THE EXPERIENCES OF SAFETY AMONG THE LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL, TRANSGENDER, QUEER, INTERSEX, AND ASEXUAL (LGBTQIA) STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF WITWATERSRAND, SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

Discrimination, prejudice, and hate crimes against members of the LGBTQIA community remain prevalent. As a minority group, LGBTQIA individuals continue to face numerous challenges, despite university policies that describe the campus environment as inclusive. This study adopted a qualitative research approach, with data collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews. Purposive sampling was used to select participants, and the data were analysed thematically. The findings reveal that members of the LGBTQIA community experience significant safety concerns and do not perceive the university as LGBTQIA-friendly. Five themes emerged from the analysis: understanding of LGBTQIA terminology, perceptions of safety among LGBTQIA students, concerns regarding safe spaces in university residences, lack of a supportive environment, and the various challenges faced by LGBTQIA students. This study contributes to existing knowledge by providing a foundation for further research, informing and strengthening inclusive interventions and policies, and supporting LGBTQIA advocacy efforts aimed at creating safer environments that promote the well-being and rights of the LGBTQIA community.

Keywords*: Campus Safety, LGBTQIA Students, Qualitative Research, Social Discrimination, University Inclusivity*

INTRODUCTION

The lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, and asexual (LGBTQIA) community encompasses individuals with diverse sexual orientations, gender identities and expressions. This includes lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex and many other non-heteronormative identities. These individuals face challenges relating to safety and well-being due to the challenges of discrimination, prejudice and violence continue to persist(Mara et al., 2021). In South Africa, the social identity of the members of the LGBTQIA community ultimately put them at risk of violence and this was despite the laws and legislations that have been put in place to protect this community. In many countries around the world, the sexual diverse nature of the LGBTQIA community was taboo because of the strict laws and server punishment that individuals of the community are subject to (Neighmond, 2020; Stets & Burke, 2000). The study explored the experiences of safety among the LGBTQIA students at the

University of Witwatersrand, South Africa.

Until 1973, The American Psychiatric Association had included homosexuality in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (Achari, 2022). This means until the time it was officially removed from the manual, homosexuality was a diagnosable mental health disorder (Barsky, 2015). In 1981, the European Court of Human Rights ruled for homosexuality to be decriminalised in the European Union (Roberts, 2019), and the United Nations Human Rights Committee officially prohibited the criminalisation of homosexuality because it violated the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights by the United Nations. However, by 2012 sexual diversity was still criminalised in more than a third of the world's countries (Roberts, 2019). An example of the criminalisation of sexual fluidity was the Russian Gay Propaganda law that punishes the mention of homosexuality (Moreno et al., 2020). Similarly, in other countries, the LGBTQIA community continue to experience hate crimes and discrimination despite the laws and legislation that have been put in place by the government and international organisations (Achari, 2022). The Navtej Singh Johar vs. Union of India Judgement was an important milestone for the LGBTQIA community in India. This judgement decriminalised all variations of consensual sex among adults in India, both heterosexual and homosexual (Achari, 2022). In China, it was prohibited to talk about the LGBTQIA community, and the country offers no laws to protect LGBTQIA individuals against discrimination and violence therefore there are hate crimes, violence and suppression of LGBTQIA individuals (Achari, 2022).

The LGBTQIA community emerged because of discriminatory actions by society and legislation towards individuals who do not identify as heterosexual or cisgender (Dixit, 2020). The United Nations has ruled against violence towards members of the LGBTQIA community, but individuals who identify as members of the LGBTQIA community are faced with societal challenges and hate crimes because the LGBTQIA community was often viewed as "abnormal" and "against the nature" (Achari, 2022). Such challenges have fostered feelings of solidarity among the individuals who identify as part of the LGBTQIA community (Dixit, 2020). African political leaders have been unhappy with the promotion of sexual diversity, which leaves the LGBTQIA community vulnerable to verbal and physical threats throughout the continent (Winkler, 2019). As a result, the government regularly restricts the media, mostly television shows and movies, from airing pro-LGBTQ+ content (Winkler, 2021). Van Heerden, (2019), argues that there has been increased support for the LGBTQIA community in the African continent, such as the recorded improvement of rights by the International Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans and Intersex Association which reports the decriminalisation of male sodomy in Lesotho in 2012 and the new penal code introduced in Mozambique in 2015 which decriminalised homosexuality (Van Heerden, 2019). However, Africa has some of the harshest laws against the LGBTQIA community with 56% of the African continent being anti-LGBTQ+ in 2020 (Dickson et al., 2021). The harsh laws against the LGBTQIA community in most African countries have allowed stigmatisation and societal exclusion of the members of the LGBTQIA community and the suppression of their gender identities for the sake of their safety (Dickson et al., 2021).

