.**

The last objective of this study was to explore and understand how sexually diverse students utilise their agency to resist heteronormativity within educational settings. The findings related to this objective is presented through the main theme: Challenging heteronormativity through education and advocacy. This section provides an overview of this theme.

The study findings indicated that educational efforts are important in creating a supportive and inclusive environment for sexually diverse students within the university setting. Most participants stated that initiatives such as seminars, pride events and student-organised discussions play a significant role in promoting an understanding of sexual diversity and challenging heteronormative norms.

Ayanda's narrative shows their advocacy for sexually diverse individuals on campus. As the chairperson in one of the university's societies, they represent students who feel unsupported. This portrays their dedication in ensuring that the voices of sexually diverse students are heard and addressed.

*“I am currently the chairperson of the LGBTQIA and transformation society representing all the sexually diverse individuals that are out there and are not really represented.”*

Ayanda further extends to speak on the need for visible and active support for LGBTQI+ students in the university. Suggesting the need to organise events such as pride events to celebrate diversity. This quote emphasises the importance of public displays in normalising and creating a supportive environment for sexually diverse individuals within the university spaces.

*“Let’s have pride events. Let the university have a Pride match as well. You know, like you’d see in. Like you’ll see in a political structure, right, the political party would have a match made for trans, you know, you’ll see like a rainbow and stuff like that.”*

Thabo’s narrative is on how visible symbols, like colours of the LGBTQI+ community, have an influence on the attitudes of people on campus. This quote shows how visual displays are influencing change. The paintings are more of a representation of the university’s effort to create inclusion. The presence of these symbols is a step towards acceptance.

*“There was this painting of the rainbow nation, like those colours of LGBTQIA+ and stuff, people are starting to, not really digest it, but they are trying to accept it.”*

Nala’s narrative on pride events and discussions around sexual orientation and gender are important ways for the student population to raise awareness. They describe how these events serve as a visibility mechanism of showing unity and acceptance towards individuals identifying as sexually diverse.

*“There’s this thing called pride that people go to, that’s how they show their togetherness, you know, different people, different colours.”*

Nala further shared their experience of attending an event organised by a student representative council that focused on educating students about sexual orientation and gender diversity. This shows that such events can provide learning opportunities, which create an understanding of LGBTQI+ issues.

*“An SRC member invited me to this event where they were just talking about sexual orientation and different genders, it was very informative, and I liked it.”*

The findings from some participants' narratives show the vital role played by the initiative in empowering sexually diverse students and further creating inclusive educational settings. These findings indicate that events like pride celebrations, educational seminars and advocacy create a platform for students to challenge the status quo (heteronormative norms) on campus and promote understanding regarding their identities. The presence of supportive societies and

visual symbols, such as pride the pride wall, enhance the environment by demonstrating the inclusivity of LGBTQI+ individuals.

According to Rand et al. (2021b) inclusive educational methods, such as LGBTQI+ advocacy and visible symbols of support, are important for going against the marginalisation faced by sexually diverse individuals. These methods add to creating an environment that promotes psychological safety and social acceptance (Rankin et al., 2010). A study by Vaccaro and Newman (2016) further state that student organisations and campus events effectively increase awareness and facilitate discussions that create a more inclusive academic culture.

The findings of this study indicate that sexually diverse students face different challenges on campus, including discrimination and feelings of exclusion. Some participants' narratives speak of open and subtle discrimination affecting their comfort and sense of belonging. This is echoed in a study by Kiguwa and Langa (2017) who identified that institutions of higher learning tend to reflect societal homophobic attitudes. The theme of Support and representation demonstrated that, as much as there are efforts to create supportive environments, that is, LGBTQI+ organisations such as the LGBTQI+ society and pride events, those efforts were inconsistent; as participants mentioned, institutional involvement was needed to ensure acceptance across campus.

Educational efforts and awareness played a vital role in promoting understanding and challenging the heteronormative norms and negative stereotypes. Events like pride celebrations, seminars, and student-organised discussions were regarded as effective in raising awareness and creating inclusivity. However, some participants indicated that the efforts were insufficient to change the accepted campus culture.

Another theme was Experiences of discrimination to which some participants described incidents where they encountered discrimination, for instance, some participants mentioned negative remarks and exclusion by peers and their discomfort interactions with some faculty staff members. This type of discrimination is more of a reflection of societal attitudes. These findings align with a study by Woodford et al. (2015) which asserts that the presence of discriminatory behaviours and language towards a minority group can impact their well-being.

Coping mechanisms emerged as participants narrated the strategies they developed in handling discrimination on campus. These include finding supportive peers, joining LGBTQI+ societies, and looking for safe spaces on campus. As much as these strategies were used, the university needs to address the cause of discrimination and provide support systems, as some participants considered these methods temporary reliefs. The theme of feeling of belonging and inclusion, in line with the previous theme, mentions that some participants felt supported in

some areas of the institutions or by groups. However, they experienced discomfort on the broader campus setting. Further pointing out the need for university-wide initiatives that create safe and acceptance rather than isolation and discrimination.