South Africa was known for being the first African country to legalise homosexual marriages (Van Heerden, 2019). Section 9 of the Bill of Rights in South Africa grants every individual the right to equality and sub-section 3 makes provisions that include but are not limited to sexual orientation. LGBTQIA individuals are also protected under section 16 of the Bill of Rights which protects the Freedom of Expression and sub-section 2c explains that Freedom of Expression does not advocate for hatred that was based on race, ethnicity, gender or religion and that constitutes incitement to cause harm (The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996) and this has been used to guide various laws towards eliminating restrictions on the LGBTQIA community such as the Prevention and Combating of Hate Crimes and Hate Speech Bill drafted in 2018 (Moreno et al., 2019). Although the country has integrated LGBTQIA rights into the legislation, public attitudes remain negative towards the LGBTQIA community (Nyeck, 2019).

Despite being the only country on the continent to allow freedom of gender identity and expression there was still violence against the community (Moreno et al., 2019). Even in the workplace, sexually diverse employees experience prejudice that hinders their career development and job satisfaction (Hwahng & Kaufman, 2024). South Africa has been praised for the inclusive constitution that was constructed after 1994 that was not just racially inclusive but considered all people worthy of human rights (Moreno et al., 2019). However, there was a stigma that has been experienced by the LGBTQIA community ranging from passive and subtle acts such as social exclusion to extreme forms of violence (Hwahng & Kaufman, 2024). In a survey conducted by the Other Foundation in 2016, it was found that seven in ten South Africans strongly believed that homosexual behaviour was unacceptable (Nyeck et al., 2019). In addition to this, there was a cultural belief in South Africa that people who do not conform to gender roles are possessed by dark spirits and are attention-seeking (Mthembu, 2023). The negative labelling of the LGBTQIA community as such manifests stigma within social structures and leads to inequalities (Hwahng & Kaufman, 2024).

Despite the law to desexualise spaces in South Africa, sexual freedom for the LGBTQIA community was policed by a heteronormative society (Pieterse, 2015) and we find that the people in the LGBTQIA community are not accepted by their social environments (Ngwenya, 2021). The presence of the LGBTQIA community in Johannesburg, Gauteng, has been met with challenges from the heteronormative society which was determined to push back on sexual diversity (Pieterse, 2015). Even in their own homes, sexually diverse individuals are faced with negative attitudes towards their sexuality (Ngwenya, 2021). Members of the LGBTQIA community are often forced to conceal their sexual identity to avoid homophobic fuelled violence in public areas (Mabin, 2023). This was found to be the reality of queer people living in the township who, in comparison to the queer people in the suburbs, feel vulnerable to violence (Ngwenya, 2021). Areas such as Braamfontein in Johannesburg are known for their gay friendliness with spaces that cater to the LGBTQIA community with inclusive events, restaurants, clubs and hotels (Katz, 2019). Regardless of the violence they are subject to in the large city

(Mabin, 2023), this area was known for the haven it plays for the LGBTQIA community (Katz, 2019). The study aims to explore and understand the experiences of safety among LGBTQIA students at the University of the Witwatersrand, South Africa, focusing on how these students perceive, navigate, and are affected by social, institutional, and structural factors that influence their physical, emotional, and psychological safety on campus.

RESEARCH METHOD

The research approach refers to the plans and procedures that the researcher followed to conclude the research report (Creswell, 2014). The study employed a qualitative research approach to explore the experiences and perceptions of safety among LGBTQIA students at the University of the Witwatersrand (Bloomfield & Fisher, 2019; Campbell et al., 2021; Clarke & Braun, 2017). Qualitative research gathers non-standardised data, examines text and images with the aims to analyse the subjective meaning of social interactions and events, emphasising how individuals make sense of their experiences (Rahman, 2016). An exploratory research design was used due to limited prior knowledge of the topic, allowing in-depth understanding of participants' subjective experiences. An exploratory research design seeks to investigate a situation or phenomenon (Adler, 2022) that the researcher has little to no knowledge about (Cacciattolo, 2015). The population refers to the people whom the researcher derived conclusions from (Babbie, 2016).

To recruitment the participants, the population consisted of LGBTQIA students who were members of the campus society Activate Wits, and purposive sampling was used to select a sample of 9 participants based on inclusion criteria such as being full-time students, 18 years or older, and identifying as sexually diverse (Coman, 2013). Efforts were made to include diverse ages, ethnicities, and backgrounds. Data collection was conducted through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews lasting 30–50 minutes, guided by an interview tool to capture personal experiences. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data, generating codes and themes to identify meaningful patterns in participants' experiences. The study ensured trustworthiness through credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Kam, 2021). Ethical considerations were strictly followed, including obtaining ethical clearance from the University of the Witwatersrand (SW 24/06/03) and maintaining participants' rights and confidentiality throughout the research (Banerjee & Chaudhury, 2010; Barrow et al., 2020; Berndt, 2020).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Overview of the Results and Thematic Analysis

This section presents and discusses the findings of the study derived from the thematic analysis of data collected through semi-structured interviews. The results are organised to provide an overview of the participants' demographic characteristics, followed by a detailed

presentation of the key themes that emerged from the analysis (Joseph, 2020; Stets & Burke, 2000). These themes reflect the lived experiences of LGBTQIA students within the university context and are discussed in relation to existing literature to highlight both shared patterns and context-specific insights (Always, 2023). The integration of results and discussion allows for a comprehensive interpretation of the findings, linking empirical evidence to broader theoretical and policy-related implications.

Table 1 Demographics of participants (N=9)

Demographic Factor	Variable	Number
Age	18-25	9
Gender	Female	2
	Male	2
	Non-binary	5
Sexuality	Lesbian	4
	Gay	2
	Bisexual	3
Pronouns	She/Her	2
	Him/He	2
	They/Them	5
Faculty	Humanities	5
	Commerce, Law, Management	3
Race	Black	9
Country	South Africa	9

Source: Authors' own data generated through qualitative interviews (N = 9)

A total of nine participants took part in the study, all of whom met the inclusion and exclusion criteria. In terms of gender identity, the majority identified as non-binary (n=5), followed by female (n=2) and male (n=2) participants. With regards to sexual orientation, four participants identified as lesbian, three as bisexual, and two as gay. Participants' pronouns aligned with their gender identities: five used they/them, two used she/her, and two used he/him. In terms of academic affiliation, most participants were enrolled in the Faculty of Humanities (n=5), while three were registered in the Faculty of Commerce, Law, and Management. All participants were African and South African (Davis et al., 2019; Harwood, 2020; Hilton, 2017).

The study generated the following key themes: (1) understanding of LGBTQIA terminology, (2) perceptions of safety among LGBTQIA students, (3) concerns about the availability and adequacy of safe spaces in student residences, (4) lack of supportive

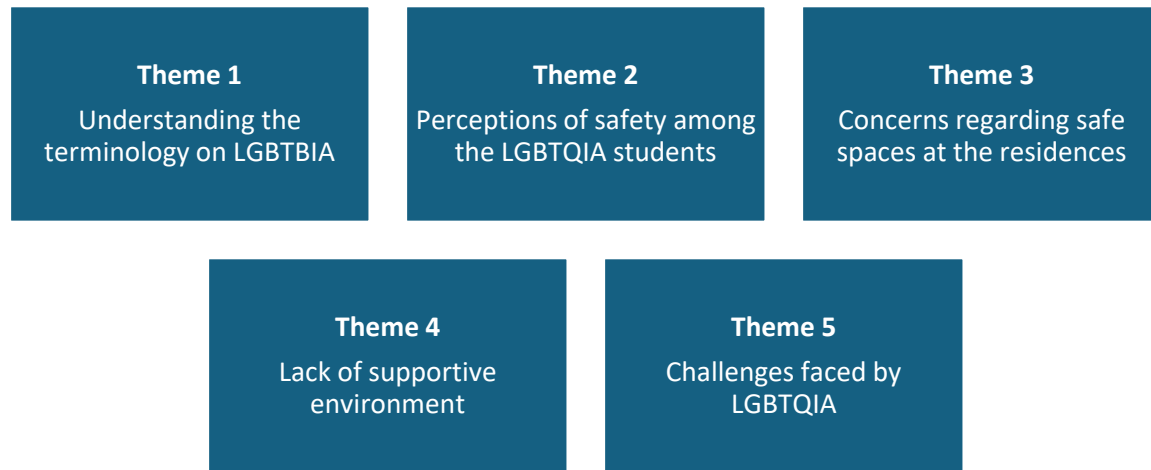environments, and (5) challenges commonly faced by LGBTQIA students. The below table depicts the themes.