Based on these narratives, these findings reflect difficult experiences faced by individuals identifying as sexually diverse, from the university's role in creating an environment where every student feels safe and included. The university should implement educational programs, campaigns, and awareness efforts to address discrimination and support LGBTQI+ students. Further ensuring policy against discrimination is not just written on paper but a consistent practice in the university environment.

## **5.7 Interpretation of the results**

### **5.7.1 Experiences of discrimination**

The findings of this are in line with the existing literature, demonstrating the challenges faced by sexually diverse students with higher education. A recent study conducted by Jones (2019) emphasises how higher education institutions unintentionally reinforce exclusionary practices through policies that lack enforcement. Singh and Durso's (2017) study on LGBTQI+ students across campuses in the United States of America found that even though there is an existence of inclusion campaigns, discriminatory practices continue to exist. This is in line with the experiences of some participants in this study who experienced discomfort when interacting with some peers and faculty members, to which this further emphasises Kiguwa and Langa's (2017) point that educational institutions are a reflection of societal attitudes.

A study by Simatele (2018) found that students who sensed exclusion from academic spaces faced prejudice and microaggression that affected their sense of safety. Such findings align with this study's findings, where subtle and clear discrimination were reappearing as codes. This further demonstrates that discriminatory behaviours are not isolated incidents but are part of a broader pattern coordinated with societal norms within academic settings.

Furthermore, a study by Poteat et al. (2014) asserted that exclusionary practices towards individuals identifying as sexually diverse have long-term impacts on their mental health and academic performance. Helminen et al. (2023) concurs with Poteat et al. (2014) stating that sexually diverse students experiencing discrimination were more likely to report elevated stress and disengagement from campus life. This context adds to the findings of this study on how a non-inclusive environment can affect the well-being of sexually diverse individuals within academic environments.

### **5.7.2 Support and representation.**

Creating a supportive and inclusive environment according to Cerezo and Bergfeld (2013) is considered important. A supportive university administration according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (2023) is beneficial as it would add to student-led organisations and events recognising LGBTQI+ students. Findings by Martinez-Acosta and Favero (2018) is that supportive institutions backing up student-led LGBTQI+ organisations enhanced students' perception of inclusivity and support. This is in line with the findings of this study, which demonstrates the participants' narratives of the existence of support groups and the university's efforts lacking.

Francis (2017) further states that institutions fail to adopt active support for sexually diverse students into their core mission to maintain a welcoming environment. The lack of active institutional involvement creates a disconnected experience that leaves students unsupported in the university environment. For some participants in this study, the institution needs to extend its support to ensure that policies and programs are actively upheld by university stakeholders. McBrien et al. (2022b) further points out that policy enforcement and visible commitment are important signals to students that their well-being is considered.

### **5.7.3 Challenging heteronormativity through education and advocacy.**

The presence of programs aimed at raising awareness and challenging heteronormative norms in institutions of higher learning plays an important role in clearing inclusivity (Matthyse, 2017). Johns et al. (2019) investigated the impact of workshops and seminars designed to promote inclusivity and found that these programs increased awareness in the short term, further stating that they need to be part of the ongoing curriculum to have an effective lasting change. This is in line with the study findings as stipulated by some participants that pride events and educational seminars are beneficial but not enough to shift the broader campus culture.

Brett (2021) extends by emphasising the importance of integrating these programs into the general education of universities. The study revealed that when mandatory awareness programs are reinforced through coursework, students internalise inclusive values. Participants who participated in these integrated programs felt knowledgeable towards sexually diverse peers. Moreover, Tierney and Lanford (2018) noted that cultural change in universities is often met with resistance when seen as externally imposed. Their findings suggest that students and the institution should be involved in the planning and implementation of awareness programs to enhance acceptance and efficacy. This is reflected in the participant's narrative of this study of

the need for the involvement of the institution in co-creating educational programs with the involvement of LGBTQI+ identifying students.

#### **5.7.4 Coping mechanisms**

Strategies employed by sexually diverse students according to Goldbach and Gibbs (2015) often provide temporary relief as they do not address the underlying issues of discrimination and exclusion. Sumbane and Makua (2023) explored these strategies and found that students found comfort in LGBTQI+ societies and supportive networks. The research demonstrates that without change in the institution, relying on these strategies can lead to emotional exhaustion, as reflected in the current study's narratives, as participants made use of coping mechanisms as temporal solutions.

Liu et al. (2023) further stated that universities with mental health interventions created for LGBTQI+ students portrayed a reduction in stress levels. This then suggests that making use of supportive peers and LGBTQI+ societies has a positive impact. However, there is a need for such interventions to be complemented by institutional support systems in addressing student-specific needs, which further provides holistic preventative strategies. Additionally, Ajjawi et al. (2023) investigated how students' sense of belonging influenced their coping strategies. In their findings, those supported by their institutions were equipped to handle the discrimination they faced in the university environment, however, with institutional support lacking, students were likely to be exposed to negative experiences, leading to anxiety. This goes back to the theme of belonging and inclusion. This then emphasises the need for the university to actively create environments where students feel safe.

#### **5.7.5 Experiences of belonging and exclusion**

Having a supportive school environment and a sense of belonging according to Denny et al. (2016) and Perales and Campbell (2020) (as cited in Chan et al., 2022b)) are connected with lower levels of minority stress, better academic results, and better health and well-being among LGBTQ students. A study by Adams (2023) found that the presence of university policies, and activities made them comfortable and engaged. This supports the findings that some participants felt supported and represented by specific groups at an institutional level such as the SRC.

Davis (2023) asserts that when a university actively involves students, staff, and faculties in promoting inclusion, the campus becomes a more welcoming place. This aligns with some participants' narratives who found support in some parts of the university, and still experienced discomfort in the broader campus setting. This then shows that belonging is about a culture

where everyone feels accepted. In creating that sense of belonging according to Eubank and DeVita (2024) requires the commitment from the university community as a whole, that is inclusive training programs, campus-wide events, and supportive policies. Some participants' narratives emphasised the need for the whole campus to take part in the campaign of promoting inclusion.

### **5.8 Theoretical Implication: Minority Stress Theory**

The minority stress theory by Meyer (2003) asserts that individuals who belong to a minority group experience stressors due to stigma, prejudice, and discrimination, which can impact the mental health and well-being. The participants' narratives in this study support this theory as they spoke of various levels of stress they have experienced on campus. Participants described open and subtle forms of discrimination, exclusion, and discomfort interactions, to which this is in line with the concept of the minority stress theory due to external stressors such as societal and institutional prejudice.

The theory further illustrates how these stressors are present in the everyday life of students identifying as sexually diverse. For instance, some participants mentioned their feelings of isolation and the need for safe spaces so to cope with discrimination. These experiences are linked to the minority groups' attempts to develop coping mechanisms as a response to stressors. In addition, the need for supportive peer networks fits the theory's framework that suggests that coping mechanisms can help mitigate stress; however, they do not address the cause of the stress linked to discrimination and stigma.

However, the minority stress theory explains the stressors and coping strategies of students identifying as sexually diverse, the findings of this study point out limitations to the theory. The study's emphasis on institutional support and inclusive interventions illustrates the importance of transforming the environment with the intention of reducing the source of stress rather than managing stress. The existence of personal and group coping mechanisms is important for sexually diverse students, however, systematic changes are important in creating a sense of belonging and inclusion. A more integrated approach that combines individual strategies and institutional interventions is then needed. This further challenges the theory to include the impact of proactive efforts in reducing minority stress.

### **5.9 Conclusion**

This chapter presented the study's findings through collective analysis between the participants in identifying common themes among the participants, providing quotes and

descriptions of the themes linking the findings to the study's objectives and existing literature and further providing a discussion of the results in line with the studies theoretical framework to provide a broader context.

This study shows the challenges that sexually diverse students face on campus, including discrimination, feelings of exclusion and insufficient support provided by the institution. The findings of this study highlight the importance of the experiences of sexually diverse students within the context of the Minority stress theory, which explains the impact of discrimination on the minority group. The study further contributes to understanding how the university can support LGBTQI+ students.

This study further points out that the university needs to change general initiatives and adopt a culture of holistic inclusion, as the findings of this study emphasise the importance of collective, broader efforts that combine educational programs, policy reinforcement and active involvement in creating an environment where all students feel safe and accepted.

## **Chapter 6: Conclusion and Recommendations for Future Research**

### **6.1 Introduction**

The previous chapter focused on discussing the study's findings and interpretation of the results in line with the research question and existing literature. This chapter summarises the study's conclusion, further providing recommendations for future research based on the findings and taking note of the limitations that may have impacted the study's outcomes.

### **6.2 Overview of findings**

This study looked at the experiences of sexually diverse students regarding their social acceptance at a university in South Africa. Through the use of semi-structured interviews, the findings show that these experiences are influenced by support from the university, their interaction with peers, and the ways of coping with challenges.

One of the findings is on support and representation, the participants' narrations highlighted initiatives like the LGBTQIA+ society, pride walls and seminars that assisted them in feeling included and safe within the campus environment. These initiatives created spaces where they could freely express themselves and connect with others. However, these initiatives were not enough for others, further suggesting that the university could do more, that is, creating more visible campaigns, regular events and compulsory courses on diversity to help educate everyone on sexual diversity.

Some participants narrated positive stories about the support they receive from friends and peers that made them feel accepted and included. These positive interactions with their peers helped them feel like they belong. However, other participants spoke of facing discrimination and transphobia. This includes negative comments, being excluded from social groups or a feeling of being ignored. Such experiences made it hard for them to completely feel accepted on campus, further leading to feelings of isolation.

Furthermore, the study showed how some participants had to cope in dealing with these challenges. Some participants found comfort in LGBTQIA+ societies and supportive peer groups. Others mentioned that they focused on being proud of their sexual identity as a method of resisting judgement. However, for some participants, avoidance was their coping method of avoiding specific spaces or people, so to protect themselves from discrimination. Even though some of these strategies assisted them temporarily, they also mentioned the need for the university to address the cause of these challenges.