Theme 1 Understanding the terminology on LGBTBIA	**Theme 2** Perceptions of safety among the LGBTQIA students	**Theme 3** Concerns regarding safe spaces at the residences
Theme 4 Lack of supportive environment	**Theme 5** Challenges faced by LGBTQIA	

Figure 1 Emerging Themes from the Thematic Analysis

Source: Primary qualitative data, 2025

Theme 1: Understanding the terminology on LGBTBIA

The term LGBTQIA+ is frequently misunderstood, including by individuals who belong to the community itself. Participants reported that when they disclose their sexual orientation or gender identity, they often encounter scepticism, invalidation, and negative reactions. Rather than being accepted, their identities are questioned, reduced to stereotypes, or attributed to personal deficiencies or past experiences (Demirden, 2021). These misconceptions were evident in participants' accounts, which illustrate how deeply entrenched societal misunderstandings shape everyday interactions with LGBTQIA individuals .

As one participant explained, misconceptions about lesbian identity were framed in ways that delegitimised sexual orientation by linking it to perceived personal failure or trauma: *"I remember someone saying, 'oh no, you're only a lesbian if you can't get men to be attracted to you' … 'you're only a lesbian if you've had traumatic experiences with men' … and you have to do the mental work of, well, no that's not really true"* (Dior). Similarly, another participant described persistent questioning and resistance when asserting their identity: *"If I say 'no, I identify as a lesbian', there is pushback … 'why?' … 'what does that mean?'"* (Amy). These experiences reflect how LGBTQIA identities are often treated as illegitimate or requiring justification.

A lack of basic knowledge regarding sexual orientation, gender expression, and pronoun usage was also identified as a key contributor to hostility and violence. As one participant noted, *"I think we experience so much violence because people are so unaware of the most basic things*

when it comes to pronouns, presentation, and sexualities" (Kai). Such ignorance reinforces harmful assumptions and contributes to environments in which LGBTQIA individuals feel unsafe and marginalised.

These findings are consistent with existing literature, which highlights how limited societal understanding of LGBTQIA identities fosters stigma and discrimination. Misconceptions surrounding the LGBTQIA community challenge dominant cultural norms, particularly those rooted in rigid gender roles (Abaver & Cishe, 2018). Hostility towards LGBTQIA individuals is often driven by perceptions that they pose a threat to traditional belief systems, thereby provoking violence, abuse, and discrimination (Lee & Ostergard, 2017). Within the South African context, sexual orientation is frequently misconstrued as a behavioural choice rather than an intrinsic aspect of identity (Rudwick & Fleisch, 2011). Furthermore, LGBTQIA identities are commonly framed as "unAfrican" and incompatible with cultural norms that equate masculinity with heterosexuality, resulting in open expressions of homophobia (Rudwick & Fleisch, 2011)..

Theme 2: Perception of safety among the LGBTQIA students

The concept of safety holds varied meanings for LGBTQIA students and is often defined in relation to individual needs and lived experiences. For some participants, safety referred to protection from physical harm, harassment, or verbal abuse, including the avoidance of hurtful or derogatory language. For others, safety was associated with a sense of belonging, acceptance, and being embraced within their social environments. Several participants emphasised the importance of being treated equally and having the freedom to express their identities without fear of intimidation or judgement.

When asked about their perceptions of safety, participants highlighted inclusion and recognition as fundamental components. One participant noted that safety begins with inclusive practices such as the respectful use of pronouns: "*I think safety means, the first element to me would be inclusion… being asked my pronouns and to have the pronouns respected in the space*" (Amy). Similarly, another participant defined safety as equal treatment, stating, "*Safety for me means to be treated just like everyone else… everyone who identifies as straight*" (Lisa). Others associated safety with the freedom to express their identity authentically: "*Safety means a place where I can fully express myself and my identity and be comfortable just being myself*" (Dior).