Some participants mentioned that they felt a sense of belonging in specific spaces, like the LGBTQIA+ societies or supportive friends. These spaces allowed them to feel safe and valued; however, outside of these groups, some participants felt excluded. For instance, they noted that the university forms and housing options only recognise heterogeneity, that is, male and female genders, leaving out non-binary sexual identities, further causing them to feel invisible. The combination of inclusion and exclusion with the university space shows how unequal social acceptance is across the campus.

In terms of challenging heteronormativity in education, the study found important ways according to participants to improve social acceptance. Some participants spoke of pride events, seminars, and discussions as being helpful in raising awareness and encouraging inclusion. However, some participants felt the efforts were insufficient to change the general campus culture. Further suggesting that the university must make these initiatives consistent and included in the everyday campus life.

In summary, the study addresses the research question by identifying the experiences of sexually diverse students on campus, through pointing out the institutional support, peer interactions, coping mechanisms and the visibility challenges experienced by sexually diverse students. This study further suggests that creating social acceptance in the university environment needs a holistic approach, which includes more institutional support, consistent inclusivity initiatives, awareness campaigns and active policies that recognise the diversity of sexual diversities and expressions.

### **6.3 Main conclusion**

The main conclusion drawn from this current study regarding the experiences of sexually diverse students' experiences concerning their social acceptance in a university in South Africa is the challenges they face that have an impact on their well-being and sense of belonging. One key finding was that discrimination in two forms, that is, clear and subtle, remains prevalent. This further affects their comfort, engagement, and ability to participate in university life, contributing to feelings of isolation and exclusion within the university environment.

Even though there is an existence of support organisations, events and an LGTQI+ display wall on campus, these interventions are not enough and are not sustained by an active involvement of the institution. Based on the responses of some participants, these initiatives provide some form of support; however, they are not enough to create a culture of inclusivity. Active and ongoing support from the university is important in ensuring that these efforts are

integrated, further upholding anti-discriminatory policies to demonstrate the institution's commitment to protect students identifying as sexually diverse.

Seminars, workshops, and pride events were found to be beneficial as educational efforts to raise awareness and promote inclusivity. However, they were not seen as enough for creating long-term change, as they create short-term understanding and visibility. Participants emphasised the need to integrate a university curriculum to create a shift in the culture on campus. In creating these programs, participants mentioned being involved so to ensure that the content is relevant in challenging heteronormative norms and promoting inclusivity.

Seeking out supportive peers and joining societies to find safe spaces as methods to cope on campus was seen as a temporary solution providing comfort, as these strategies do not address the cause of discrimination and exclusion. This suggests that as much as peer support groups play a significant role, changes in approaches by the university can create a supportive and accepting environment.

Some participants who find support and representation through certain groups and areas within the university may still experience a sense of disconnection from the entire campus community. This emphasises the need for more inclusive campus efforts that involve the whole university community in promoting acceptance and creating a culture where all students feel safe and respected.

#### **6.4 Strengths and Limitations**

The exploration of the experiences of sexually diverse students regarding their social acceptance in the university environment is important, as it demonstrates how sexually diverse students navigate the university environment. Such an exploration is important for creating an understanding and creating a more inclusive and supportive environment.

Through the study focusing on the experiences of sexually diverse students, it addresses an underrepresented group in research, further contributing to equity and inclusivity. This focus provides a platform to enhance the voice of the minority group, which can empower these individuals further, creating awareness. In addition, the study's focus on the South African context, a country with a constitution protecting LGBTIA+ rights offers a platform to explore the relationship between existing policies and the lived experiences of sexually diverse individuals.

A key strength of this study is its potential to generate qualitative data that captures the realities of sexually diverse students. Through the method used, that is, semi-structured

interviews, allowed the exploration of in-depth subjective experiences that a quantitative approach may not fully capture. This further allows for a holistic understanding of the challenges and successes that sexually diverse individuals encounter regarding social acceptance.

This study also aligns with the global efforts to promote diversity and inclusivity in university spaces. Universities internationally are focusing on the importance of creating safe and accepting spaces for all students, also those identifying as sexually diverse, making this research a contribution to these broader discussions. Furthermore, this study shows the cultural dynamics and societal perspectives influencing how sexually diverse individuals navigate heteronormative spaces in university.

However, the study has a potential for sample bias, as participants who chose to participate have certain narratives and experiences that are different concerning their social acceptance, which limits the generalisation of the findings. Even though the research attempted to include diverse gender identities to capture diverse perspectives, the sample does not fully represent differences in experiences influenced by factors such as race, socio-economic background or rural versus urban settings. With the study limited to the sampled student population at a particular university in South Africa, the findings may not be transferable to another geographical setting.