To avoid discrimination and prejudice from homophobic members of society, many LGBTQIA individuals choose to conceal their sexual or gender identities, a practice that can significantly increase the risk of mental health challenges (Abaver & Cishe, 2018). Concealment further limits access to appropriate support systems that could mitigate these challenges (Mavhandu-Mudzusi & Sandy, 2017). This aligns with participants' accounts of feeling "at risk," particularly those who do not identify within the gender binary. Societal perceptions and a lack of understanding were identified as key factors contributing to feelings of vulnerability within the LGBTQIA community. These findings underscore the need for safe spaces and meaningful queer integration to reduce marginalisation and exposure to harm or violence. The persistence of homophobic attitudes within the university environment makes it difficult for LGBTQIA students

to perceive the institution as a safe space, particularly when they are not afforded the same level of equality as their heterosexual peers.

Theme 3: Concerns regarding safe spaces at the university

Universities are generally regarded as spaces that encourage learning, self-discovery, and personal growth. They are also expected to promote students' mental health and overall well-being (Turner & Maschi, 2015). As such, the provision of safe spaces for all students, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, is essential. However, several LGBTQIA students expressed serious concerns regarding the limited availability and effectiveness of such spaces within the university.

Participants described the prevalence of problematic views within the institution, which undermine claims of inclusivity. One participant remarked, "*I don't think Wits does that enough because we have extremely problematic views that are prevalent in our institution*" (Dior). Another emphasised the persistent sense of insecurity, stating, "*We are not safe… there is always a feeling of being on edge all the time*" (Kai). Similarly, a participant questioned the university's commitment to inclusion: "*As much as we claim to be an inclusive space, there are so many issues that are overlooked because they're not properly addressed*" (Taylor).

These accounts indicate that the university still has significant progress to make before it can be regarded as a genuinely safe space for LGBTQIA students. Participants highlighted that reliance on a single queer society or under-resourced offices is insufficient to address the complex challenges faced by queer students. Acceptance and inclusion are critical components of safety, particularly given the LGBTQIA community's long history of marginalisation and exclusion (Parmenter et al., 2020). The lack of queer visibility was also identified as a concern, as visibility fosters awareness and challenges harmful narratives that portray queer identities as deviant or illegitimate. Persistent beliefs such as "praying the gay away" or "beating the gay away" were described as deeply harmful and indicative of broader societal hostility. Although individual experiences varied, participants shared common experiences of prejudice and discrimination, which significantly contributed to their feelings of unsafety (Aversa et al., 2022).

Theme 4: Lack of supportive environment

Supportive environments play a critical role in enhancing students' psychosocial well-being by providing safe, nurturing, and empowering physical and social spaces. Such environments are essential for promoting mental health, academic productivity, and overall quality of life. Despite the availability of institutional resources, several participants reported challenges in accessing effective support, noting that reported cases often did not result in meaningful intervention.

One participant described reporting a homophobia-related case without receiving feedback or resolution: "*In first year, I did go to TEEO and laid a homophobia case, and I don't even know where that case is right now*" (Billie). Others expressed concern regarding limited staffing and institutional capacity to address LGBTQIA-related issues effectively. As one participant noted, "*In a university with over forty thousand students, there is one person*

responsible for inclusion, one person pushing policy, and one person with access to management"
(Amy).

Participants further highlighted a lack of follow-up in reported cases, which undermined
trust in institutional support mechanisms. One participant stated, "*There's a lack of follow-up
when it comes to investigations*" (Kai). The perceived inefficiency of these services contributes to
feelings of insecurity among LGBTQIA students and reinforces the belief that reporting incidents
may not lead to meaningful change. Uninvestigated homophobia cases were described as
particularly distressing, as they signal institutional neglect. Research indicates that LGBTQIA
students who receive adequate support are less likely to experience mental health difficulties
and more likely to develop positive social relationships (Coley & Das, 2020). The presence of
effective and visible supportive structures is therefore essential in improving campus experiences
for LGBTQIA students and fostering environments where their identities are respected and
validated (Aversa et al., 2021).

Theme 5: Challenges faced by LGBTQIA

Despite the introductory of policies supporting the LGBTQIA community, they still face
negative challenges that impact negatively to their mental health and well-being. They reported
the following challenges:

Hate crime and discrimination

Participants described ongoing exposure to discrimination and hate crimes, including
within academic spaces. One participant noted, "*We face the risk of discrimination and hate
crimes from our own classmates, and that is very dangerous*" (Dior). Others expressed fear of
asserting their identities in class due to anticipated prejudice: "*It's hard to say my pronouns are
they/them because you're afraid of the prejudice that comes with that*" (Charlie). Another
participant identified hate crime as the most significant challenge they had experienced: "*I have
been a victim of a hate crime*" (Fallon).