### **Recommendations**

Based on the experiences of sexually diverse students in this study, it is recommended that the university should enhance its institutional support and ensure that policies are not just written but are actively enforced. This involves training faculty staff to recognise and address discrimination and setting up procedures as a response to addressing discriminatory behaviours. Implementing active inclusive policies will show their commitment to creating an inclusive environment for all. Centres or safe spaces on campus providing physical and emotional availability for LBGQTI+ students should be established.

An integration of educational programs into the curriculum would be a key step. As much as workshops and pride events play a significant role, ongoing interventions should be linked to academic learning. This would allow the university to promote a long-term cultural shift that challenges heteronormativity and stereotype.

There should be an emphasis on supportive services for LGBTQI+ students. This includes ensuring that LGBTQI+ groups and organisations receive institutional involvement. Expand

counselling services, mentorship and safe spaces that can provide support networks for students.

Educate faculty staff and students about LGBTQ+ issues to build understanding and empathy. This includes the university organising workshops, training sessions and awareness campaigns to sensitise the student community about the challenges faced by individuals with the LGBTQI+ community. This initiative can help dismiss myths, challenge stereotypes, and promote respectful dialogue.

Regular assessment and feedback techniques to understand the campus climate and the effectiveness of the intervention programs. This evaluation of the interventions would ensure that the university is up to date with the current state of the experiences of university students and their needs.

The university should further contribute to developing and advancing LGBTQI+ rights and understanding through supporting research on this topic. Encourage university faculties to explore LGBTQI+ topics in their research and provide opportunities for research projects that involve collaborating with the community to expand the knowledge and positive change.

### **6.5 Limitations to the study**

The sample size and scope of participants do not completely represent the broader LGBTQI+ student population, limiting generalisability. However, the aim of the study and the purpose of making a qualitative approach was not to generalise but to capture the participants' experiences in the study. The study research was conducted within the context of a single university, which reduces the applicability of the findings to other higher education institutions. The study used a purposive sampling technique, with an addition of snowball effect in finding research participants, the study might demonstrate homogeneity within the sample, as the referral process might have included individuals who share similar experiences.

### **6.6 Potential Directions for Future Research**

Further research could focus on ensuring that LGBTQI+ policies are actively enforced in the university environment.

Research the cultural shift within universities that challenge heteronormativity and stereotypes, further look at what kind of interventions that are more active and impactful.

Future research could also focus on studying the impact of awareness campaigns, seminars, and discussions on reducing the existing myths and stereotypes about sexually diverse

individuals. Further, assess how different demographic groups within the university respond to these campaigns.

Future research could also focus on analysing the effects of institutional support to determine the functioning and effectiveness of the existing support for LGBTQI+ individuals on campus.

Conducting comparative studies across universities to determine diverse cultural and national contexts to identify successful strategies for promoting LGBTQI+ inclusivity.

Research could also focus on the under-researched aspect of LGBTQ+ experiences such as intersectionality with race, religion, and socioeconomic status.

## **6.7 Conclusion**

This study explored the experiences of sexually diverse students regarding their social acceptance at a South African university. The findings of the study indicated that initiatives like the LGBTQIA+ societies, pride events and seminars help create a sense of belonging, however, not enough to address discrimination and exclusion faced by individuals identifying as sexually diverse. Through their narration, they still encounter challenges such as feeling isolated or invisible regardless of these existing initiatives.

The study's findings further indicate the need to create and reinforce anti-discriminatory policies, provide inclusive educational programs, and ensure that the university is fully involved in promoting diversity and acceptance. Furthermore, the study identified that safe spaces and peer support, as narrated by the participants, offer temporal support as they do not solve the challenges they face.

In general, the study shows the need for long-term efforts by the university to make the campus more inclusive for all students, further encouraging future research to explore methods that will ensure support for sexually diverse students, creating a homogeneous environment in higher education institutions.

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## Appendices

### Interview Schedule

### APPENDIX A

Research Topic: An exploration of sexually diverse student's experiences regarding their social acceptance at a university in South Africa: A narrative approach.

### Exploring Experiences

1. Could you please share what it has been like for you as a student identifying as a sexually diverse student in university?
2. Have you personally experienced acceptance or discrimination from your peers based on your sexual orientation or gender identity? Please give an example.
3. How did these experiences shape your interactions with your peers afterwards?
4. Did you seek help or support following any discriminatory experiences, and if so, how did that go?
5. Can you tell me about any specific incidents that stood out to you regarding your experience of acceptance or lack from your peers?
6. Did the incident have any long-term impact on your university experience?
7. Have you noticed any differences in your interactions with peers who know about your sexual orientation or gender identity versus those who do not?
8. How do you feel your relationships with peers have shaped your university experience overall?
9. How has your sexual orientation or gender identity influenced your relationships with your peers at the University?

### Campus Climate and Policies

1. How would you describe the overall climate at the University towards sexually diverse students?
2. How do you think the university could better educate students and raise awareness about sexual diversity?

### **Challenges faced by sexually diverse students.**

1. How do you perceive the overall campus climate regarding your acceptance and inclusion?
2. What are some specific challenges you encounter in accessing social networks?
3. In what ways do you feel that your identities are represented and acknowledged within existing campus social networks?
4. What barriers do you encounter in forming connections with others who share similar experiences?
5. What strategies or support systems do you believe would improve your access to inclusive social networks on campus?

### **Psychological well-being**

1. Can you describe your experiences and feelings related to belonging and alienation as a sexually diverse student within the university environment?
2. Are there particular moments or places within the university where you feel a stronger sense of belonging or alienation?
3. How have your feelings of belonging or alienation evolved throughout your time at the university?
4. What role, if any, do student groups, organisations, or events play in shaping your sense of belonging?
5. Could you tell me about your experiences as a sexually diverse student in the university?
6. In terms of fitting in and feeling like you do not belong. Have you ever felt pressure to change or hide aspects of your identity to fit in? Can you describe those moments?
7. Are there specific groups or communities within the university where you feel more or less accepted?

8. How do you think your sexual identity has impacted your overall sense of belonging and connection to others in your academic environment?
9. Have you experienced barriers to connecting with certain people or groups due to your sexual identity?
10. Have you found it easier or harder to build connections with people from diverse or similar backgrounds in terms of identity?
11. Can you share any coping strategies or mechanisms you have developed to navigate feelings of alienation and foster a sense of belonging as a sexually diverse student?
12. Have you found support from specific communities or networks that have helped you feel more connected?
13. What advice would you give to other sexually diverse students who may be struggling with similar feelings of alienation?

## Survey Committee Approval Letter

## APPENDIX B



Office of the Registrar

2024-06-20

Mr K Jonga  
Department of Psychology  
Faculty of Humanities  
University of Pretoria

Email: [u23864274@tuks.co.za](mailto:u23864274@tuks.co.za)

Dear Mr Jonga

### APPROVAL OF RESEARCH STUDY

The UP Survey Coordinating Committee has granted approval for the research study titled "An exploration of sexually diverse student's experiences regarding their social acceptance at a university in South Africa: A narrative approach".

The proposed research study has to strictly adhere to the associated study protocol, as well as the UP Survey Policy and the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities instructions.

Please liaise with the Market Research Office in the Department of Institutional Planning ([carlien.nell@up.ac.za](mailto:carlien.nell@up.ac.za)) to officially register the study and to finalise the survey regulations, procedures and the fieldwork dates. In order to register the study, the Market Research Office has to receive the formal ethical approval letter from the Faculty of Humanities.

A final electronic copy of the research outcomes must be submitted to the Survey Coordinating Committee as soon as possible after the completion of the study.

Kind regards



**Prof CMA Nicholson**  
**REGISTRAR**  
**CHAIRPERSON: SURVEY COORDINATING COMMITTEE**

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[www.up.ac.za](http://www.up.ac.za)

**Kantoor van die Registrateur**  
**Ofisi ya Morejistara**

## Research Ethics Committee Letter

## APPENDIX C



## Faculty of Humanities

Fakulteit Geesteswetenskappe  
Lefapha la Bomotheo



27 June 2024

Dear Mr KI Jonga

Project Title: An exploration of sexually diverse student's experiences regarding their social acceptance at a university in South Africa: A narrative approach  
Researcher: Mr KI Jonga  
Supervisor(s): Dr SL Liccardo  
Department: Psychology  
Reference number: 23864274 (HUM037/0923)  
Degree: Masters

I have pleasure in informing you that the above application was **approved** by the Research Ethics Committee on 27 June 2024. Please note that before research can commence all other approvals must have been received.

Please note that this approval is based on the assumption that the research will be carried out along the lines laid out in the proposal. Should the actual research depart significantly from the proposed research, it will be necessary to apply for a new research approval and ethical clearance.

We wish you success with the project.

Sincerely,



**Prof Karen Harris**  
**Chair: Research Ethics Committee**  
**Faculty of Humanities**  
**UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA**  
**e-mail: tracey.andrew@up.ac.za**

**Research Ethics Committee Members: Prof KL Harris (Chair);** Ds S Abdoola, Mr A Bizos; Dr S Chigeza; Dr A-M de Beer; Dr A Dos Santos; Prof Salome Geertsema, Prof P Gutura; Ms KT Govinder Andrew; Dr D Krige; Mr A Mohamed; Dr T Nkoha-Ramunenyiwa; Dr I Noomé; Dr C Puttergill; Prof D Reyburn; Prof E Taljard

Room 7-27, Humanities Building, University of Pretoria, Private Bag X20, Hatfield 0028, South Africa  
Tel +27 (0)12 420 4853 | Fax +27 (0)12 420 4501 | Email: pghumanities@up.ac.za | www.up.ac.za/faculty-of-humanities

## Participant Information Sheet

## APPENDIX C



### PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

#### Exploration of sexually diverse student's experiences regarding their social acceptance at a University in South Africa: A narrative approach.

Hello, my name is Kwezi Indiphile Jonga, I am currently a Master student at the Faculty of Humanities, University of Pretoria. You are being invited to take part in my research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take some time to read the following information carefully, which will explain the details of this research project. Please feel free to ask the researcher if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information.

#### WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THE STUDY?

**[Briefly give the background of the study and describe the purpose of conducting that particular study]**

- The purpose of this study is to explore the stories of sexually diverse students at a University in South Africa as this will provide valuable insight into the experiences of sexually diverse students and assist in moving toward a climate free of heteronormativity and homophobic discrimination. Little is known about the experiences of students identifying as LGBTQ in a heteronormative campus environment. Hence the study ought to explore the stories of sexually diverse student's experiences regarding their social acceptance at a university in South Africa.
- The overall aim of this study is to explore the narratives of sexually diverse student's experiences regarding their social acceptance in a university in South Africa.

#### WHY HAVE YOU BEEN INVITED TO PARTICIPATE?

**[Recruitment, state the Inclusion and Exclusion criteria]**

- You are invited to participate because you can assist the study to shed light on the experiences of sexually diverse students in relation to social acceptance at a university in South Africa.
- You have also complied with the following, that you are currently enrolled as students at a university in South Africa, and you self-identify as sexually diverse, which includes LGBTQ and participants that are of legal age of consenting.
- You will be excluded if you are not currently registered as a student at a university in South Africa, as well as heterosexual registered students.

#### WHAT IS THE NATURE OF MY PARTICIPATION IN THIS STUDY?

Departmental Research Committee (ResCom)  
 University of Pretoria, Faculty of Humanities, Department of Psychology  
 Humanities Building, Lynnwood Road, Hatfield, 0083, South Africa  
 Private Bag X20, Hatfield 0028, South Africa  
 Email: [psychology.rescom@up.ac.za](mailto:psychology.rescom@up.ac.za)  
 Website: [www.up.ac.za/psychology](http://www.up.ac.za/psychology)

Fakulteit Geesteswetenskappe  
 Departement Sielkunde  
 Lefapha la Bomotho  
 Kgoro ya Saekolotši

**[Give a detailed procedure, preferably in chronological order. Clearly state what will be the participant's involvement? State the amount of time required of participants per session, and the total duration of that particular activity. Explain all the procedures using a language that is appropriate for the level of participants]**

- You will be expected to participate in face-to-face or online interviews depending on availability and your preference. This interview will take approximately 45 to 60 minutes. The interviews will be started with a short explanation, with the researcher explaining the aim of the research to you, together with the purpose of the interviews, further informing you that each interview would be recorded through the use of a tape recorder, and later writing what was recorded by the researcher. Before the data is collected the researcher will allow you to ask questions before initiating the interview.

**CAN I WITHDRAW FROM THIS STUDY EVEN AFTER HAVING AGREED TO PARTICIPATE?**

**[Explain to the participants' that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any time]**

- Participating in this study is voluntary and you are under no obligation to consent to participation. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a written consent form. You are free to withdraw at any time and without providing a reason if you decide not to take part in the study without negative consequences or being penalized.

**WILL THE INFORMATION THAT I CONVEY TO THE RESEARCHER BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL?**

**[State measures taken to ensure confidentiality] For example:**

- Confidentiality will be ensured by assigning code names/numbers to each participant, and that will be used in all research notes and documents. Findings from this data will be disseminated through conferences and publications. Reporting of findings will be anonymous, only the researchers and supervisor of this study will have access to the information.
- ❖ Please note participant information will be kept confidential, except in cases where the researcher is legally obliged to report incidents such as abuse and suicide risk.

**WHAT ARE THE POTENTIAL BENEFITS OF TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

**[List the benefits you anticipate will be achieved from this study. This include the benefits to the participants, community, society or body of knowledge. If there is no direct benefits just state that,**

Benefits for you as a participant will be to contribute to the understanding of the experiences of sexually diverse students at the University of Pretoria, as this research can help shed light on the challenges and successes faced by this community. By participating in this study, you may feel empowered by sharing your story and perspectives, as it can help validate your experiences and give a voice to your community. Your participation in the study can also raise awareness of LGBTQ+ issues among participants and the broader university community, potentially encouraging a more inclusive and understanding environment.

**WHAT ARE THE ANTICIPATED RISKS FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?**

**[List all the foreseeable risks, if any, of each of the activities mentioned in the procedure of the study. Clearly state any measures that will be used to minimize the risks] It is important to emphasise that; the benefits outweighs the risks.**

- The risks in this study involve collecting sensitive and personal information from you and the study is about social acceptance and experiences related to sexual orientation can evoke strong emotions for you. Measures to minimise these risks are through the researcher clearly explaining the purpose of the study, and the potential risks involved, with you having the option to withdraw your consent at any time without facing any negative consequences. After the study, the researcher will provide a debriefing session where you as a participant can discuss your experiences and emotions. Additionally, researchers can offer information about resources and support services available to participants, such as a student counselling unit and toll-free counselling numbers.

**WHAT WILL HAPPEN IN THE UNLIKELY EVENT THAT SOME FORM OF DISCOMFORT OCCUR AS A RESULT OF TAKING PART IN THIS RESEARCH STUDY?**

- Should you require further discussions after the interviews, you will be referred to the University of Pretoria student counselling unit, and toll-free counselling numbers (Out Well-being, Triangle Project, and Lifeline) will be provided.