Although South African legislation offers legal protection for LGBTQIA individuals,
discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity remains prevalent. Fear of
violence, harassment, and abuse continues to limit individuals' willingness to openly express their
identities (Abaver & Cishe, 2018). Discrimination has been reported across multiple social
contexts, including families, educational institutions (Sumbane & Makua, 2023), and healthcare
settings (Nxumalo et al., 2023). These findings reinforce participants' views that safety is
fundamentally linked to inclusion and equitable treatment.

Homophobia at residences

University residences are intended to foster social interaction and community-building
among students. However, participants reported that these spaces were often sites of hostility
and exclusion for LGBTQIA students. One participant shared, "*It is the residence I lived in… I
experienced so much homophobia*" (Kai). Another expressed concern regarding openly
homophobic behaviour by student leaders: "*This person is supposed to represent the student*

body without bias, yet they openly post homophobic content" (Taylor).

These sentiments are consistent with a questionnaire conducted at the Walter Sisulu University with 3034 participants, revealed that more than 50% of participants answered that they had witnessed an attack on same-sex couples (Abaver & Cishe, 2018). This questionnaire also found that three fourths of members of the LGBTQIA Community have at the least experienced verbal abuse, some people had experiences damaged to their property (Abaver & Cishe, 2018). There are also cases of extreme violence against the LGBTQIA Community. In 2015, the United Nations reported the rape of a lesbian woman while in police custody (Abaver & Cishe, 2018). The action of corrective rape that occurs mostly in South African townships, where lesbian women are raped by men with the idea that this will somehow cure their sexuality is just one example of the challenges that the LGBTQIA Community faces in South Africa (van Heerden, 2023) in fact in a survey conducted in KwaZulu Natal (KZN) in 2005 many gay, bisexual and lesbian individuals revealed that they had been raped (Rudwick & Fleisch, 2011). Such actions against the LGBTQIA community are concerning to queer students about the hate crimes that could be inflicted on them by homophobic people.

CONCLUSION

The study explored the experiences of safety among the LGBTQIA students at The University of Witwatersrand. It is evident that the LGBTIA continue to face diverse challenges. It is recommended that continuously pushing back on discrimination and challenging the norm is power the LGBTQIA community should have and need to be overcomers. Thus, to circumvent discrimination, misunderstandings, bullying and homophobic remarks against the LGBTQIA community, this study recommends conscientization on student body by facilitating conversation and sharing of knowledge on this community. Social media can be used as a strategy to spread awareness and educate people, also beyond the university, about the LGBTQIA community and identities. Implementing campaigns aimed at reducing stigma and discrimination to promote a safer and inclusive university. Encouraging the student body to learn pronouns and refer to members of the LGBTQIA community with their preferred pronouns to normalise the LGBTQIA community. Furthermore, there is need to offer psychosocial support tailored to the challenges that are faced by the LGBTQIA community. Although these are present in the university, these support services need to be enhanced and capacitated. Having more people involved in the Gender Equity Office (GEO), the Transformation and Employment Equity Office (TEEO) and Career and Counselling Development Unit (CCDU) to increase manpower and have people actively investigating cases. Psychosocial support for the families of the members of the LGBTQIA community, especially when they are ready to disclose their sexuality can also assist families gain knowledge about the LGBTQIA community and better support them. Up scaling the offices providing support to the LGBIQIA will decrease strain and add to the resources available to the LGBTQIA community. Including a 'queer desk', in addition to other specialised services, has the

possibility of improving the effectiveness of services as cases will not get lost in the various categories of issues that are reported. The University support offices may also provide LGBTQIA students with a list of 24/7 services that are available off-campus so that there is always support available to students. The study was limited by the sensitive nature of participants' experiences, which could cause emotional distress and affected how experiences were reported. It focused only on LGBTQIA students at the University of the Witwatersrand, limiting generalisability to other universities or LGBTQIA communities. The findings were subjective, reflecting individual experiences, and the study's time constraints may have restricted the depth of data collection and analysis, despite efforts to include a diverse sample for broader relatability.

ETHICAL STATEMENT AND DISCLOSURE

This study received ethical clearance from the University of Witwatersrand, reference number SW 24/06/03. The researcher observed and respected all the related ethical consideration of research. No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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