**HOW WILL THE RESEARCHER(S) PROTECT THE SECURITY OF DATA?**

- Electronic information will be stored for a period of 10 years. Future use of the stored data will be subject to further Research Ethics Review and approval if applicable.
- Participant information in hard copies of raw data will be locked in the cabinet and electronic data will be kept in a file that is password protected in the Department of Psychology

**WHAT WILL THE RESEARCH DATA BE USED FOR?**

***[Indicate exactly how the research data you would have gathered from participants will be used for. This should be based on your particular research study.]***

- Data gathered from the participants would be used for research purposes that includes;
- Dissertation, article publication, national and international conference presentations
- For administration purposes or policy briefs
- For further research inform of secondary data analysis.
- Used by future researchers.

**WILL I BE PAID TO TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?**

***[Indicate whether participant will receive any compensation or any remuneration by taking part in the study. If compensation is pro-rated over the period of the participant's involvement clearly state the stages at which compensation changes during the study]***

- NO, you will not be paid to take part in this study.

**HAS THE STUDY RECEIVED ETHICS APPROVAL**

***[It is important to mention if the study has received ethical approval or not yet]***

This study has received written approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities, University of Pretoria. Ethical approval number is. A copy of the approval letter can be provided to you on request.

- The risks in this study involve collecting sensitive and personal information from you and the study is about social acceptance and experiences related to sexual orientation can evoke strong emotions for you. Measures to minimise these risks are through the researcher clearly explaining the purpose of the study, and the potential risks involved, with you having the option to withdraw your consent at any time without facing any negative consequences. After the study, the researcher will provide a debriefing session where you as a participant can discuss your experiences and emotions. Additionally, researchers can offer information about resources and support services available to participants, such as a student counselling unit and toll-free counselling numbers.

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This study has received written approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Humanities, University of Pretoria. Ethical approval number is HUM037/0923. A copy of the approval letter can be provided to you on request.

**HOW WILL I BE INFORMED OF THE FINDINGS/RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH?**

**[Explain when and how the findings will be shared with the participants]**

- The findings of the research study will be shared with you by Kwezi Indiphile Jonga after one year or two years of completing the study, upon request. (Can provide the approximate month and year)

**WHO SHOULD I CONTACT IF I HAVE CONCERN, COMPLAINT OR ANYTHING I SHOULD KNOW ABOUT THE STUDY?**

If you have questions about this study or you have experienced adverse effects because of participating in this study, you may contact the researcher whose contact information is provided below. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, or if problems arise which you do not feel you can discuss with the researcher, please contact the supervisor, and contact details are below.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet and in advance for participating in this study.

**Researcher**

Name Surname: Kwezi Indiphile Jonga

Contact number: 060 401 2104.

Email address: u23864274@tuks.co.za

**Supervisor**

Name: Dr Sabrina Liccardo

Contact number: +27 (0)12 420 4935.

Email address: sabrina.liccardo@up.ac.za

## Informed Consent

## APPENDIX D



### Exploration of sexually diverse student's experiences regarding their social acceptance at a university in South Africa: A narrative approach.

{ETHICAL APPROVAL NUMBER} (HUM037/0923)

#### WRITTEN CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY

I, \_\_\_\_\_ (participant name), confirm that the person asking my consent to take part in this research has told me about the nature, procedure, potential benefits and anticipated inconvenience of participation.

STATEMENT	AGREE	DISAGREE	NOT APPLICABLE
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason, and without any consequences or penalties.			
I understand that information collected during the study will not be linked to my identity and I give permission to the researchers of this study to access the information.			
I understand that this study has been reviewed by and received ethics clearance from the Research Ethics Committee Faculty of Humanities of the University of Pretoria.			
I understand who will have access to personal information and how the information will be stored with a clear understanding that, I will not be linked to the information in any way.			
I give consent that data gathered may be used for dissertation, article publication, conference presentations and writing policy briefs.			
I understand how to raise a concern or make a complaint.			
I consent to being audio recorded.			
I consent to have my audio recordings be used in research outputs such as publication of articles, thesis and conferences as long as my identity is protected.			
I give permission to be quoted directly in the research publication whilst remaining anonymous.			

**Departmental Research Committee (ResCom)**  
 University of Pretoria, Faculty of Humanities, Department of Psychology  
 Humanities Building, Lynnwood Road, Hatfield, 0083, South Africa  
 Private Bag X20, Hatfield 0028, South Africa  
 Email: [psychology.rescom@up.ac.za](mailto:psychology.rescom@up.ac.za)  
 Website: [www.up.ac.za/psychology](http://www.up.ac.za/psychology)

**Fakulteit Geesteswetenskappe**  
 Departement Sielkunde  
**Lefapha la Bomotho**  
 Kgoro ya Saekolotši

I have sufficient opportunity to ask questions and I agree to take part in the above study.			
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\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of person taking consent

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature