

**Non-Conformity in a Predominantly Heteronormative Space: Experiences of Lesbian
University Students**



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Abstract

The freedom of expression and choice of gender of sexually nonconforming individuals is constantly impacted by restrictive societal norms and heteronormative standards. While there are numerous studies on gender and sexual diversity globally, the majority of these are studies conducted in the global north. There is limited research on sexual orientation and gender identity in the Southern African region and increasing academic inquiry into the experiences of sexual minority students. This research study aimed to understand the experiences of lesbian females within and outside of the university environment in South Africa.

This study used a qualitative narrative approach and was informed by theories of heteronormativity, intersectionality, and narrative theory to first investigate and understand how lesbian students define and express their sexuality. The participants of this study all self-identified as lesbians and students from different fields and levels of study at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. The data was collected through semi-structured individual interviews and analysed using narrative thematic analysis.

The findings of this study reveal that individuals' experiences of their sexual orientation identity vary depending on their contexts. In addition to their lesbian identity, individuals are constantly negotiating their intersecting identities, and this influences how they experience and are experienced in different environments. The university campus environment is one where most participants feel free to explore and express their sexuality. However, this freedom did not necessarily equate to feelings of safety or support, as there is a lack of confidence in the adequacy and effectiveness of the services available to assist and support lesbians in issues relating to same-sex relationships. This study contributes to the understanding of lesbian

students' expression, experiences, and usefulness of the existing university efforts towards inclusivity.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Background

While there is a contention that attention is mainly drawn to lesbians in South Africa when they are violated and victimised (Hames, 2018), the reality remains that “the rights of women and feminised bodies are threatened by the status quo” (Kumalo, 2019, pp. 144-145). The current reality is that the country’s political climate poses a threat to women’s rights and the understanding of femininity. Moreover, women as well as gender and sexually nonconforming individuals continue to experience violence and other injustices across various domains of their lives (Lewis, 2021). This may be attributed to restrictive patriarchal norms, traditional cultures, gender roles, and historical sexism (Mahlori et al., 2018; Makongoza & Nduna, 2021; Ross et al., 2021), which hinder the freedom of development and expression of identity and preference (Matebeni, 2009; Youdell, 2004).

The development and expression of identity occur within complex contexts that are influenced by various factors (Butler, 1988; Sium & Ritskes, 2013). Moreover, the concepts and definitions referring to gender identity and sexual orientation keep developing and evolving (Moleiro & Pinto, 2015). There are numerous international studies on gender and sexual diversity, especially in the global north (Bosia et al., 2019; Hoffman et al., 2018; Renn et al., 2015). However, Nduna et al. (2017) state that Southern Africa has an insufficiency of such studies. Academic inquiry into the experiences of gender and sexually nonconforming students in institutions of higher learning in South Africa is still growing (Tshilongo & Rothmann, 2019). Some of the research has broadly been on the experiences of lesbian, gay, transgender,

transsexual, intersex and questioning/queer (LGBTIQ+¹) students (Nduna et al., 2017). The focus of these studies have been on the challenges experienced (Sithole, 2015), violation and mental well-being (Mavhandu-Mudzusi, 2017; Mavhandu-Mudzusi & Sandy, 2017), sexual health and sexual rights (Kiguwa & Nduna, 2017; Nduna & Kiguwa, 2017) experiences in student residences (Kiguwa & Langa, 2017; Munyuki & Vincent, 2018) and the need for safe spaces (Tshilongo & Rothmann, 2019) amongst a few others.

Since university communities are microcosms and a reflection the larger society (Finchilescu & Dugard, 2021), gender policies have been included in institutions of higher education in South Africa (Nduna et al., 2017). Nevertheless, it is still important to explore the role of educational institutions in unequal social relations, in a democratic and constitutionally progressive country, such as South Africa (Hames, 2018; Youdell, 2004). Studies on the experiences of gender and sexual diversity in higher education are necessary to further the inquiry and knowledge production on gender and sexual diversity, disrupt heteronormativity, and promote advocacy and transformation initiatives (Nduna et al., 2017; Rothmann, 2018).

Some of the existing research on lesbian students in South African higher education include studies on identity construction and expression (Prado-Castro & Graham, 2017), experiences of black undergraduates (Nel et al., 2017) university experiences and sexual citizenship (Naidu & Mutumbara, 2017). However, there is a scarcity of literature on the experiences of lesbian females on South African university campuses (Hames, 2018).

¹ In this paper, unless stated otherwise, the acronym LGBTIQ+ is used synonymously to other acronyms referring to lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgender, intersex, queer and/or questioning identities.

This study aimed to explore the experiences of lesbian students at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg (Wits University) campus, using a qualitative narrative approach. Additionally, this study sought to understand the expressions, perceptions, and practices of lesbian students in relation to the university space and the diverse groups of people that populate it. This study was conducted, using a qualitative narrative approach, and was informed by theories of intersectionality and heteronormativity. The theory of heteronormativity was utilised in view of the fact that experiences of gender nonconforming and sexually nonconforming youths' experiences in South Africa are influenced by various factors, including the deeply rooted heteronormative and patriarchal systems that exist in the country (Khan, 2019). Additionally, intersectionality theory was used to uphold and demonstrate the complexity of interconnectedness identities, as well as other interests that inform it.

1.2. Research Aims and Objectives

This study aimed to investigate the experiences of lesbian students at Wits University. For this study, the term *lesbian* is used to refer to women in same-sex relationships i.e., women in romantic relationship with other women. Although, some of the participants shared opposing sentiments to the term lesbian and some had other preferences of labels and expression for how they identify, all of them identified as women in same-sex romantic and/or sexual relationships.

The study aimed to fulfil the following objectives:

- Discussing experiences and perceptions of sexual identity and other intersecting identities.
- Identifying significant themes based on the participants' narratives of their experiences as lesbian students on the Wits University campus.

- Discussing experiences and perceptions of violence and victimisation against and amongst lesbian individuals.

1.3. Research Questions

The following questions were answered by this research:

- How do lesbian students define, express, and experience their sexual identity and other sociocultural identities?
- What are the experiences of lesbian students at Wits University?
- What are the experiences and perceptions of violence and victimisation against and amongst lesbian individuals?

1.4. Rationale for the Study

The existence of a society that oppresses all women is a cause for concern, especially for those who are gender nonconforming (Lee & Crawford, 2012). There has been a dramatic increase in empirical research on same-sex relationships in the past decades (Diamond, 2017). Lee and Crawford (2007, 2012) observed changes in research topics on homosexuality over the years and opined that this is representative of researchers' conceptualisation of lesbian and gay people. Though much has been achieved concerning nonnormative and nonconforming sexualities in Africa, much remains to be done as there are still some gaps in studies of gender and sexually nonconforming identities (Matebeni & Msibi, 2015). Moreover, the African continent is still reported to have the most countries that criminalise same-sex activity and relationships (Sutherland et al., 2016).

Currently, South Africa is labelled a constitutionally progressive country, which claims equality for all (Hames, 2018; Youdell, 2004). South Africa is currently the only African country that legally recognises same-sex marriage and protection from discrimination based on sexual orientation is included in the South African Constitution (Khan, 2019; Sutherland et al., 2016). The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, Section 9 (3) states that “the state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth”. However, these anti-discriminatory laws have not necessarily resulted in visible changes in discriminatory attitudes or lived experiences of equity (de Wet, 2017). Furthermore, women, gender nonconforming, and sexually nonconforming individuals often experience ongoing violence and injustices in many homes, workplaces, and educational institutions (Lewis, 2021). This demonstrates the lack of transformation in ideological beliefs, power relations, and institutional cultures (Lewis, 2021).

Although often referred to as the “sexual minority”, some studies report that over half a million (530 000) adult men and women in South Africa self-identify as gender nonconforming and sexually nonconforming in some way (Sutherland et al., 2016). Moreover, approximately 2.8 million women are reported to present in a gender-nonconforming way (Sutherland et al., 2016). Gender identities and sexual orientations are difficult to identify and quantify due to their variety, flexibility, fluid, and intersecting features (Kurup & Underwood, 2021). Diamond (2017) warns that investigation into same-sex relationships will be hampered if certain topics continue to be considered taboo and are unattended to. However, there remains an underrepresentation of experiences of lesbian women, especially black lesbians, because many of them live in fear and are often silenced. Unfortunately, there are also limited efforts made to encourage black lesbians

to talk about their experiences and insufficient spaces where they can engage without forced visibility and fear of victimisation (Matebeni, 2009). Hence, this study aimed to understand the perceptions and experiences of lesbian students along with their experiences of their intersecting identities.

More specifically, the study sought to explore the experiences of lesbian students within the university to contribute to knowledge about the experiences of lesbian students within higher education and educational institutions. The dearth of data on LGBTIQ+ students perpetuate their invisibility on campus and in much of the literature (Sanlo, 2004). Several studies have been conducted on gender and sexual diversity internationally, with majority of them conducted in the global north (Bosia et al., 2019; Hoffman et al., 2018; Renn et al., 2015). Some studies have been conducted on the experiences of LGBTIQ+ students, with some conducted in the United Kingdom (Ellis, 2009) and in American higher education sectors (Evans, 2001; Evans, et al., 2017; Longerbeam, et al., 2007). A few of the South African studies conducted on the experiences of LGBTI students have focused on discrimination, stigma, and victimisation (Mavhandu-Mudzusi & Sandy, 2015). A few others have focused on the experiences in student residences (Kiguwa & Langa, 2017; Munyuki & Vincent, 2018). However, the majority of the trends in literature prove that men, whether gay or straight, are still the norm and have been focused on more than lesbians (Lee & Crawford, 2007, 2012). There are even fewer literature and studies that focused specifically on lesbian students in South African universities. Similarly, those that have been conducted have centred mainly on issues of discrimination and violence (Hames, 2018). A few of the existing studies on lesbian students in South African higher education include studies on identity construction and expression (Prado-Castro & Graham, 2017), experiences of black undergraduates (Nel et al., 2017) university experiences and sexual

citizenship (Naidu & Mutumbara, 2017). However, there still exists a gap in knowledge about the lived experiences of lesbian students in South African Universities (Hames, 2018).

University communities are microcosms and a reflection of larger community experiences (Finchilescu & Dugard, 2021). Therefore, the issues observed in universities reflect the larger societal practices and experiences (Finchilescu & Dugard, 2021). Miller (2015) reports that studies on student sexual identities in higher education have found that there still exists a need for transformation and inclusivity in institutional policies. Thus, the post-apartheid South African higher education sector is reported to have institutionalised some of the legal reforms in their gender policies (Nduna et al., 2017). Even so, studies in the South African education sector have also revealed that heterosexist patterns are reproduced in education institutions, despite the promise of non-discrimination and inclusion (Francis & Msibi, 2011; de Wet, 2017). Other studies conducted in South African institutions of higher learning have also reported the existence of homophobia against and amongst same-sex-identifying students (Matebeni & Msibi, 2015). This further validates the need for gender and sexuality studies in institutions of higher learning in South Africa (Davids, 2020).

Amongst the many violations and injustices against women and nonconforming identities is the issue of gender-based violence (GBV), which is reported as one of the most rampant human rights violations in the world with a higher prevalence for women and girls (Djamba & Kimuna, 2015; United Nations Population Fund, 2014). South Africa is reported to have one of the highest rates of gendered violence (Boonzaier, 2023; Ross et al., 2021). Intimate partner violence (IPV), a form of GBV, is “the most prevalent form of interpersonal violence experienced by women in South Africa” (Makongoza & Nduna, 2021, p. 7). Ross et al. (2021) report that 50% of femicides result from IPV. However, there are discrepancies in data on the

prevalence of IPV among South African youths; this is somewhat due to the different study designs employed (Makongoza & Nduna, 2021). The high rates of IPV reported amongst gender nonconforming and sexually nonconforming individuals challenges the notion that IPV only afflicts heterosexual women (Ard & Makadon, 2011). Literature suggests that there are multiple intersecting factors that contribute to GBV, some including restrictive patriarchal norms, traditional cultures, gender roles, and historical sexism (Mahlori et al., 2018; Makongoza & Nduna, 2021; Ross et al., 2021). Similarly, there are various complex dynamics and aspects of violence in LGBT groups (Ard & Makadon, 2011). Thus, these occurrences and experiences of violence and victimisation within homosexual relationships are explored in this study.

South African universities are not exempt from the social issues that affect the country, and this is true of the issue of GBV (Mahlori et al., 2018). This issue of GBV is widespread across all contexts, including the educational, however, there is a paucity of data on GBV in university (Mahlori et al., 2018). It has also been observed that research on experiences relating to gender and sexuality at Wits University are also limited. A study by Finchilescu and Dugard (2021) focused on the experiences of GBV. However, this study focused solely on GBV and inquired about its prevalence between men and women but did not investigate about or account for the gender and sexual identities of the participants. Moreover, the Wits University Centre for Applied Legal Studies (CALS, 2013) reported that “there are no records kept by the University regarding the consequences of sexual harassment incidents on the complainant” (p. 42). Wits University has made some efforts to educate students and the wider community by publishing a statement following the nationwide scourge of GBV (Wits University, 2019). Moreover, the student newspaper, Wits Vuvuzela, also published some articles on GBV and students’ safety on

campus (Wits Vuvuzela, 2020). However, more research and efforts are needed that are inclusive of both gender and sexuality on the university campus.

Social research, such as this, is necessary and suitable to increase knowledge and understanding and, possibly, contribute to practical problem solving (Connell, 2002). Lee and Crawford (2012, p.5) suggest that psychology needs transformative research that will treat lesbians' experiences as normal. Research in institutions of higher education represents a symbolic shift that is of significance because higher education also plays a role "in shaping the public understanding and reaction towards same-sex sexuality and gender nonconformity" (Matebeni & Msibi, 2015, p. 6). There is a need for rich in-depth studies into the experiences of sexual minority students (Sanlo, 2004). Moreover, Sanlo (2004) submits that family background, intersecting identities, sexual identity development, participation on campus, and on-campus support are amongst some topics that need further examination when studying LGBTIQ+ students. Thus, it is hoped that this investigation into the experiences of lesbian students will increase awareness and contribute to the knowledge on the experiences of lesbian students in university spaces and broaden the scopes of gender and sexual diversity work. This study aims to recognise and convey the complexity of sexuality and gender, thus promoting the intersectionality and challenging heteronormative attitudes (Reddy et al., 2018). Without reducing lesbians to victims and, thus, possibly, perpetuating stigmas (Hames, 2018; Matebeni & Msibi, 2015), it is further hoped that this will encourage gender and sexually diverse narratives and, in doing so, promote diversity and inclusivity within and beyond university communities.

1.5. Outline of the Study

This thesis consists of five chapters and six appendices, as outlined below:

Chapter 1: Introduction

The purpose of this first introductory chapter is to familiarise the reader with the topic that is explored in this study. Chapter one presents the background to the study, the research aims, objectives and the questions that were engaged in this study. The chapter further outlined the rationale for why research on the experiences of lesbian females is important and relevant. In addition, an outline of the research report chapters is also provided in this chapter.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Chapter two includes the definitions and explanations of the key terms used in the study: sex and gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, identity categories, and coming out. The chapter also includes a detailed review of studies on gender and sexual diversity in the field of psychology as well as the experiences of lesbians' individuals in international, African, South African, and especially university contexts.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Chapter three describes the methods used for the study. The chapter begins with a discussion of the theoretical framework and theories of intersectionality, heteronormativity, and narrative theory, which have informed this research. This chapter continues to discuss the use of qualitative narrative interviews and research setting. The data collection, sample and sampling, and narrative thematic data analysis methods, and ethical considerations are also discussed.

Chapter 4: Findings and Discussions

In chapter four, the findings and discussions of the study are presented. This chapter discusses the results of the study in relation to the aims and objectives. The themes and subthemes identified from the narrative thematic analysis of the data are presented, interpreted, and discussed in relation to the relevant literature in an attempt to answer the research questions

posed in the beginning of the study. The main themes identified in the chapter include nonconforming sexual orientation, navigating intersecting identities, university campus experiences and victimisation and same-sex intimate partner violence.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

Lastly, chapter five is the concluding chapter, which summarises the significant findings, the limitations of the study, and provides recommendation for similar future studies.

Appendices

The appendices attached include the participant information sheet, the consent form for the interview, the consent form for recording, the interview guide used, the research permission letter received from the faculty, and a copy of the advertisement used to recruit participants.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter provides definitions of the key terms used in this dissertation to provide clarity on the conceptualisation of the study. Among these are terms such as sex and gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, identity categories, and coming out. Additionally, this chapter reviews and discusses the key trends in literature, such as studies on gender and sexual diversity in the field of psychology, international studies on gender and sexual diversity, and South African studies on gender and sexual diversity. A key focus is on studies on lesbians in institutions of higher learning. These studies are reviewed to provide context for the present study.

2.1. Definition of key terms

2.1.1. *Sex and gender*

In their review of the history of the definitions and distinctions between the terms *sex* and *gender*, Muehlenhard and Peterson (2011) found that these terms were used in inconsistent and varied ways. Earlier researchers worked under the assumption that sex and gender are organised around the male or female binary (Kurup & Underwood, 2021). However, it is now understood that these two terms relate to each other but are not synonymous with each other (Kurup & Underwood, 2021). The distinction between the two terms began in the 1950s (Muehlenhard & Peterson, 2011). Though viewed as natural, sex, gender, and sexuality are distinct attributes and constructions (Guess, 1995). In contrast to some earlier and traditional authors and researchers who use these terms interchangeably, the youth of today are embracing a broader range of gender

identities and sexual orientations (Kurup & Underwood, 2021). Hence, the distinction and conceptualisation of such key terms in this research.

A person's *sex* is typically assigned at birth and is decided based on various biological sex indicators such as external genitalia, internal reproductive organs, sex chromosomes, and sex glands (American Psychological Association [APA], 2012; APA, 2015; APA & National Association of School Psychologists [NASP], 2015). Simply put, sex refers to the "biologically determined reproductive system characteristics" (Kurup & Underwood, 2021, p. 1). The terms male, female, and intersex are the standard classifications for sex (APA, 2012).

Butler (1998) argues that sex is a meaningless biological construct, whereas gender brings meaning to the fact of sex. This is because *gender* is used to refer to attitudes, feelings, and behaviours associated with a person's biological sex (APA, 2012). This also indicates overall behavioural, psychological, social, and cultural aspects of maleness or femaleness (i.e., masculinity or femininity) (APA, 2015). Hence, gender is said to be socially constructed and learned (Francis et al., 2019). Thus, gender is no longer seen as an either/or fixed proposition, but rather an internal sense of identity and outer expression that can be renegotiated throughout an individual's development (Kurup & Underwood, 2021). Hence, Butler's (1998) assertion that being a female might be a biological fact but being a woman is more complex and has a different meaning (Butler, 1988).

2.1.2. Gender identity

The term *gender identity* was invented in the 1960s (Moleiro & Pinto, 2015). *Gender identity* refers to a person's self-identification as male or female or transgender (APA & NASP, 2015). This further extends to one's persistent internal felt sense of being a man or woman or an

alternative gender (APA, 2015; Laramie, 2021). Gender identity also speaks to a “person’s self-concept of their gender (regardless of their biological sex)” (Levi, 2004, p. 347 as cited in Moleiro & Pinto, 2015). The complexity of gender identity and the wide range of gender labels that individuals may identify with is acknowledged among today’s youth and emerging adults (Kurup & Underwood, 2021).

The term *cisgender* refers to a gender identity that corresponds in an expected way with a person’s assigned sex at birth (APA, 2015; Laramie, 2021). Cisgender also refers to an individual that is not transgender or gender nonconforming (APA, 2015). Such behaviours that are consistent with societal expectations and beliefs are referred to as *gender normative*, while those viewed as inconsistent with societal expectations and beliefs represent gender nonconformity (APA, 2012). This is what is commonly understood as *straight* gender in societies nowadays (Mishali, 2014).

Individuals whose gender identity does not correspond with their biological sex at birth may identify as gender neutral, genderqueer, or gender nonconforming. This may also be referred to as an “affirmed gender identity” once the person has come out or is undergoing a transition process (APA, 2015). *Gender nonconforming* broadly refers to people whose behaviours do not conform with traditional or societal expectations of their gender or whose gender expression does not fit into a category (Laramie, 2021). *Gender diversity* on the other hand refers to the differences in individuals’ deeply felt internal experiences and sense of gender, whether corresponding to their assigned sex or not (United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation, 2016).

An individual’s external expression and presentation of their internal identification and feelings is referred to as *gender expression* (Kurup & Underwood, 2021). This also speaks to an

individual's external expression of their gender identity through physical appearance, clothing, accessories, and interests that may or may not conform to socially defined expressions that are typically associated with masculine or feminine (APA, 2015; APA & NASP, 2015; Laramie, 2021).

2.1.3. Sexual orientation

The conceptualisation and definitions of terms such as *sexual orientation* are continuously evolving and some may argue that the concept of sexual orientation is not well defined (Moleiro & Pinto, 2015; Moser, 2016). The terms sexual orientation and sexual preference both focus on *sexuality* (Lopez & Chims, 1993), which refers to dimensions of romantic orientation, sexual attraction and behaviour (Hall et al., 2021). To begin with, some scholars state that there is more to sexual orientation than just sex, therefore, include sexual and affectional components, which are components that do not always necessarily correspond (Diamond, 2003). The difference between the sexual and affectional components of sexual identity development are distinguished and discussed by Diamond (2003).

The terms *sexual identity*, *sexual interest*, and *sexual behaviour* are often engaged when discussing sexual orientation. *Sexual identity* speaks to how individuals define themselves sexually, *sexual interests* described the individual's desires or intentions, while *sexual behaviour* is what they do (Moser, 2016). However, these are not always necessarily consistent with one another. Sexual orientation is explained by Moser (2016, p. 505) as "a distinct type of sexual attraction." Researchers, such as Diamond (2003) and Moser (2016), delve further into the characteristics of sexual orientation. It is noted that, even though these terms are commonly used, they do not always mean the same thing to everyone.

Previously, heterosexuality and homosexuality were recognised as the only sexual orientations, but more sexual orientations have been proposed in recent years (Moser, 2016). Past measures of sexual orientation have compared sexual minority or non-heterosexual individuals with heterosexual individuals (Galupo et al., 2014). Savin-Williams (2016, p. 38) argues that sexual orientation was initially assessed and reported by sex researchers as a continuum “ranging from exclusively opposite-sex attraction to exclusively same-sex attraction with degrees of non-exclusivity in between.” The topic of sexual orientation has become controversial, as there is a question of whether sexual orientation is understood as restricted categories or an intersecting continuum (Savin-Williams, 2016). Moreover, some individuals are unaccepting of the existence of sexualities other than heterosexual or homosexual (Moser, 2016). Nevertheless, some researchers argue that sexual orientation should not be reductively conceptualised as limited to discrete categories and that, if categories exist, they should be understood as wide-ranging, intersecting, and occurring on a continuum (Moleiro & Pinto, 2015; Savin-Williams, 2016).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO, 2016) defined the term *sexual diversity* as referring to the different emotional and sexual attractions that people have to individuals of the opposite gender, same gender, or more than one gender. For the purposes of this research, the term *sexual orientation* was understood in accordance with Moleiro and Pinto’s (2015) definition, as referring to the sex of people that a person is sexually and romantically attracted to.

2.1.4. Identity categories

There are increasing numbers of young people who identify with descriptors such as non-binary, genderqueer, genderfluid, trans, and others (Kurup & Underwood, 2021; Laramie, 2021).

Terms such as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and others, are referred to as identity categories that typically classify individuals based on their sexual desires (Diamond, 2003; Francis et al., 2019). The term *gay* is used to refer to “a person who is emotionally, romantically, or sexually attracted to persons of the same gender” (Laramie, 2021, p. 580). In the 1960s, the term was used as an umbrella term for nonnormative sexual and gendered practices and identities that were not congruent with heterosexuality (Kulick, 2000).

Some researchers report that lesbian women contested the term *gay* which led to the introduction of the term *queer* around the 1990s (Kulick, 2000). *Queer* is an umbrella term used to describe individuals who neither identify as straight nor cisgender (Guess, 1995; Laramie, 2021). The term *queer* and LGBTIQ+ acronym is sometimes used interchangeably. However, not all LGBTIQ+ people embrace or use the term *queer* in its historical use as a derogatory term (Kulick, 2000; Laramie, 2021). The acronym has also evolved over time as the current generation uses terminology and definitions that differ from the past (Kulick, 2000; Sanlo, 2004).

Lesbian refers to women who experience same-sex attraction (Kurup & Underwood, 2021). This denotes that the woman’s emotional, romantic, and/or even sexual attraction is toward other women (Laramie, 2021). Some even categorise lesbian women and gay men as being “at the gay end of the sexual spectrum” (Kurup & Underwood, 2021, p. 39). Feminist researchers differ in their opinions on language and labels (Guess, 1995). Guess (1995) states that some feminists, such as Adrienne Rich, opine that embracing the term *lesbian* is a courageous act and a challenge to the hegemonic powers that oppose and oppress the lesbian identity. Thus, they assert that not using the term *lesbian* is viewed by some as contributing to the invisibility and oppression of and collaborating with compulsory heterosexuality (Guess, 1995). However, theorists such as Judith Butler are said to view identity categories, including the

lesbian identity, as inherently restrictive and serving the hegemonic forces that view it as deviant (Guess, 1995). Kulick's (2000) research also comments on gay and lesbian language. What this shows is that, while some people protest the use of labels and identity categories, others believe that naming confers existence (Guess, 1995; Kulick, 2000).

2.1.5. *Coming out*

Coming out is a term used to describe the first process of self-acknowledgement and acceptance of one's sexual orientation or gender identity that they then share and disclose to others (Laramie, 2021). This includes the act of informing people of one's non-heterosexuality and openly and freely dating people of the same sex (Nkosi & Masson, 2017). *Coming out* or self-disclosure is described, by some, as a critical developmental task in identity development of LGBTIQ+ adolescents (Leung, 2021). Some researchers state that being "out" or publicly acknowledging and disclosing sexual orientation or identity to others is often associated with positive self-worth (Woodford et al., 2012), while others report that self-identified LGBTIQ+ youths are more likely experience victimisation and are at higher risk for mental health problems (Mallon, 2008; Shields et al., 2011).

The coming out process is never easy, as students may face criticism and victimisation for their sexuality choices (Naidu & Mutumbara, 2017). Woodford et al., (2012) state that students are often reluctant to disclose their sexual orientation to others in social environments that are hostile. Negative labelling and stigmatisation are some of the factors that contribute to LGBTIQ+ reluctance to come out or disclose their sexual orientation (Sithole, 2015).

An LGBTIQ+ person is described as *living openly* when they are comfortably out about their gender identity or sexual orientation (Laramie, 2021, p. 581). Conversely, an LGBTIQ+

person who has not disclosed their gender identity or sexual orientation to others is described as *closeted* (Laramie, 2021). *Outing* occurs when someone divulges someone's lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender identity to others without their permission. This can have serious repercussions to the person being 'outed' (Laramie, 2021).

While the above perspective aligns with the existing scholarship that is cited, it is important to note these may not be absolute truths as alternative perspectives may exist in other studies and bodies of literature. In their paper on *Vocabularies of the non-normative*, Matebeni and Msibi (2015) provide nuanced perspectives that acknowledge that these terms hold different meanings in various contexts.

2.2. Trends in the Literature

2.2.1. Studies on gender and sexual diversity in the field of psychology

Psychology is a discipline and social practice that is influenced by the social and political climate (Lee & Crawford, 2007, 2012). Historically, women's perspectives and experiences have been underrepresented in psychological and mental health research, more especially non-white and non-heterosexual women (Dorn-Medeiros & Doyle, 2018; Hartmann et al., 2013). Moreover, it is reported that research and theory in this field has reflected a psychopathological view of homosexuality through its focus on causes, assessments, and negative effects (Lee & Crawford, 2007). In studying the trends in Psychology research, Lee and Crawford (2007, 2012) report that research on women and gender are previously neglected topics, as they started receiving attention in the 1960s. Lee and Crawford (2012) further argued that the emergence of new research topics reflect changes in how women are conceptualised, as their results reveal that causes, assessments, adjustment, special topics, and attitudes towards homosexuality were

topical between the 1970s and 1990s. However, these studies often prioritised the concerns of sexual minority men over sexual minority women (Lee & Crawford, 2012; Hegarty & Fasoli, 2023).

Publications on lesbians are reported have increased rapidly between 1991 to 2001 (Lee & Crawford, 2012). Research publications from 2003 to 2009 are reported to have focused on the attitudes of others, intimate relationships, coping and coping out, lesbians' problems as well as life in a heterosexual society (Lee & Crawford, 2012). Lee and Crawford (2012) report that psychological research has consistently ignored lesbians and suggests that transformative research should be conducted as it would treat the experiences of lesbians as normal. Although Matsick et al. (2021) argue that feminist researchers' contributions to the deconstruction and rethinking of psychology are largely marginalised, Hegarty and Rutherford (2019) inform that psychology has been involved in civil rights movements for the rights of gender and sexual minorities over the past half century. Bartoş et al. (2014) research found that there are numerous unpublished studies that could present different perspectives and add value to the topic however they also the possibility that psychologists and scholar studying sexuality may experience stigma associated with the topic of gender and sexual nonconformity. Hence Matsick et al. (2021, p. 418) as the question "for whom is psychology, and how should we broaden its applicability?"

2.2.2. International studies on gender and sexual diversity

On July 2016 the United Nations (UN) years of activism was recognised and the UN was appointed as the human rights official for gender and sexually diverse people (Rahman, 2019). This also meant the implementation of the 2012 recommendation of the *Born Free and Equal* report from the UN human rights commissioner which was the first UN policy statement to

advocate sexual orientation and gender identity issues (SOGI) under human rights issues (Rahman, 2019). The number of people of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations is not easily quantifiable due to various issues in the measure of gender diversity, some of these include the fact that gender identity and sexual orientation are difficult to identify and quantify because their various, fluid, and intersecting features (Kurup & Underwood, 2021).

There are numerous international studies on the topic of gender and sexual diversity, but the Southern African region is still lacking in research on this topic (Nduna et al., 2017). Moreover, there has been great progress made in terms of the rights and attitudes towards non-heterosexual people in many Western countries, but the same cannot be said about Asian and African countries where homosexuality is illegal and punishable (Bailey et al., 2016). In the United States, diversity is reflected in race, ethnicity, and in sexual and gender identities, as individuals openly identify as LGBTIQ+ (Laramie, 2021). Nevertheless, these sexual and gender minorities face social stigma, discrimination, human rights violations, and various health disparities. Supportive social networks are viewed as protective factors and associated with decreased health challenges and increased resilience (Laramie, 2021).

Prior to the 1980s, the topic of sexuality rarely received explicit attention in African literature, but some of the newer research challenges older assumptions and prescriptions on African perspectives of sexuality and nonnormative practices (Epprecht, 2009). The silencing and denial of inclusion of gender and sexual diversity are attributed to the tension between African and Western values, patriarchal values, and Christian values (Francis et al., 2019). Most African countries are conflicted between conservative traditional and social values and progressive human rights laws (Francis et al., 2019). Additionally, gender and sexually diverse individuals in African countries are discriminated against and experience condemnation, public

humiliation, assault, rape, imprisonment and are even murdered (Tshilongo & Rothmann, 2019). Homosexuality is still viewed an identity of the privileged and an identity to be explored by those whose indulgence would not result in immediate daily struggles (Swarr & Nagar, 2003).

2.2.3. South African studies on gender and sexual diversity

During South Africa's apartheid era, race, gender, and sexuality were regulated and utilised as political and social tools for the advancement of white supremacy and the exploitation of black people (Stephens & Boonzaier, 2020). One such policy was the Immorality Act of 1950 and later amendments, which criminalised interracial and same-sex sexual relationships (Carolin, 2017). Though "heterosexuality is on display every day in public space" (Burgess, 2005, p. 27), colonial and apartheid laws set gender and sexuality as private matters belonging in the domestic sphere, interracial sexual relationships were prohibited, and homosexuality was criminalised (Stephens & Boonzaier, 2020). This is evidence of the fact that displays of sexuality that are nonconforming to heterosexuality are considered out of place (Burgess, 2005). Valentine (1993, p. 410 as cited in Burgess, 2005) argues that the lack of recognition of diverse sexual identities reproduces heterosexual hegemony. As such, sexual freedom and freedom of expression became a political fight, hence gay and lesbian history is interrelated with the broader agenda for liberation (Stephens & Boonzaier, 2020). Still, white middle class men largely defined the gay identity in South Africa and black women were excluded from the mainstream gay culture (Stephens & Boonzaier, 2020).

Presently, the Republic of South Africa's Constitution (Act No. 108 of 1996) is reportedly the first to recognise the rights of gay and lesbian individuals in the Southern African region (RSA, 1996a as cited in Francis et al., 2019). Furthermore, discrimination based on sexual

orientation is prohibited according to the Equity Clause of the Constitution (Tshilongo & Rothmann, 2019). The concept of citizenship in South Africa is rooted in this egalitarian Constitution, which is lauded for its recognition of previously marginalised and gender and sexually diverse groups on the African continent (Hames, 2007; Stephens & Boonzaier, 2020). Race remains central in the intersections of class, gender, and sexuality (Stephens & Boonzaier, 2020). The contribution of civil society and activist was also pivotal to the negotiation and formation of these liberal laws (Hames, 2007).

However, this inclusion of sexual orientation rights has not necessarily translated into automatic equitable and primary access to privileges afforded to citizens or social acceptance (Hames, 2007). There is currently an “absence of adequate and effective legal and institutional support to give tangible effect to constitutional priorities” (Stephens & Boonzaier, 2020, p. 328). South African communities reportedly still deeply conservative and patriarchal as there still exist prejudiced, biased, and hateful attitudes towards gender and sexually diverse individuals (Hames, 2007).

Lesbians share the same institutional oppression of all women and denial of civil rights with gay men (Kulick, 2000, p. 244). However, lesbian speechlessness and invisibility have been identified as oppressions particularly unique to lesbians (Kulick, 2000; Lopez & Chims, 1993). In South Africa, the legislative recognition of diverse gender and sexual identities has increased the visibility of the lesbian population; however, this has also increased their vulnerability to discrimination, homophobia, and other hate crimes (Stephens & Boonzaier, 2020). “Local studies have foregrounded the intersections of lesbian subjectivities and continuing forms of institutional homophobia, sexual prejudice, societal discrimination and hate crimes against lesbian women” (Stephens & Boonzaier, 2020, p. 328).

Black lesbian women are victims of homophobic rape and sexual violence that is representative of discipline and control of black lesbian sexuality (Stephens & Boonzaier, 2020). The use of terms such as “corrective” rape – as opposed to homophobic rape – perpetuates and legitimises the practice that views black lesbian women as deviant (Stephens & Boonzaier, 2020). The conceptualisation of citizenship and black lesbian women in South Africa is detailed in Stephens and Boonzaier’s (2020) article on *Black lesbian women in South Africa: citizenship and the coloniality of power* which reports that black lesbian women are positioned as hegemonised and ‘othered’, which denies them of full citizenship (Stephens & Boonzaier, 2020). The article also reports that Gevisser and Edward Cameron are said to be amongst those who asked pertinent questions around homosexuality in South Africa (Stephens & Boonzaier, 2020). Some of the research on sexual minority women in Southern Africa focus on their health (Muller & Hughes, 2016).

2.2.4. Studies on lesbians in institutions of higher learning

Most of the research on sexual orientation and gender identity in higher education is in the global north and even research conducted in the global south is often written from an ‘outsider’ perspective as it is produced by international researchers (Nduna et al., 2017). The history of first lesbian, gay, and bisexual college student groups in the United States is documented in Beemyn’s (2003) paper titled *The silence is broken: A history of the first lesbian, gay, and bisexual college student groups*. Generally, efforts to promote diversity and inclusion in the universities have included inquiry into the experiences of students from previously disadvantaged racial backgrounds; however, the inclusion of sexual minorities is still slow (Sanlo, 2004). Discrimination based on sexual orientation is common throughout the United

States, as some States still do not protect gender and sexually nonconforming individuals from discrimination (Sanlo, 2004). Studies such as those by D'Augelli, 1992; Reed et al., 2010; Sanlo, 2004; Woodford et al., 2012) have, over the years, documented LGBTIQ+ students' experiences of harassment and fear on university and college campuses, and some report that these students face higher rates of victimisation on campus than other groups.

Experiences of heterosexism in educational institutions appear to be prevalent globally. Cech and Waidzunus (2011, p.3) explain *heterosexism* as referring to “broad structural and societal biases that disadvantage minorities associated with homosexuality.” Tshilongo and Rothmann (2019) add that heterosexism also includes prejudiced behaviours, discrimination, and stigmatisation towards gender and sexually diverse individuals or those presumed to be non-heterosexual. Heterosexism is reproduced by *heteronormativity*, which is the application of male/female sex binary norms and the appointment of heterosexuality as the only acceptable option and may further fuel homophobia (Cech & Waidzunus, 2011; Tshilongo & Rothmann, 2019). Woodford et al. (2012) state that heterosexism is enacted through heterosexist language to communicate anti-homosexual sentiments towards sexual minority individuals, and further examine the wellbeing of college students who have experienced heterosexist language. Moreover, it is reported that heterosexist language is used by heterosexual students to express disdain towards sexual minority students or those perceived as gender and sexually nonconforming.

Heterosexuality continues to be normalised in almost every space, including academic spaces such as university campuses (Burgess, 2005). Lloyd (2013, p. 819) labels the regulation of bodies according to sex, gender, and sexuality as “heteronormative violence”. Articles published in the special issue of the *South African Journal of Higher Education* reveal that

institutions of higher education in Southern Africa are still heteronormative and that gender and sexually nonconforming staff and students are prejudiced, discriminated, and marginalised (Nduna et al., 2017).

In their review, Francis et al. (2019) report that global studies indicate that schooling environments in South Africa are characterised by heteronormativity and are hostile to gender and sexual minority youths. Researchers such as Francis et al. (2019, p. 21) focused on the school setting and explored “how structures in education police and regulate nonnormative gender and sexualities.” While Tshilongo and Rothmann (2019) explore the need for safe spaces for lesbian and gay students on university campus. Tshilongo and Rothmann (2019) report that heteronormativity and cisgenderism are legitimised in many South African institutions, including the education sector.

Given the country’s apartheid legacy, the post-apartheid South African government has been preoccupied with legal reconstruction and policy making focused on the eradication of racial and gender discrimination, but sexual orientation and disability initially received less attention (Hames, 2007; Nduna et al., 2017). Higher education institutions in South Africa have been known as targeted sites for state transformation and environments for identity and knowledge formation because the democratic government inherited tertiary education institutions that were embedded in the apartheid legacy (Hames, 2007). Despite the current proliferation of policies that allegedly embrace gender and sexually diverse persons and address homophobia, the implementation of these policies to create safe spaces is questionable (Francis et al., 2019; Hames, 2007). Therefore, there remains a need for research on gender and sexuality diversity in the education sector, particularly research on policies and experiences (Francis et al., 2019;

Hames, 2018). There is growing academic inquiry into the experiences of sexual minority students in South Africa (Tshilongo & Rothmann, 2019).

The demographic make-up of some higher education institutions in post-apartheid South Africa has changed since the state has become a custodian of gender and race transformation, but inequality persists (Hames, 2007; Munyuki & Vincent, 2017). South African universities have a diverse community of identities, i.e., race, religion, gender, class, etc, which are “critical points of intersection and division” (Nduna et al., 2017, p. 4). Although there is a growing body of literature on the experiences of LGBTIQ+ tertiary education students, the work conducted in South Africa is scant (Munyuki & Vincent, 2017). Earlier research discovered that LGBTIQ+ students experience university environments as unaccepting, unsafe, and plagued with homophobia (Munyuki & Vincent, 2017). Likewise, more recent studies reveal that little progress on the challenges identified by earlier research as LGBTIQ+ students continue to experience hostile campus climates because of their sexual orientation (Munyuki & Vincent, 2017).

Furthermore, the present-day youth are questioning, challenging gender beyond the male-female binary, and are more open about their sexual orientation at younger ages than before (Kurup & Underwood, 2021; Sanlo, 2004). Young people today are more outspoken and visibly expressive about embracing diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. They represent, express, and share their diverse gender identities and sexual orientations across various social media and other online platforms (Kurup & Underwood, 2021). Hence, college and university years are important because this is the developmental stage of personal identity formation (D'Augelli, 1992). The process of sexual identity development and awareness of affectional status occurs simultaneously with other identity development processes which typically occur

during high school or early tertiary years (D'Augelli, 1992; Lopez & Chims, 1993). Thus, it is normal for all students to face various developmental tasks and challenges during their university experience; however, sexual minority students experience these as well as other unique challenges related to their sexual identity development (Sanlo, 2004). LGBTIQ+ students often worry about unsupportive environments and suffer the consequences of intolerance (Sanlo, 2004).

Factors such as the campus climate are imperative as they impact on the evolving affectional status and exploration of sexual minority students, which they possibly share for the first time on campus away from the scrutiny of family and high school friends (D'Augelli, 1992). Unlike other identity categories, individuals who are gender and sexually nonconforming sometimes do not share their nonconforming identity with their parents and do not have the experience of parents who understand them, thus leaving them with feelings of fear, shame, and isolation (Sanlo, 2004). Cech and Waidzunas (2011, p. 4) state that, because LGBTIQ+ students “fall within diverse intersecting identity categories,” they cannot be assumed to experience campus culture the same. “The domination of heterosexuality as a pervasive sexual ‘norm’ regulates spaces, and therefore any expression of sexuality other than heterosexuality is... ‘out of place’” (Burgess, 2005, p. 27). Unfortunately, some gender and sexual minority students experience the campus environment as unwelcoming (Reed et al., 2010). Harassment and discrimination on university campuses vary and can be perpetrated by other students and staff. Unfortunately, people still hold negative attitudes towards gender and sexually nonconforming individuals, despite this generations increased invisibility (Sanlo, 2004).

Some students described their initial awareness of and first time disclosing their sexual identity as confusing and worrisome, but unavoidable (Lopez & Chims, 1993). In their study,

Lopez and Chims (1993, p. 98) found that students felt that “coming out is a life-long process in that one is continually developing more self-awareness and expanding the group of people to which one self-discloses.” During their university years, some self-identified lesbian and gay students may remain undisclosed and some even enact normative heterosexual roles as avoidance efforts due to fear (D'Augelli, 1992; Sanlo, 2004). These students often confront harassment, discrimination and prejudicial attitudes and are unfortunately often victimised for their openness (D'Augelli, 1992). Nevertheless, it is reported that there are increasing numbers of LGBTIQ+ that come out during their years at university (Sanlo, 2004). Students whose sexual orientation/sexuality is disclosed start to develop a social network of friends within the LGBTIQ+ community and, thus, they become a support network that helps during difficult processes relating to sexuality (D'Augelli, 1992). Some students opt against serving as advocates for the sake of their own mental health (Lopez & Chims, 1993).

Incidents of harassment and discrimination experienced by students range from verbal abuse to physical violence (Munyuki & Vincent, 2017). Studies have found that some of the students who have experienced harassment and discrimination pretend to be heterosexual to conceal their sexuality in order to avoid further victimisation (Munyuki & Vincent, 2017). This is reported to have severe and extensive effects on the wellbeing of LGBTIQ+ students (Munyuki & Vincent, 2017). The various experiences of stigmatisation, harassment, discrimination, and heterosexism are reported to have negative effects on the wellbeing and impede on the personal, academic, and professional developments of LGBTIQ+ students and sometimes results in unhealthy coping strategies, such as alcohol and drug use (D'Augelli, 1992; Reed et al., 2010; Sanlo, 2004; Woodford et al., 2012). Thus, Munyuki and Vincent (2017) state

that the transformation, eradication of unfair discrimination, compensation of past inequality, and an inclusive social order is necessary at South African higher education institutions.

University campuses are microcosmic of the social context where discrimination against LGBTIQ+ individuals is pervasive and students with the homophobic behaviours that are reflective of society (Finchilescu & Dugard, 2021; Munyuki & Vincent, 2017; Nduna et al., 2017). Thus, the frequency of harassment, discrimination and victimisation on campuses reflects the general hostility and violence directed towards LGBTIQ+ individuals in other settings (D'Augelli, 1992; Nduna et al., 2017). Francis et al. (2019, p. 20) state that “education is the most significant means for fostering social inclusion, promoting individual rights, and realising the full potential of all young people including those perceived as different in terms of their gender and sexuality.”

Institutions of higher learning have a moral responsibility to create a safe environment for LGBTIQ+ students and provide them with an equal opportunity to succeed (Munyuki & Vincent, 2017). “Creating inclusive campus environments has to transcend formal policy to permeate day-to-day practices, values, and assumptions” (Munyuki & Vincent, 2017, p. 16). D'Augelli (1992) suggests that the enhancement of campus climate for LGBTIQ+ individuals would assist more students’ experience of psychological, social, and emotional stress and problems, especially those currently living in silence and fear of integrating their sexuality into their lives.

The disruption of silence and invisibility is important in academic settings and necessary to challenge heteronormativity (Burgess, 2005). Burgess (2005) reports that the adoption of anti-homophobia campaigns in institutions of higher learning is one attempt at confronting heteronormativity, challenging marginalisation, and raising visibility and support spaces for

LGBTIQ+ staff and students. Sanlo (2004) reports that there is a limited number of campuses that provide adequate mental health services to LGBTIQ+ students.

A safe space is one that does not tolerate bigotry and discrimination of gender and sexually diverse individuals (Tshilongo & Rothmann, 2019). Moreover, such spaces may provide support and safety, defend sexual minority rights, increase visible support, and contribute towards improving the campus environment for gender and sexually diverse students through the understanding of the various challenges and fears that individuals experience (Tshilongo & Rothmann, 2019). A safe space can be a person, a programme or even an organisation (Tshilongo & Rothmann, 2019). The presence and engagement of diverse groups of young people in diversity and activism spaces indicate the importance of diversity and non-heteronormativity to contemporary youth (Kurup & Underwood, 2021). The creation of safe spaces may also be critiqued as creating exclusion and segregation, which may exacerbate potential homophobia and discrimination and an intersectional space is argued for as an alternative (Tshilongo & Rothmann, 2019)

In addition to safe spaces, Tshilongo and Rothmann (2019) also propose the implementation and/or restructuring of university policies, which may require a redevelopment of curriculum and training for staff and students. Nduna et al. (2017) report that there are some efforts towards challenging heteronormativity in higher education curriculum. Matthyse (2017) also suggests that, to challenge the present heteronormative situation in higher education, simultaneous dual approaches should be used i.e., transformation of institutional policy as well as increasing awareness and implementation of existing policies. Tshilongo and Rothmann (2019) report that there are limited studies that have explored the need for university support services and safe space for sexual minority students.

2.3. Conclusion

This chapter provided definitions of key terms and concepts that are mentioned and inform this study. The chapter further focused on studies on gender and sexual diversity globally and within the African context. While this chapter addressed gender and sexual diversity within the South African context, more specific focus was given to the studies on the experiences of gender and sexual diversity within institutions of higher education, with focus on the experiences of lesbian university students. The available literature and trends within the literature on the mentioned topics were highlighted due to their importance for the current study.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodology used in this research. The aim of the study, as indicated in Chapter 1, was to explore the experiences of lesbian students at Wits University. The study wanted to explore and understand the participants' perceptions of their sexual orientation identity and intersecting identities, their expressions as well as experiences linked to their sexual orientation identity. Hence, this chapter describes the theoretical framework that underpinned the research design, specifically the theories of heteronormativity, intersectionality, and narrative theory are discussed in relation to this study. Thereafter, the research design is discussed along with its appropriateness for this research study. Additionally, the relevant processes of the research design are described and discussed, namely, the research setting, participants of the study data collection procedures, and data analysis. This chapter also states the principles of qualitative rigour and the ethical considerations of the study. Lastly, the researcher's reflection on positionality or identity and the influence of these on the research study are presented in the form of the researcher's self-reflexivity.

3.1. Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework offers a qualitative researcher a vantage point through which to collect and analyse data (Henstrand, 2006). Thus, the chosen theoretical framework influences how the data is collected and interpreted and some assumptions and purposes of the research study (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). Heteronormativity, intersectionality, and narrative theory were utilised as guiding theories of this to understand the experiences of lesbian university students.

3.1.1. *Heteronormativity*

The concept of heteronormativity is understood to be informed by and rooted in queer and feminist work and is mainly influenced by the work of theorists such as Michael Foucault, Adrienne Rich, Gayle Rubin, and Judith Butler, Michael Warner, and Seidman (Marchia & Sommer, 2019). Before the term *heteronormativity* was created, the work of these earlier theorists used terms such as “heterosexual contract”, “compulsory sexuality”, and “obligatory heterosexuality” and other terms to refer to heterosexual privilege (Lloyd, 2013, p. 822). The concept of heteronormativity is reported to have first been introduced by Adrienne Rich (1980) in the essay *Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence*, where Rich discusses the assumptions of sex and gender in social and institutional practices (Kiguwa & Langa, 2017). The term *heteronormativity* was later officially coined by Michael Warner (Devís-Devís et al., 2018; Robinson, 2016). The concept of normativity, which assumes the normalcy and naturalness of one thing over others, is central to the description of heteronormativity (Thorne et al., 2019).

While it does not appear that there is a singular definition of the term, heteronormativity is understood from different perspectives. The concept has been used by authors in various ways in relation to sex, gender, and sexuality and sexual expression (Battle & Ashley, 2008; Devís-Devís et al., 2018). Earlier scholars disagreed on whether sexuality and gender should be studied together as some thought it would conflate the two, while others argued that the concepts are intertwined (Marchia & Sommer, 2019). Some further state that heteronormativity is maintained by assumption that the two biological sexes are reflected in two genders and, therefore, sexual attraction between those two “opposite” genders is natural (Ng et al., 2019; Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). Hence, heteronormativity is viewed as the privileging of gender conformity and heterosexuality by viewing an attraction between cisgender heterosexual men and women as the

legitimate norm (Pollitt et al., 2021). Thus, heteronormativity dictates what behaviours are deemed acceptable based on heterosexual and patriarchal standards and norms (Battle & Ashley, 2008; Ray & Parkhill, 2021; Thorne et al., 2019). It is further used to understand heterosexual expectations set for men and women in accordance with traditional *gender norms* and hierarchies, which include general notions that men should behave in a masculine manner and women in a feminine manner and women are viewed as subordinates to men (Miller, 2015; Ray & Parkhill, 2021; Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). This regulation of bodies according to sex, gender, and sexuality is viewed as violent by everyone (Devís-Devís et al., 2018; Lloyd, 2013; Miller, 2015) and associated with hegemonic masculinity, which perpetuates power and dominance (Devís-Devís et al., 2018; Connell, 2002).

Mainstream society often characterises heterosexuality and homosexuality as a binary and marginalises sexual minorities through the privileging of heterosexual standards (Devís-Devís et al., 2018; Pollitt et al., 2021; Robinson, 2016). Some researchers assert that heteronormative practices in schools are the principal reason for homophobia (Youdell, 2004). Devís-Devís et al. (2018) refer to these categorisations of heterosexual/homosexual and man/woman as *dual classifications* that are defined in opposition to each other and characterised as ‘essentialistic’. Other scholars state that gender and sexuality are entwined by individuals and spaces that endorse heteronormative ideals and that such individuals often have prejudicial and antigay attitudes, where behaviours that are non-conforming to heteronormative ideals are believed to be unnatural, inferior and given a lower status in society (Nzimande, 2017; Ray & Parkhill, 2021). Robinson (2016, p. 1) defines it as “a hegemonic system of norms, discourses, and practices that construct heterosexuality as natural and superior to all other expressions of sexuality.”

Although there are varying understandings and uses of heteronormativity and one universal conceptualisation of the term does not exist (Javaid, 2018), it is evident that heteronormativity is a pervasive concept that trivialises and undermines other LGBTIQ+ identities. Heteronormativity has been used as theoretical framework by researchers to offer insight into the experiences of sexual minority learners in a school setting (Devís-Devís et al., 2018). Since there are fewer studies on the sexual minority youth and young adults and how they disrupt or perpetuate heteronormativity (Pollitt et al., 2021), this study utilises heteronormativity to contextualise and understand the experiences of lesbian university students. The concept is used to understand the normalisation of heterosexuality and heterosexual behaviours versus non-conforming identities and practices that are often marginalised and condemned (Kiguwa & Langa, 2017). It is further argued that heteronormativity may also refer to practices, structures, and institutions that legitimise the binary order (Devís-Devís et al., 2018; Javaid, 2018; Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). Therefore, it is applied in this study to examine hierarchical structures that maintain gender binaries, gendered roles, and behaviours that are assumed to match one's physiological sex (Connell, 2002; Ng et al., 2019). Moreover, this research explores theorists' assertions that heteronormativity warrants homophobia and heterosexism as heteronormative norms and discourses that discriminate against sexual minorities (Ray & Parkhill, 2021; Robinson, 2016; Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). Thus, also examining and exploring how heteronormativity stifles non-heterosexual identities and inhibits lesbian persons from expressing their gender and sexual identities (Burgess, 2005).

3.1.2. Intersectionality

First introduced by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in 1989, intersectionality is a theoretical tool used to analyse the interaction of power differentials and constraining normativities to examine how inequalities and unjust social relations are produced (Gopaldas, 2013; Jesmin, 2022; Nash, 2008). The intersection of race and gender has been a particularly enduring interest to intersectionality, as the concept emerged from critical race studies (Nash, 2008). Particularly, the unique experiences of black women were at the core of Crenshaw's discussions on race, gender, and class discrimination (Al-Faham et al., 2019; Gopaldas, 2013). Hence, the theory of intersectionality has received recognition as one of the most important contributions to women's studies (Carastathis, 2014).

Intersectionality is a concept that considers the multifaceted reality of identity and relations between an individual's various social identities (Crenshaw, 1991; Miller, 2015; Shields et al., 2011). In particular, intersectionality views identity as multifactorial and inclusive of demographic, social, cultural, political and other factors, which are interlinked and inseparable (Gray & Cooke, 2018; Youdell, 2004). Various scholars have shared that the individual is manifold and is influenced by an array of facts (Sarbin, 1986; Somers, 1994). Hence, intersectionality describes the interaction between these various social identity structures and categories in the creation of life experiences (Gopaldas, 2013; Harris, 2017).

Although it is critiqued by some as being vague and open-ended (Carastathis, 2014), intersectionality is still widely used, especially by anti-racist and feminist scholars, as an analytic tool to examine how different sociocultural categories are interwoven (Jesmin, 2022; Nash, 2008). Various models have emerged to understand and discuss the development of lesbian and other nonconforming sexual and gender identities. Nevertheless, intersectionality is a theoretical

contribution and is acclaimed as the ‘gold standard’ multidisciplinary analytic approach, as it is attuned to the reality that people exist within overlapping categories of race, gender, and other spaces (Nash, 2008). The theory has been used to demonstrate connections between whiteness, masculinity, and heteronormativity in organisational knowledge (Harris, 2017). Other researchers have used intersectionality as an analytic tool to highlight and disable the heteronormative (Battle & Ashley, 2008). Upcoming research could attempt to incorporate an intersectional approach or perspective that takes into consideration the multiple dimensions of identity (Gray & Cooke, 2018; Miller, 2015).

Intersectionality is often used as a research theory, methodology, and paradigm to identify and reveal pervasive and oppressive workings of power at all levels of social relations (Carastathis, 2014; Kapilashrami, 2020). It challenges that assumption of similarity, reveals important differences within certain groups and scrutinises the generatively privileged social identity (Gopaldas, 2013; Kapilashrami, 2020). Since recent studies have observed a growing interest in diversity and multi-contextual models in higher education (Miller, 2015), this study sought to view students holistically by acknowledging the multiple social identities that students develop and embody. The theoretical framing of this study analysed the experiences of the research participants, using an intersectional lens, as it explores how interlocking systems impact minority and marginalised groups. The theoretical framing of this study seeks to understand the experiences of the sample of lesbian female students at Wits University, using an intersectional lens.

3.1.3. Narrative theory

Individuals' identities, actions, and experiences are organised into narratives and stories that structure events in a way that is understood by the individual (Sarbin, 1986; Somers, 1994). Thus, the surroundings greatly influence an individual's morality, ways of making meaning, and overall worldview. An individual's identity expression, conformity or nonconformity to societal norms is a narrative (Bruner, 1990). Narratives aid in the understanding of people's views, interactions, and experiences of themselves and the world.

Narrative theory studies an individual's narratives and studies understandings, feelings, and human experiences (Riessman, 2008). This theory considers individuals as narrative beings whose stories are shaped by their different intersecting identities, perceptions, and experiences (Crossley, 2000). In fact, some theorists state that people's identities are developed, influenced, and maintained by their surroundings as well as their definitions of a past self, present self, and anticipation of the future (Bruner, 1991; Crossley, 2000). Thus, the use of narrative theory, in this study, is useful in unravelling and understanding the complexities of identity, the expression and performance of identity, and how identity shapes experiences.

Narrative theory is applicable both as a theoretical perspective and a method of study and analysis (Bruner, 1991). Therefore, this study applies both the narrative theory and narrative methods and analysis. In the methods below, narrative techniques are applied to analyse the content and meanings of the participant's accounts of their thoughts and experiences, and how they tell their stories (Crossley, 2000). A narrative theoretical perspective and narrative methods structured both the researcher's and participants expressions and understandings of certain events, how they present themselves and how they account for that, and how they would prefer

to be perceived (Skultans, 2000). Thus, in the methods section below, a narrative analysis is used to not only understand experiences, but also encapsulate the contexts (Brough et al., 2012).

Lastly, Mishler (1986) advises the importance of the characters and interactions in the research interview process, the interviewer who is also the listener, and the participants who are the narrators, and how they influence the story. Since narrative studies explore participants as subjects of their own stories using their own narratives (Creswell & Poth, 2018), this study explored the self-identified lesbian students as subjects and narrators of their own stories and lived experiences.

3.2. Research Design

Researchers in the social sciences have placed research methodologies, qualitative and quantitative, in competition against each other by comparing the two (Rizo, 1991). What is imperative though is that researchers should be more cognisant of the relevance, applicability, and appropriateness of the chosen method for the phenomena under study (Weiss, 1994). To understand the experiences of lesbian students in the university, this study adopted a qualitative exploratory approach that is located within an interpretive paradigm.

Qualitative research is known for its recognition of the importance of people's experiences and stories as giving insight and understanding of concepts (Wong & Breheny, 2018). Hence, the application of theories of heteronormativity, intersectionality, and narrative theory in the interactions between the researcher and the study participants to explore their experiences of their sexual orientation/sexuality at the university (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Although qualitative research is often critiqued for its lack of generalisability due to it uses smaller samples than quantitative research (Greenstein, 2003), it is important to note that

generalisability is not necessarily the aim of qualitative research studies and is not the aim of this research. The aim was to allow for more in-depth discussions and meaning making of personal experiences that is made possible through qualitative research (Berg et al., 2004; Sixsmith & Daniels, 2011). In addition to facilitating in-depth discussion, the use of a qualitative research design allows the researcher to understand and interpret how people make sense of themselves and their social worlds (Lewis et al., 2003). Hence it was the most plausible method to research the lived experiences of lesbian students in the university campuses since it “values individual voices and is often used to illuminate voices that have previously been marginalised” (Perl & Noldon, 2000, p. 38, as cited in Miller, 2015).

3.3. Research Setting

The study was conducted with self-identifying lesbian students who have had lived experiences at Wits University, which has various campuses in the City of Johannesburg. The university’s heritage dates to 1896 when the South African School of Mines was established in Kimberley and was renamed Transvaal Technical Institute in 1904 when it was transferred to Johannesburg. The institution’s name further evolved to Transvaal University College in 1906, South African School of Mines and Technology in 1910, University College Johannesburg in 1920, and was finally granted full university status in 1922, when it was officially named the University of the Witwatersrand (Evans, 2012; Wits University, 2021). The university was officially launched on the 1st of March 1922 (Veller, 2006). Despite its anti-apartheid history, transformation at Wits University has been the most dishevelled of South African institutions (King, 2001).

The university is located in an area that has a controversial history and politics (Munro, 2010). Currently spreading over the Braamfontein and Parktown regions of Johannesburg, Wits University is considered one of the most prestigious English-medium universities in South Africa (King, 2001; Murray, 1990; University of the Witwatersrand, 2020) and counted as one of the ‘big five’ elite universities in the country (Nduna et al., 2017, p. 7).

Wits University’s 2020 Annual Report revealed that the total student intake in 2020 was 40 856 and was explained as having increased compared to previous years. The student enrolment data of 2020 also revealed that, in terms of the gender, the majority of the registered students were females (Wits University, 2020). Moreover, when analysing the student enrolment data by gender and race, Black female students were shown to be in the majority and placed at 84.35% compared to 14.95% of White females. More specifically, the student enrolment data specified that female Africans set comprised 79.48%, Indians at 14.36%. Coloureds at 5.62%, and Chinese at 0.53% in the female and black group (Wits University, 2020).

Some argue that campus environments have the potential to be supportive and allow sexual minorities the freedom to create their own values and freely experience life (Munyuki & Vincent, 2017; Tshilongo & Rothmann, 2019). Wits University is also known to have deployed various campaigns to increase visibility and recognition for gender and sexual diversity (Milani & Kapa, 2015). Still, Francis (2021) opines that, because of the country’s history, South African educational institutions have been sites for the preservation of heteronormative and patriarchal norms that perpetuate discrimination against gender- and sexuality-diverse students. Hence, this research study aimed to understand how lesbian students perceived and experienced the university environment in relation to their sexuality.

3.4. Sample and Sampling

This research study used a mixture of purposive non-probability convenience and snowball sampling to select the participants. In purposive sampling, sampling is non-random as participants are selected based on pre-defined characteristics (Etikan et al., 2016). The convenience sampling method is one that collects data from an available and appropriate pool by sourcing participants that are accessible and available (Terre Blanche et al., 2006). Additionally, the snowball sampling process is one in which participants are invited to assist the researcher in identifying additional potential participants (Emerson, 2015). This was done to select a sample of research participants who may be able to provide pertinent data to gain a thorough comprehension of the subject matter of the research. These methods were most ideal for this research studies as the Wits University student community were convenient and accessible to the research to recruit study participants who met the inclusion criteria.

The research participants were recruited by using an advertisement on social media platforms. Information about the research study was posted on social media platforms, such as WhatsApp, Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter (see Appendix F). The inclusion criteria for participation stated that interested individuals should self-identify as lesbian, be students at Wits University, and available for a 60- to 90-minute-long interview. Participants were also recruited using the university's email, which was disseminated through the office of the registrar, once permission was received from the university (refer to Appendix E). The researcher also advertised and recruited for research participants through the Voice of Wits (VOW) FM campus radio station. Prospective participants who showed an interest in the study were emailed an information sheet describing the purpose of the study (see Appendix A), as well as a consent

form indicating that they consented to participate in the study (see Appendix B) and that they consent to the recording of the interview (see Appendix C) for the purposes of the study.

While qualitative research theory does not typically stipulate the sampling sizes needed, the size of the sample is more so contingent upon the objectives of the researcher and the desired outcome of the research study (Patton, 1990). The study recruited 10 female students from Wits University who self-identify as lesbian, attended in-person lectures at the university prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and had lived experiences on the university campus. The participants were from different racial backgrounds (seven Black, one Indian, and two White), some non-South Africans, at different levels and fields of study within the university, and diverse family and social backgrounds.

3.5. Data Collection and Procedure

The first step before collecting data was obtaining ethical clearance from the School of Human and Community Development Ethics, as constituted under the university Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical). Since the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated strict regulations for travel and in-person meetings, this caused a shift in the nature of the qualitative research interviews from in-person to virtual platforms (Maulana, 2022; Oliffe et al., 2021), hence, the research interviews were conducted online to ensure that the health and safety of the researcher and research participants was not compromised. While access to a virtual platform made it possible to continue with the research study, online interviewing does have its advantages and limitations that may affect the interview process. Online interviews provide the researcher and the participants the flexibility and convenience to conduct the study without the constraints of geographic location, but internet connection issues can affect the quality of the

audio and video (Oliffe et al., 2021; Saarijärvi & Bratt, 2021), and possibly the overall experience of the interview as it affects the flow of the interview process.

The Zoom videoconferencing communication platform was used to conduct the interviews and collect the data for the research since it is secure, easy to navigate, and allows for quality audiovisual connection and recording (Archibald et al., 2019; Serhan, 2020). The researcher and participants were able to establish rapport online and scheduled interviews at a time that was convenient to both parties. The nature of the interviews was semi-structured to guide and encourage participants to engage, freely express themselves and speak about their experiences, while the researcher remained discreet and only guided the interview process with follow-up questions (Appendix D, Greenstein, 2003). Narrative interviewing is a collaborative effort between researcher and participants and entails narration and collection of stories and experiences by the participants and researcher, respectively (Paiva, 2012). In a narrative interview, the participant/interviewee is central to the research and their perspective is given priority (Anderson & Kirkpatrick, 2016). The interviews were conducted in English and the average duration of the interviews was 60 to 90 minutes. The participants were requested to avail themselves for follow-up interviews if further clarification was needed. However, no follow-up interviews were scheduled, as these were not needed. While most of the interviews were conducted seamlessly with little interruptions and/or challenges, a few proved to be challenging due to connectivity issues, thus affecting the quality of the audio and video recording. As a result, data was only collected from 9 of those 10 research participants, since one of the research interview recordings was inaudible due to connectivity issues experienced during the interview process. The data was collected during August to October 2021 and was transcribed and reviewed for analysis using narrative thematic analysis techniques.

Participants background information

Table 1: Participant's demographic profile

Participant	Pseudonym	Self-Identity	Race	Faculty	Level of Study
P1	Akhona	Queer/Gay	Black	Science	Honours
P2	Livhu	Lesbian/Gay	Black	Health Sciences	Masters
P3	Esihle	Lesbian	Black	Humanities	Third year
P5	Tebello	Lesbian	Black	Engineering	Third year
P6	Sarah	Lesbian	White	Humanities	Third year
P7	Nikita	Pansexual	Indian	Humanities	n.s. ²
P8	Cleo	Lesbian/Queer	Black	Humanities	Masters
P9	Dineo	Lesbian/Queer	Black	Science	Masters
P10	Alex	Queer	White	Humanities	Doctorate

There were ten participants that were initially recruited, however, only nine of interview data was collected and analysed to be used in the study. The sample of participants included lesbian students from different racial groups: 5 Black, 2 White, and 1 Indian. The participants were also registered in various Faculties and levels of study, namely the Sciences, Engineering, Humanities and Health Sciences. Lesbian students from the Faculty of Commerce, Law and Management were not represented within this sample. Although all the research participants self-identified as lesbian because of their romantic and/or sexual orientation towards women, they indicated the terms they prefer to identify themselves by. These are further discussed in the

² "n.s." is an abbreviation for "not stated".

3.6. Data Analysis

After the data was collected and transcribed, the data was analysed using narrative thematic analysis. When analysing qualitative data, the researcher examines the data to identify and report patterns and themes that are apparent in the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Narrative analysis enables researchers to explore, investigate, gather, and analyse narratives, stories, and experiences (Webster & Mertova, 2007). Such an analysis is entrenched in the personal accounts of events and experiences and how they are rooted in social interactions (Webster & Mertova, 2007). The narratives expressed in this research will be analysed using a narrative analysis technique. Although there are guidelines written by narrative researchers, there is no set standard or procedure for narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008). Narrative researchers usually use four methods of narrative analysis, namely, structural, thematic, visual, and dialogic (Riessman, 2008). This study will use the narrative thematic analysis to analyse the content of transcribed interviews by identifying themes that are relevant and applicable to the research questions of the study (Babbie & Mouton, 2004).

Creswell's (2014) five stages of narrative thematic analysis were employed to guide the data analysis of this research:

- 1) Preparation and organisation of the data: the interviews were conducted and recorded, then transcribed shortly after the interviews were conducted and each participant was assigned a pseudonym.
- 2) Obtaining a general sense of the information: during the process of transcription, the researcher made notes of emergent patterns and themes.
- 3) The process of coding: the data was coded manually by sorting and highlighting prominent ideas and/or recurring words or ideas. Thereafter, a relevant code – short

description – was developed to identify these ideas or words. and the codes were organised together.

- 4) Categories or themes: the codes were then organised and placed into relevant logical categories, which were short phrases reflecting emergent themes to represent the key findings of the research study. For this study, the codes were condensed into four major categories or themes including: 1) nonconforming sexual orientation; 2) navigating intersecting identities; 3) university campus experiences; 4) victimisation and same-sex intimate partner violence.
- 5) Interpretation of the data: this stage occurs simultaneously with the coding and categorisation stages and consisted of making meaning of the data. In making meaning of the data, the researcher constantly reviewed and refined the codes, and interpreted the corresponding themes and subtheme of the collected stories of the lesbian experiences.

3.7. Qualitative Rigour

Qualitative rigour is ensured by maintaining the standards qualitative validity and reliability throughout the research process and presentation of findings (Creswell, 2014). Qualitative rigour and merit of the findings of the study is further ensured by upholding principles of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Morse, 2015).

Credibility

This speaks to whether the results of the findings of the study were obtained in a trustworthy manner and requires that the participants' experiences are accurately reflected and interpreted (Connelly, 2016; Corbin & Strauss, 2015; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). To ensure

credibility in this study, the researcher asked the participants clarifying questions, where it was necessary. Probing for clarity also allowed for the collection of rich and in-depth data. The researcher also referred to the interview transcripts and checked quotes and represented the participants accurately.

Transferability

Transferability refers to the extent to which the methods and the findings of the research study are transferable between study groups (Hall & Roussel, 2014; Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). One of the ways of ensuring transferability is by providing the demographic and geographic information of the participants so that the study is replicable (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Therefore, the researcher applied the principle of transferability by providing a detailed description of the research setting, as well as the relevant background information of the participants in the methodology chapter of the research. It is worth noting, however, that, since qualitative research is not aimed at generalisability, this study may only be applicable to similar and comparable communities.

Dependability

Dependability is another principle that contributes to the trustworthiness of qualitative research. It ensures that the findings of the data collected, and the findings of the research study are reliable within a certain period and conditions (Hall & Roussel, 2014). Hence, the reason for the study was outlined and described, as well as the data collection processes, and analysis procedures employed.

Confirmability

The confirmability of a study is reliant on its credibility, dependability, and transferability. Hence, it speaks to how the data collected is precisely represented in the research study and that the findings represent the participants' experiences and perceptions rather than those of the researcher (Polit & Beck, 2008). Hence, the interview schedule was merely used as a guide and the participants were asked to expand on their experiences beyond the questions asked. This also requires a researcher's reflexivity and an awareness of own biases and positionality that may have influenced the study (Thomas & Magilvy, 2011). Therefore, the researcher's self-reflexivity is mentioned below.

3.8. Researcher's Reflexivity

While conducting this research, the researcher aimed to understand and present the participants' experiences as accurately as possible. Yet, is important to acknowledge the researcher's role as it pertains to understanding and presenting the participants' experiences and narratives thereof (Luttrell, 2000). Moreover, striving to be a "good enough" researcher requires one to be self-aware and aware of the tensions and errors that may occur due to the researcher's personal biases (Luttrell, 2000). The researcher needs to be aware of participants' self-location, interests, and social position across the lines of gender, race, class, sexual orientation identity, etc and how these could have possibly influenced the research (Adler, 2022; Pillow, 2003). These identities of both the researcher and the participants play a significant role in determining the power and positionality in the research (Muhammad et al., 2015).

Therefore, I had to be aware of and acknowledge the power that comes with my role as a researcher and the different ways it presented itself in the research. I, as the researcher, practiced

power in the research process; the research question, design, setting, and other decisions about the research were undertaken by me throughout the research process. Moreover, power is practiced during the write-up and presentation of the finding and results from the data and interactions with the participants (Muhammad et al., 2015), which was conducted by me, as the researcher.

Since the researcher has control over the interview questions and when to end the research interview, the participants' involvement and contributions may be influenced by the pre-determined interview questions (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009). This was true for this research, as an interview guide was used to direct the research. Moreover, the interview guide that I created may have been influenced by my personal motives and interests in certain aspects of the participants' experiences. Nevertheless, the participants were reminded of their freedom of participation and that they were free to choose which information they were comfortable disclosing during the research interview.

I further tried to create a comfortable space for the participants to share by allowing them to lead the discussion, even when the conversation shifted away from the question asked and I probed, where I needed clarity and understanding of the expressions, perceptions, and experiences they shared with me. Some of my shared factors with the participants, i.e., similar age range and educational status, aided in my building rapport with them. I also realised that I may have related to some of the racial and gendered experiences shared by some of the participants, which Karnieli-Miller et al. (2009) warn is a normal experience. Hence, I challenged myself to recognise where I may have overidentified in order to shift my attention back to the participants and their experiences instead.

Member-checking of the transcripts is often advisable to enhance qualitative rigour and improve the accuracy of participants' information and contributions for analysis and interpretation (Kerneili-Miller et al., 2009). Upon reflection, it is acknowledged that the participants were not promised or provided the opportunity to engage in member-checking. This also confirms that the researcher has power over the interpretation of participants' experiences and how those are presented in the final research report (Almlund, 2013). To ensure that the participants' narratives are well represented, I included quotations from the interviews, which were analysed according to the context of the participants.

The purpose of the research question was considered as the first factor in an effort to maintain reflexivity. One of the important things to reflect on is the rationale and motive behind the research question. Although my initial interests were in understanding heteronormativity and how it influences GBV on campus, my supervisor challenged me to broaden my interests outside of my comfort zone, as there is a growing awareness and interest in queer work. Although I initially felt out of my depth and overwhelmed by the magnitude of the work, I came to realise a competent and effective psychologist and community worker is one who is aware of and accepting of the many unique and diverse individuals that one may encounter in the helping profession. It is important for community psychologists to reflect on their place in society, i.e., social positionality, and the power dynamics that are often present in their work (Graham, 2017).

While I understand and share some of the general struggles that are experienced by women, especially black women, I have hardly been challenged to think beyond the comfort of my cisgendered heterosexual lens. Hence, this research was an eye-opening experience and a learning opportunity for me to understand the experiences of women from diverse backgrounds and with same-sex attractions. I was curious about the intersectionality of identity and wanted to

better understand the challenges faced by sexually nonconforming women and how they navigate them.

While I thought I could focus on leveraging the fact that I am insider, as I am a student at Wits University, I was welcomed with suspicion by some of the participants, as they were curious about my sexual orientation and motives, while others were intrigued that a heterosexual woman had an interest in their lives. Hence, to avoid my own blind spots, I maintained transparency with the participants who were welcoming and enthusiastic to share their knowledge and experiences, as experts in their own lives. I also engaged with more people in my personal and professional capacity on the topic of gender and sexuality, and some were generous to share formal and informal resources. I also had the guidance and objective support of my supervisor, who would challenge me to think about certain aspects of the research in a more open-minded and critical manner.

While reflexivity does not ensure objectivity and impartiality, it aims to highlight the characteristics and contexts of the researcher and how they influence or interact with the research (Olmos-Vega et al., 2022). Moreover, the purpose of my reflexivity as a researcher has not only ensured that I remain cognisant of my own intersubjectivities, it has also reminded me to be aware of my own biases, while I was interpreting the data (Medico & Santiago-Delefosse, 2014).

3.9. Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations and guidelines need to be adhered to when conducting research, to ensure that all possible arising ethical dilemmas are considered beforehand. This research study obtained unconditional approval (protocol number: MACC/21/09) from the university's ethics

committee under the university Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), as the study was considered low risk.

The following ethical considerations were adhered to: The researcher informed the participants about the nature of the study as well as their freedom to withdraw from the study without any penalties prior to obtaining their written consent to participate in the research study (see Appendix A). Informed consent was obtained from each participant prior to each interview, both for the interview and for the recording of the interview (see Appendix B and Appendix C).

Although anonymity was not possible since the face-to-face interviews were conducted on a videoconferencing platform, the participants' safety and confidentiality of the data collected had to be maintained as the participants' identities and personal information was not shared with anyone and the data was collected in the researcher and participants' respective private spaces. Moreover, the participants' identifying information was hidden during write up of the final research report. The collected data was stored on a personal password-protected laptop that was only accessed by the researcher. The data was archived upon completion of the research and the participants were informed that they could access the completed research report, should they wish to do so.

Due to the nature of the research and information shared by the participants, the researcher understood that the interview process may be sensitive to some of the participants. Hence the participants were also informed of the psychological and support services available to them at the university, namely the Counselling, Careers and Development Unit (CCDU) and the Emthonjeni Centre.

3.10. Conclusion

This chapter provided an overview of the methodology that was employed throughout the research study. The three theories that were used to inform and shape this research study were also discussed under the theoretical framework of this chapter, namely, heteronormativity, intersectionality, and narrative theory. Furthermore, an explanation of the research design, research setting, and sample and sampling procedures were discussed together with the data collection and data analysis methods. The chapter further discussed how qualitative rigour was ensured in the research process and highlighted the researcher's reflexivity at different stages of the research process. Lastly, the ethical considerations that were considered and adhered to during the process of the research were discussed; in the latter part of this chapter, the process of data analysis discussed focused on narrative thematic analysis approaches and how this was applied for the study.

Chapter 4: Results and Discussion

In this chapter, the findings of the study will be reviewed and discussed in relation to the objectives of the study. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with self-identified lesbian students to investigate the experiences of lesbian students at Wits University, Johannesburg. This chapter will also discuss the emerging themes by relating them to the literature on heteronormativity and intersectionality, as these underpin the research study. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed for narrative thematic analysis. All the participants included in this study self-identified as lesbian on the basis that they were in same-sex relationships, although they may have used other identifiers. A brief description of the themes, subthemes, and each participant will be provided, then a discussion of the results, followed by the implications relative to the aims and objectives of the study.

4.1. Themes

Four major themes emerged from the narrative thematic analysis of the data collected: 1) Nonconforming sexual orientation; 2) Navigating intersecting identities; 3) University campus experiences; 4) Victimization and same-sex intimate partner violence. These themes reflect and represent the experiences of lesbian university students at Wits University. Four subthemes were identified within theme one: Initial awareness of same-sex attraction, lesbian self-definition, perceptions of LGBTIQ+ labels, and coming out experiences. Additionally, three subthemes emerged in theme two: Sexual identity is one component of identity, gender, race and lesbian identity, and religion and lesbian identity. A further five subthemes emerged in theme three: Diversity and self-expression on campus, LGBTIQ+ campus communities, on-campus attitudes, university resources and support services, and suggestions for a LGBTIQ+ friendly campus.

Lastly, four subthemes emerged in theme four: Experiences of victimisation and same-sex intimate partner violence, perceptions of same-sex intimate partner violence, help-seeking behaviours. These themes and subthemes are expanded on and discussed below.

4.1.1. Theme 1: Nonconforming Sexual Orientation

This theme is reviewed and discussed in a chronological approach that corresponds with the narrative approach of data analysis (Bradbury, 2017; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). The theme and underlying subthemes mentioned below explore the research question that asks, “How do lesbian students define, express and experience their sexual identity and other sociocultural identities?” The four subthemes representing the participants’ understandings and expressions of their nonconforming sexual orientation were their initial awareness of same-sex attraction, their self-definition, their perceptions of LGBTIQ+ labels, and their coming out experiences.

Subtheme 1: Initial awareness of same-sex attraction. During the interviews, participants shared about their sexual identity development and their awareness of affectional status, more specifically, their initial awareness of their same-sex attraction.

Adolescence and young adulthood

Almost all the participants recalled that they became aware of their attraction to people of the same sex during their adolescent stages and high school years. Participants’ experiences correlated with the developmental theories that state that sexual identity development and awareness of affectional status are central tasks of the adolescence and young adulthood stages that typically occur during high school and early tertiary years (Bates et al., 2020; Bregman et al., 2013; D’Augelli, 1992; Gómez-López et al, 2019; Lopez & Chims, 1993; Sanlo, 2004). The

excerpts below present two participants' experiences of them becoming aware of their same sex attraction in their primary and high school years:

“Like from higher primary. Maybe from Grade 6. I found myself... I had feelings for my friend... Whenever I had guys hitting on me, it felt very uncomfortable. Like the feeling was so different with females, more than males.” (P3, Esihle, Black, Lesbian)³

“Since early high school, I'll say. But even before that, I didn't feel like I was attracted to men the way my peers were, the way my friends were... It was never something I paid attention to until I got to high school, where I was like, you know I am actually attracted to this person... That is when you start also becoming aware of other sexualities. So, I did date a girl back in high school. I did have a few experiences back in high school.” (P1, Akhona, Black, Queer/Gay)

The statements by Esihle and Akhona correspond with the notion that adolescent and high school years are characteristically developmental stages, where individuals form their identity and social relationships. Since most individuals typically undergo puberty-related changes and begin romantic and sexual relationships during their adolescent years, sexuality begins to occupy a larger part of their lives (Pearson et al., 2007). While Esihle's above statement does not detail much of what her initial awareness of her same-sex attraction was like, she shared that she noticed having different feelings for people of the same sex versus the opposite sex from as early as primary school. Similarly, Akhona's statement highlights how she was aware that her attractions were different to those of their peers. Various models of sexual

³ The bracketed information is reported as followed: participant number, pseudonym, race, preferred label.

identity or sexual orientation identity development describe the first stage as involving the initial awareness of feeling different (Hall et al., 2021). Akhona highlights that she did not pay much attention to or acknowledge her attraction to people of the same sex during her childhood.

These excerpts also demonstrate Allan et al.'s (2018) statement that the primary school context is often a sheltered place where LGBTIQ+ identities are often made absent, as they are not formally acknowledged in the context or made taboo when addressed. In fact, childhood is often treated as a stage of life where sexuality is non-existent (Alves et al., 2016). This may be attributed to the lack of comprehensive sexuality education as well as the lack of supportive environments in schooling environments (Miller, 2015).

Doubts, internal conflict, and confusion

While sexual identity development is typically found to occur during adolescence for everyone, doubts, conflicts, and confusion appear to be the recurring feelings for most sexual minority youths who are trying to make sense of their same-sex sexual attraction in settings that are suffused with heterosexuality (Allan et al., 2018; Alves et al., 2016). Below, two participants described experiences of trying to make sense of their initial stages of self-awareness:

“I think I was around 23. So, I am like 31 now... And before that, even though I maybe didn't necessarily understand it or know it for myself, I think even looking back into when I was a teen, there was definitely an understanding deep inside that I was attracted to other women. But maybe as I am getting older, I am realising how much things are changing and when I was in high school there wasn't as much openness.” (P10, Alex, White, Queer)

In the excerpt above, Alex expressed that, although she knew that she was attracted to individuals of the same sex, she did not seem to understand what it meant. Alex attributed her lack of openness about her same-sex attraction to her lack of understanding of it or what it meant. A study on peer-to-peer influence on sexual attraction and behaviour amongst adolescent social networks reported that early romantic relationships are often a key focus of adolescent development (Brakefield et al., 2014). However, sexual feelings and behaviours are stigmatised in schooling environments (Pearson et al., 2007) and caregivers are also often not open and communicative about sexuality with their children (Jimmyns & Meyer-Weitz, 2019), and this often has undesirable consequences for sexual minority youths.

“I always knew... I mean like growing up and stuff, although I was clearly attracted to females, I didn’t necessarily allow myself to call myself - I don’t know, 'bisexual' or 'lesbian' or any of those terminologies. I felt like it was taboo and what I was doing was wrong. So, I kind of internalised that.” (P7, Nikita, Indian, Pansexual)

While Nikita expressed her early awareness of her same-sex attraction, she described feelings of internalised disapproval of her sexual orientation. Fear of labelling oneself as a lesbian may result from internalised homonegativity or internalised homophobia, which is defined as an application of anti-homosexual stigma to oneself and internalised perceptions from fear (Bregman et al., 2013). This further indicates the normalisation of heterosexuality while nonconforming sexuality and sexual orientations are often overlooked or even viewed as taboo and wrong in heteronormative societies (Alves et al., 2016; Netshandama et al., 2017). Hence, it is not uncommon for sexual minority youth to reject, conceal, feel uncertain and or concerned

about their lesbian identity, as these are incompatible with prevailing heteronormative standards (Alves et al., 2016; Bregman et al., 2013).

The impact of religion, culture, and geographic location

Rosario et al. (2009) suggests that some individuals who are questioning their sexual identity may often explore and even identify as bisexual before accepting their same-sex attraction. Sarah's description of her experience in the excerpt below confirms Rosario et al.'s assertion:

“I started figuring out I was attracted to girls at about 15. And I thought I was bisexual at the time. And I did for a long time because... I was friends with a group of people who very much normalised being attracted to men. And there was homophobia in the school as well, being an Anglican school with a lot of religious students. It did make it a bit more difficult.” (P6, Sarah, White, Lesbian)

Furthermore, Sarah's experience above is a reminder that sexual identity development is a non-linear and multidimensional process with varying components and trajectories (Bregman et al., 2013; Miller, 2015). Sarah shared that heterosexuality was normalised amongst her peers because she attended an Anglican school where homophobia was a reality. Moreover, this excerpt reveals that some individuals who attended Christian schools struggle with accepting their sexuality, as when they were taught about heterosexuality and homosexuality, it was introduced as a sinful act that is hated by God (Ntombana et al., 2020). Hence, some individuals struggle with their sexual orientation or even deny it.

“Well, I grew up Catholic. So, there was like a moment of ‘Oh! Fuck! I am going to hell’ and ‘Oh no! This is not what it should be’ but like very internalised... I also went to school in Catholic schools. I grew up in Uganda, and it was it wasn’t always very very homophobic, but it gradually became so. And at school obviously, if you are caught in any kind of queer relationship, you’ll be expelled, and you’ll have a hard time finding any other school. So, there was all these very internalised homophobia and very homophobic environments growing up, that ended up with me thinking ‘Huh! These homosexual tendencies are going to lead me straight to hell’.” (P8, Cleo, Black, Queer)

Similar to Sarah, Cleo shared that she attended a Christian school. The Christian religion and mainstream Christian denominations are known for promoting heterosexuality and condemning homosexuality, and viewing it as sinful (Nkosi & Masson, 2017; Ntombana et al., 2020). Cleo narrated that she was aware of the stigma and discrimination around homosexuality and that it is often labelled as sinful, demonic, and satanic, according to religious beliefs and practices (Mavhandu-Mudzusi & Sandy, 2015). For these participants, the realisation that their same sex attraction was contradicting what their religious beliefs and contexts dictate, resulted in a mixture of feelings, including confusion, denial, self-loathing in their initial stages of their realisation (Nkosi & Masson, 2017). Cleo explained that she internalised the homophobia from the conservative Christian school she attended and her country of origin.

Cleo’s experience further highlighted the impact of social contexts and African views on homosexuality, as she explained that she is from a homophobic African country. It is important to also recognise that geographic location and community plays a role in identity formation and influences expression (Hulko & Hovanes, 2018). Most African countries still retain laws against homosexuality, as it is viewed as an imposition of Western nations and is considered to go

against cultural and religious value systems (Matebeni & Msibi, 2015; Nkosi & Masson, 2017). Some studies, such as Duruamaku-Dim (2019) and Denwigwe et al. (2022), conducted in some African countries, even report gender and sexual nonconformity as an increasing “issue” that requires intervention. In Uganda, there is an Anti-Homosexuality Act of 2014 and homosexuality is a criminal offense that carries the death penalty (Nkosi & Masson, 2017). Hence, some sexual minority individuals, such as Cleo, fear persecution due to religion, culture, and/or a heteronormative defined world (Price & Prosek, 2020).

Self-acceptance

While feelings of doubt, uncertainty, and confusion may persist into young adulthood (Allan et al., 2018; Alves et al., 2016; Bregman et al., 2013), the excerpts below express eventual feelings of self-acceptance of one’s sexual orientation.

“I was genuinely attracted to girls in my high school and then when I accepted that ‘Okay you are proper proper... you're into girls bro’ was when I was in varsity. Like first year of university, I was like ‘This is who you are. You're not gonna fight it’.” (P9, Dineo, Black, Lesbian/Queer)

Dineo shared that she became aware of her same-sex attraction in high school. However, she stated that she only came to terms with and accepted this when she reached university.

“You know, I only came into accepting - it's about 4 to 5 years ago... So, I was at Wits. I was doing my Honours year... But looking back... you know when something rings and you're like, 'I actually identify as that'. And then you look back at your life, and you're like, 'Hmm. Actually, that friend who I thought I really liked, did I like them as a friend

or was there more?'. Just looking at some of the behaviour and things that I liked as a child, throughout primary, throughout high school, then I can see like, 'Oh! I've always been there'. Maybe I just didn't know how to define it.” (P2, Livhu, Black, Lesbian/Gay)

Likewise, Livhu stated that she became knowledgeable and accepting of her same-sex attraction and sexual orientation when she was in the university space. Both participants shared that their process of self-acceptance began in their university years. The internal process of self-acceptance is often initiated in the university context, as some lesbian individuals may experience the university environment as a safer space to learn and explore in order for them to move towards identity integration (Price & Prosek, 2020; Stevens, 2004).

Subtheme 2: Lesbian self-definition. The terms *lesbian* or *lesbian identity* are often used as though they have a predetermined fixed definition, but this is still a contentious topic among some researchers (Eliason & Morgan, 1998). Although the simple definition of lesbian denotes a woman who experiences same-sex emotional, romantic, or even sexual attraction toward another woman (Kurup & Underwood, 2021; Laramie, 2021), here, the participants described how they understand and use the label of the *lesbian*:

“I identify as female and, inasmuch as I am female, I am a lesbian. And I think I mentioned this, that being female, a lesbian female does not mean that I want to be a man.” (P5, Tebello, Black, Lesbian)

While there are many connotations to the term lesbians, Tebello dispels the misunderstanding that her lesbian identity means that she does not wish to be a woman or that she wishes to be a man. This shows that a popular misconception is that lesbians want to be men

and that butch lesbians, in particular, desire maleness (Jones, 2015). Hence, the above excerpt is a reminder that, minority groups, such as sexual minorities, are vulnerable to stereotyping and the perpetuation of myths and other forms of negative misinformation based on “heterocentrism” and other types of discrimination (Mallon, 2008).

Other participants linked their understanding and use of the term lesbian to their attractions and affections. The following explanations by Akhona and Sarah concur with and are summarised by Hagai and Seymour (2022) as a choice, as women to love other women:

“I am a female who is attracted to females... it's something that is there, and it just sucks that you have to explain yourself too much for something that is just a part of you.” (P1, Akhona, Black, Queer/Gay)

“It means that I am going to live my life with another woman and be happy, and we are just going to live our lives together.” (P6, Sarah, White, Lesbian)

Akhona and Sarah describe being lesbian as being attracted to people of the same sex or gender i.e., a female attracted to other females or a woman in a romantic relationship with another woman. While this is seen as the universal working definition of the term, some scholars critique that it is a monolithic or deceptively simplistic manner of defining the term where individuals define themselves according to the sex of their sexual or romantic partners because the term *woman* itself is not as simple as it appears (Eliason & Morgan, 1998; Tate, 2012).

Questions of what it means to be lesbian and what it means to be a woman, which are asked by scholars such as Tate (2012) and some participants as well are complex and controversial:

“So, for example, if I say I'm lesbian, then does that mean that I only date straight, do I only date other lesbian women or bisexual women? What about transexual women? What about transwomen? Lesbian-woman and Lesbian-woman... So, it has both good and bad... I wouldn't want any other person to label another person. Rather hear it from the person themselves.” (P2, Livhu, Black, Lesbian/Gay)

The above excerpt from Livhu questions the inclusions and exclusions of the lesbian identity category. This, once again, highlights the complexity and sensitivity of sexual orientation and gender identification. Hence, researchers continue to investigate the definition the term *lesbian* and what a lesbian relationship is, while also debating the possibility of engaging in same-sex relationships, without necessarily identifying as lesbian (Diamond, 2017; Tate, 2012). Nevertheless, Livhu mentions that it is important to understand and respect how individuals choose to identify themselves. Furthermore, in the excerpt below, Livhu introduces another significant identifier.

“I identify as a lesbian. Pronouns are she/her... It just happened to fit with who I am.”
(P2, Livhu, Black, Lesbian/Gay)

Pronouns play a significant role in how individuals prefer to be addressed. While some LGBTIQ+ identifying students and advocates may view traditional pronouns as limiting and rooted in patriarchal heteronormative beliefs (Norris & Welch, 2020), some state that explicitly acknowledging one's personal pronouns (e.g., she/her/hers, he/him/his, they/them/theirs) is a way of showing value and support (Johnson et al., 2021, p. 1). In her above statement, Livhu mentions that she believes her pronouns and sexuality are relevant to who she is. Thus, gendered

pronouns may be seen as a means of conveying one's personal sense of identity to others (Tate, 2012).

Subtheme 3: Perceptions of LGBTIQ+ labels. While some participants described their identity categories and explained how they make meaning of the term lesbian, others had varying views and sentiments on the use and usefulness of LGBTIQ+ identity categories and the term lesbian.

Naming confers existence

While heterosexuality is viewed as the norm, there is often an assumption that all people are heterosexual (Ray & Parkhill, 2021; Thorne et al., 2019). Esihle states that her use of the word lesbian is her way of informing people of her sexual identity and orientation, as she wishes for people to understand and respect her sexual orientation:

“Sometimes people they just think that maybe you are heterosexual and all that. So, I feel like if you label yourself, it's easier for them to understand and respect that.” (P3, Esihle, Black, Lesbian)

Sarah expressed comfort in embracing identity categories and stated that categorizing herself as lesbian is a form of distinguishing and identifying herself. Moreover, Sarah's sentiments concur with Rich (1976, as cited in Guess, 1995, p. 19) that “the word lesbian must be affirmed because to discard it is to collaborate with silence and lying about our very existence; with the closet game, the creation of the unspeakable.”

“I love the label of being a lesbian and, for me, that brings me a lot of comfort because I have something that I am, something that I can call myself.” (P6, Sarah, White, Lesbian)

It remains true that, for some, “naming confers existence” (Kulick, 2000, p. 244).

Although Cleo stated that she does not use the lesbian identifier, the excerpt below reveals her understanding that some people view identity categories as useful, as they help them to find other people who are like them.

“I think labels are important to the people who use them. Like sometimes I think, do you have to have all these labels?... I think people are just looking for their people. They are just looking for people like them. And these labels help them find those people.” (P8, Cleo, Black, Queer)

There is a recognition that the use of the word lesbian creates a collective identity and visibility (Giacomuzzi & Tal, 2022). Moreover, the use of the word lesbian is vital for the mobilisation and liberation of lesbians from heterosexuality and heteronormative structures that deem it non-existent (Guess, 1995).

Labels are restrictive

Conversely, two participants expressed discomfort with identity categories and associated categorisation with a ‘box’. Below, Nikita expressed that while some people are comforted by being able to place themselves into a particular identity category, she believes labels and categories to be restrictive and unnecessary, thus referring to them as boxes. Hence, although in a same-sex relationship, she identifies as *pansexual*, meaning that she “has the potential for attraction to people of any gender” (Greenberg, 2021, p. 422)

“I mean some people find comfort in it, in knowing their box, in knowing. Maybe the box sounds a bit weird but just knowing who they are and being able to identify with something. That can be comforting, definitely but at the same time I feel like it's not necessary.” (P7, Nikita, Indian, *Pansexual*)

Dineo's opinion below is similar to Cleo's and Nikita's, in that she acknowledges the convenience of labels and categorisation for some. However, she too believes that identity categories are restrictive, and that people should not be expected to adhere to a single identity category because sexuality is fluid.

“For human purposes, it is convenient. It just makes things easy, but it is not necessary... I am not expecting you to stick to that because I do understand that sexuality is a fluid thing.” (P9, Dineo, Black, Lesbian/Queer)

Some scholars agree that human beings are constantly evolving and that their sexuality is complex hence, their sexual orientation should also be viewed as fluid (Hagai & Seymour, 2022; Laramie, 2021) and that labels are limiting and impose meanings on individualities (Stephens & Boonzaier, 2020). However, there is an ongoing debate on whether sexual orientation should be viewed as categories or assessed as a continuum (Savin-Williams, 2016).

Preference for gender-neutral labels

Other participants also shared general negative sentiments towards and dislike of identity categories. Akhona expressed her specific dislike of the term *lesbian* and stated that it has sexual

connotation. Moreover, Akhona associates the term lesbian with her initial experience of the label, which seemed to have been in a context where being lesbian was seen as improper. She goes as far as describing the term as distasteful, “vulgar”, and speaks about a fetishised concept of lesbianism. This further reveals the internalised negative attitudes towards the word and harmful misrepresentations of the lesbian identity (Giacomuzzi & Tal, 2022; Swenson, 2013). Hence, her preference for the terms such as gay and queer, which she describes as more relaxed and neutral forms of identifying oneself as non-heterosexual or nonconforming.

“I don’t like the term lesbian. I feel like there's just so much sexual connotation around it... Lesbian sounds so... pornographic... When you first said that to yourself, it wasn’t in a nice space... It kind of feels vulgar... To identify myself, I say gay... Like it's queer. Like it's 'That is just so gay, oh my gosh it's so gay!'... So gay is like, it's chilled. It's like a more neutral term. It's like, it's not vulgar.” (P2, Akhona, Black, Queer/Gay)

While there is an acknowledgement that the term gay has varying uses amongst LGBTIQ+ individuals, Woodford et al. (2012) state that the phrase “that’s so gay” is a form of heterosexist language that is frequently used to describe something as weird or undesirable and explain that some LGBTIQ+ students may use the phrase as an expression of empowerment or to ridicule others because of their own internalised homophobia (Woodford et al., 2012). In the above excerpt, Akhona, however, shared that she uses the phrase “that is just so gay” and the term *gay* as a repose from the term lesbian since she associates the term gay with a more “chilled” tone.

It seems that the term *lesbian* is viewed by some as highly stigmatised and gender-neutral terms are viewed as a softer and friendlier replacement (Swenson, 2013). Livhu’s extract below

informs us that she too prefers gender-neutral terms and uses the terms *gay* and *queer* interchangeably. The term *gay* is understood, in a broader sense by some, as describing someone who is emotionally, romantically, or sexuality attracted to people of the same gender (Laramie, 2021), while the term *queer* is sometimes used as an umbrella term to describe a larger category of ambiguous sex and/or gender individuals whose sexual practices and identities are nonnormative (Eliason & Morgan, 1998; Laramie, 2021). This use of the word *queer* as an umbrella, and even an alternative for the LGBTIQ+ community, has become increasingly common in recent years (Giacomuzzi & Tal, 2022).

“Labels, for me or myself, labelling myself as lesbian helped me with finding who I am. And then I use the words *lesbian* and *gay* interchangeably... I use *gay* as an umbrella term for what people say is *queer*...” (P2, Livhu, Black, Gay)

Some scholars state that individuals often use gender-neutral terms of identification to avoid explaining their sexual orientation or to connect to a like-minded community without a sexual or gendered specification (Giacomuzzi & Tal, 2022). However, Alex mentions that her use of the term *queer* is not only to claim her nonnormative identity but to also demonstrate her resistance intentionally to heteronormative rules. Hence, the use language and naming can be used as forms of political expression (Eliason & Morgan, 1998; Matebeni & Msibi, 2015) and direct opposition against patriarchy (Hagai & Seymour, 2022). Stephens and Boonzaier (2020, p. 328) emphasise that “the fight for sexual freedom and expressions is a political matter.”

“Ya, I mean, for me personally I use *queer* because to me it's political. It's kind of a 'fuck you'. It's I am going to claim this identity because it is non-normative and because it is

resistant to whatever heteronormative society tries to tell me to be.” (P10, Alex, White, Queer)

Although queer identification is aimed at highlighting non-normativity, Swenson (2013) cautions that it may contribute to the erasure of exclusive female homosexuality and essentially lesbian invisibility. Hence, Giacomuzzi and Tal (2022) state that there is tension between queer politics and lesbian politics and argue that queer politics’ deconstruction of the lesbian category undermines lesbian visibility.

Subtheme 4: Coming out experiences. Participants reflected on and shared their experiences of coming out. Some researchers view coming out or self-disclosure as a critical developmental task in identity development of LGBTIQ+ individuals (Leung, 2021).

Being outed

One of the participants shared that experienced being outed and found out:

“In high school, I was outed. I didn’t come out... In varsity, I didn’t really come out, but people just found out.” (P1, Akhona, Black, Queer/Gay)

Akhona shared that she did not willingly disclose her sexual orientation to high school peers but was outed. Being *outed* is when one’s LGBTIQ+ identity is disclosed to others without the individual’s permission and this can have serious repercussions on a person’s safety (Laramie, 2021). Francis (2017) reports that, in the South African context, lesbian youths who are *out* often experienced harsh social laws.

Living openly

Some participants shared that they have not had any official coming out experience, rather that they continued living their lives openly. Laramie (2021) described that individuals who live openly are comfortable out about their sexual orientation. However, some shared that they were never closeted to begin with:

“I just live my life. I don’t hide it. It’s just like, if we are chilling talking about people and then let’s say we are talking about dating, and people are like, ‘Oh, what about your boyfriend?’ I look at them and I’m like, ‘Uh! I don’t date guys’... When I’m talking and then I am like, ‘Ya and then my girlfriend didn’t want to...’. But I have never had to be like, ‘Ya, I am out. I am going to tell people that I am this identity’.” (P2, Livhu, Black, Lesbian/Gay)

“Well, I mean I don’t know if I would ever call it coming out. I didn’t... For me, I refuse to be in the closet by default. So, I didn’t have the whole thing, but I am not in the closet. I mean my family is aware that I am a lesbian, and my neighbours are, and everybody who knows me is aware of this. But it’s not like I feel a need to be like ‘Listen people, I am a lesbian’. No! I didn’t see why I should do that.” (P8, Cleo, Black, Queer)

These above excerpts from Livhu and Cleo echo Hand’s (2007, as cited in Nkosi & Masson, 2017), that homosexuality should not be viewed as a complicated and contentious issue but rather viewed as legitimate. Hence, these participants state that they have been openly living their lives as people who are attracted to people of the same sex without particularly going through a coming out process, as this would mean that they were “closeted”. Being “in the

closet” is a description used to describe an LGBTIQ+ identifying person who has not disclosed their sexual orientation or gender identity to others (Laramie, 2021).

Coming out to parents

Most participants shared various feelings and narratives about their coming out experiences. The excerpts below show that individuals’ coming out experiences are influenced by their contextual factors (Leung, 2021). The above extracts show that parental reactions and responses towards their child’s nonconforming identity may differ and are influenced by different factors.

“And then in second year I tried to come out to my parents. Well, I did, and it went terribly. It went so bad. They were like ‘No, you’re not’. And I was like ‘What? Okay!’ And they sent me to this Pastor’s house... they were very adamant on me going to church and reading scriptures every day and how this is bad. And I had to just sit there, and be like yes, I disagree with homosexual practices and all that. It was wild honestly.” (P9, Dineo, Black, Lesbian/Queer)

The experience shared by Dineo shows that the coming out process and experience of disclosing one’s sexual orientation can be an unsettling and sometimes traumatic experience for some. Dineo shared that her Christian parents were unaccepting of her sexual orientation. The journey of self-acceptance and being accepted by others is often more complicated for Christian students with nonheteronormative identities (Nkosi & Masson, 2017). Studies on the experiences of Christian homosexual university students revealed that students have numerous reasons for not wanting to be open with their families; some included that their parents were homophobic,

fear of disappointing their families and being disowned, and that their parents may not accept their choices (Nkosi & Masson, 2017; Sithole, 2015). Furthermore, a hostile parental environment could affect their child's mental health and affect other aspects of their stability, if they are dependent on their parents (Hall et al., 2021).

“I kind of feel like, my family or my mother maybe knows that I am lesbian. But I haven't sat my family down and told them. Only my cousins ya, the youth of my family know, not the adults... Fortunately, my family is a very open-minded, welcoming family because I have another cousin of mine who is a lesbian. She has never gotten any rejection or judgement from them. So, I know that they would be supportive.” (P5, Tebello, Black, Lesbian)

“We never really had a relationship where we could openly talk about things like that, you know about really our personal lives... So, I wrote this letter, and it was just kind of like, 'I think I am bisexual, and I don't even know what else to say'. And my parents were fine. My dad, that night, kind of came and was like ya 'I love you no matter what... thanks for telling me and I accept you'. My mom never actually acknowledged it, but she is not the best at communicating. So, she would have weird ways of telling me that it was okay.” (P10. Alex, White, Queer)

While some parents found it difficult to come to terms with their children's decisions, some participants felt they experienced unconditional acceptance from their families, which brought them peace with their identity. For some, such as Tebello and Alex, talking to open-minded family members and friends played a crucial role in their process. Perceived parental and familial support related to sexuality is reported to result in higher self-esteem, lower internalised

homophobia, and fewer self-critical behaviours (Bregman et al., 2013; Moleiro & Pinto, 2015; Price & Prosek, 2020). Moreover, the wellbeing of LGBTIQ+ individuals is improved when their parents embrace and support them and provide them with the necessary assistance (Diamond, 2020). Coming out to parents may be beneficial for the parent-child relationship (Hall et al., 2021), as is seen in Alex's case above and Sarah's case below:

“My parents are divorced, and I currently live with my mother. And my mother herself has recently entered a relationship with another woman. So that does make it easy.” (P6, Sarah, White, Lesbian)

Sarah's experience, as shared above, is that having a nonconforming parent has normalised and made her experience easier. Battle and Ashley (2008) argue that, while some may believe that homosexual parents are corrupting their children, the reality is that they are no less loving and supportive of their children than heterosexual parents and may, in fact, be more considerate of their children's emotional needs.

It is worth noting that majority of the participants that shared that they disclosed their sexual orientation to their parents are white. Research found that white individuals are more likely to disclose their sexual orientation to their parents and other networks than non-white individuals (Hulko & Hovanes, 2018; Price & Prosek, 2020).

Perspectives on the necessity of coming out

While some participants shared their coming out experiences, others shared varying comments about the concept of coming out and others questioned its necessity. One of the participants stated that self-disclosure can be empowering, as the individual claims and affirms

their identity (Craig & McInroy, 2014). Moreover, Alex's excerpt below concurs with Price and Prosek's (2020, p. 84) statement that coming out is an "ongoing and lifelong process" because it is a decision that homosexual individuals make when they meet someone new.

"Like it can be a very empowering moment to kind of claim for yourself who you are and to openly, and you know at times bravely, say this is who I am, and I want you to know me... And I think that if you are a queer person, you know that it is ongoing. Like you never really stop coming out." (P10, Alex, White, Queer)

Some sexual minority individuals may selectively disclose as a strategy to safeguard and protect themselves (Hulko & Hovanes, 2018). While the recognition and disclosure of the sexual identities of non-heterosexual individuals has been historically significant in shaping identity (Khuzwayo, 2021), some participants expressed disapproving sentiments on the concept of coming out. Khuzwayo (2021) also found that some LGBTIQ+ individuals challenge that act of coming out and many question why non-heterosexual individuals are subjected to it, whereas straight individuals do not have to announce their heterosexuality. Similarly, both Livhu and Nikita share the same questions and queried why non-heterosexual individuals are expected to announce their sexuality, whereas heterosexual individuals do not.

"I don't believe in the concept of coming out. I think it is very unnecessary and very stressful... I just feel like it strips some level of humanity from you because you don't get straight people saying, 'Okay, I've got something to say... I am heterosexual'. There is no such concept because they are seen as the norm. So, expecting people to come out kind of - it just goes into being homosexual is not normal, which is why you need to come out" (P2, Livhu, Black, Gay)

"I don't like the term 'coming out'... Straight people don't have to come out and announce that they are straight... I feel like it becomes a spectacle and that it makes your sexuality something that is a spectacle... Like all of a sudden you aren't categorised as the norm." (P7, Nikita, Indian, Pansexual)

Livhu and Nikita further voiced that the notion of a coming out process draws unnecessary attention to individuals and implies abnormality for people who do not identify as heterosexual. Craig and McInroy (2014) state that, in recent years, scholars and LGBTIQ+ youths have argued that coming out is process that conforms to heteronormativity, as it seeks the approval and acceptance of heterosexuals. Hence, some of the participants reject the act of coming out and refuse to engage with it.

4.1.2. Theme 2: Navigating Intersecting Identities

Social identity categories may include age, gender, race, nationality, class, sexual orientation, religion, and other components that intersect and create various power dynamics or structures of order (Battle & Ashley, 2008; Miller, 2015). Sexual orientation intersects with all the other mentioned social categories (Prado-Castro & Graham, 2017). Participants shared more than just their experiences of their sexual orientation identity development. Many participants shared on their intersecting identities and reflected on how the various aspects of their identities interact and influence their lives. This included identifying sexual orientation as one component of identity and discussions about the intersections of gender, race, and religion as well as how they navigate these identities as lesbian women.

Subtheme 1: Sexual orientation is one component of identity. Participants shared that people often focus on and define them by their lesbian identity and forget that there are other components that contribute to an individual's identity. The extracts below are a reminder that women's identities are not only characterised by fluidity, but also by variety and diversity, though often limited by the labels imposed on them (Stephens & Boonzaier, 2020).

“I just feel like sexuality is just... as long as people don't take it to be, that's all that you are. I mean I'm project manager, I am a scientist, I am a Wits graduate, I have an Honours Degree in Science. There is so much more about me than me being a lesbian.” (P1, Akhona, Black, Queer/Gay)

In the above excerpt, Akhona details that she occupies various roles and positions in her life, yet people often overlook those and zoom in on her sexual identity as a lesbian woman. She further expressed that this fixation with sexual orientation identity often invalidates or disregards other experiences that lesbian women are navigating. Battle and Ashley (2008) state that individuals have multiple identities that intersect and have a relationship with each other. Purdie-Vaughns and Eibach's (2009, p. 381 as cited in Collier et al., 2013) theory of intersectional visibility refers to the “general failure to fully recognize people with intersecting identity as members of their constituent groups.”

“As much as my queerness is kind of central to who I am and how I navigate the world, you know, that is not to say that any other part of my identity or the social occasions that I have aren't because I also know that as much as my queerness, you know, affects my experience in the world, you know, my whiteness does, my middle-classness does, my

being a woman does. So, ya, for me it is about being mindful of how those play off of each other.” (P10, Alex, White, Queer)

Alex explains that her sexual orientation is the most central part of her identity and how she experiences the world but acknowledges other aspects of her identity. In addition to her sexual orientation, Alex states that her race, gender, and social status interact and further influence how she experiences the world. Individuals in the middle class are able to access and be protected by their Constitutional rights, which enable them the freedom of expression of their lesbian identity (Prado-Castro & Graham, 2017). In their research on sexual minority women, Diamond and Butterworth (2008, p. 371) state that “no identity is experienced – or can be meaningfully understood – in isolation.” Thus, focusing on a single identity, one can overlook the ways in which other identities intersect with sexual orientation (Shaheed et al., 2022).

Subtheme 2: Gender, race, and lesbian identity. Furthermore, participants shared how they navigate their gender, race, and lesbian identity. Black, female, lesbian participants were mostly aware of the compounded marginalisation that they were subject to because of their race, ethnicity, gender, and sexual orientation identities:

“There's that understanding that, because I am a black woman, and identify as a black lesbian woman, I am more at risk of being killed, being sexually assaulted... Like I am at the bottom of the food chain... I need to be cautious of the environment that I am in. Am I safe to hold my girlfriend's hand in this space? Can I talk about my sexuality in certain groups of people? Ya, basically it's stuff like that.” (P2, Livhu, Black, Lesbian/Gay)

“So, one, I am black - which is already a disadvantage in society with racism getting jobs and whatever. Two, I am a female - so that is another factor that contributes to my struggles in society. And I am lesbian, which makes things even worse. So, it's like I have all of these factors weighing me down or like they are challenges in the way of getting where I want to be. If I was a white person, I'd have a different experience. If I was a male, I'd have better opportunities.” (P5, Tebello, Black, Lesbian)

In the above extracts, Livhu and Tebello share that they are often disadvantaged because of their female gender. Scholars have reported that women are disadvantaged based on their gender (Cech & Waidzunas, 2011). Additionally, the participants share that combination of being black and female is often an added disadvantage. Moreover, they expressed experiencing multiple disadvantages and are at risk of being victimised based on their multiple marginalised identities as black, female, lesbian women. Battle and Ashley (2008) mention that some LGBTIQ+ individuals may have multiple marginalised identities. The experiences of these participants demonstrate that black lesbians are constantly living in fear of their safety. Moreover, participants are continually experiencing the emotional and mental labour of having to negotiate the public knowledge of their personal lives in ways that their heterosexual peers do not have to do (Cech & Waidzunas, 2011).

In addition to navigating the various challenges stated above, Shaheed et al. (2022) found that black LGBTIQ+ individuals also experience racial microaggressions from white LGBTIQ+ communities. The excerpt below reveals how the experiences of white lesbian women tend to differ from the experiences of black LGBTIQ+ individuals:

“I’ve had people who have said that being gay is a very white thing and I know a lot of gay people of colour... I’ve seen gay people who are racist, and they think they are free from being any kind of oppressor because they are gay... My whiteness does protect me because visibly I am a white person and especially as a feminine person, they see a feminine white woman. Whereas a black girl would always be first seen as a black person before anything else.” (P6, Sarah, White, Lesbian)

In the above excerpt, Sarah shares that homosexuality is often seen as a “white thing” and that racism exists among LGBTIQ+ communities. This confirms that, in South Africa, homosexuality is almost solely associated with whiteness and middle-classness (Gevisser and Cameron, 1995, as cited in Stephens & Boonzaier, 2020). Race is evidently central in the intersections of class, gender and sexuality and white people are often positioned as powerful and privileged in the social hierarchy (Stephens & Boonzaier, 2020). This excerpt also gives a brief indication that a more feminine expression of lesbian identity is protective, whereas the more masculine-presenting lesbian women experience pervasive social stereotypes.

“I acknowledge the privileges that come with this... you know with my whiteness, with my middle-classness, with my Americanness, also. But it is not merely just acknowledging it, it's really kind of understanding how that has also shaped my experience of being queer, of being a queer woman.” (P10, Alex, White, Queer)

Like Sarah, Alex shared that her white race, middle-class social status, and American nationality place her in a privileged position. Stephens and Boonzaier (2020, p. 338) concur that, “within the South African context, privilege is closely linked to class and material privilege.” In addition to her race and class, Alex shared that her nationality is a protective factor for her. This

may be supported by the reality that there is a strong belief that homosexuality is a Western concept (Prado-Castro & Graham, 2017).

Subtheme 3: Religion and lesbian identity. Additional to the intersections of gender, race and sexuality, participants shared their experiences of how their lesbian identity intersects with religion. Religion and sexuality are sensitive topics that people often avoid talking about (Nkosi & Masson, 2017; Price & Prosek, 2020).

Keeping the faith

Contrary to some opinions, Judge (2020) state that many LGBTIQ+ individuals seek to “keep their faith” by continuing to claim their right to religious beliefs despite religious institutions’ disregard of them.

“So, I accepted myself, and also accepted the idea that God loves me, and that homosexuality is not a sin... So, it's like, me being at ease with being Christian and just being who I am.” (P2, Livhu, Black, Lesbian/Gay)

Ntombana et al. (2020) state that homosexual individuals who also identify as Christian often find themselves in conflicting views relating to theology, church culture and their sexual identities. Despite the reality that religious communities often ostracise and cast out LGBTIQ+ people as sinners and lesser humans (Jones, 2015), Livhu shared she was able to be at ease with being a Christian when she chose to accept herself and accept that she is loved by God as she is.

Not interested in religion

The discrimination and exclusion that tend to exist in communities of faith often cause many LGBTIQ+ individuals to leave religious organisations (Judge, 2020). In the extracts below, some of the participants share that their negative experiences have resulted in a shift away from religiosity and more towards spirituality. Sarah's extract below is an example of how negative attitudes have caused some nonconforming individuals to leave organised religion:

“Some of these things tend to kind of kill that religious vibe in you. I still feel like I am very spiritual. I suppose you could say agnostic. I very much believe in a higher power, but I don't attribute it to a particular religion. But I still very much believe in some form of higher power.” (P6, Sarah, White, Lesbian)

“Church is good, but it is not who I kind of am... I am very spiritual as well and I believe in God.” (P1, Akhona, Black, Queer/Gay)

“And it was when I stopped being a Christian, like I had an epiphany, I went through a thing. I thought 'God can't be this judgemental'... But now, of course, I have gradually become aware that religion doesn't necessarily have to always be homophobic. But I am not interested in religion anyway.” (P8, Cleo, Black, Queer)

Although the participants quoted above state that they do not identify with any organised or institutionalised religion, Sarah and Akhona share that they still believe in a higher power and describe themselves as “spiritual”. These LGBTIQ+ individuals continue to integrate their sexuality and spirituality in a way that enables them to still express themselves. On the other hand, Cleo shared that, although she no longer identifies as a Christian and is not interested in

religion, she has chosen to cancel the belief that religion is homophobic. Judge (2020) states that religious institutions tend to enforce heteronormative ideals and position religious identity and queerness as oppositional, which might further explain the participants' sentiments.

Pray it away

In the excerpts below, Akhona and Livhu shared that they once internalised anti-homosexual attitudes and believed that their same sex attraction is a condition that they needed to alleviate themselves of. Some people still believe that homosexuality is a disorder (Finlay & Walther, 2003). Hence, they both shared that they believed they could pray it away. Some homosexual individuals may also experience guilt and shame due to internalised homonegativity and seek out various ways to relieve themselves. For some, religious practices such as prayer are often recommended as a solution to “convert” or “cure” them from their homosexuality (Ho & Hu, 2016)

“It is not something you can just ‘pray away’, because I have tried that. It is not something you can just wake up and it's gone. It's not something that is fake, it's not something that is because of the influence of social media” (P1, Akhona, Black, Queer/Gay)

“And I was like, 'You know what? I am going to pray this thing away! Like, I am gonna pray, fast, I am going to do everything that needs to be done for me to not be gay.' But it just seems like each time I pray and whatnot, I just became ‘gayer’. If that is the word, I could use.” (P2, Livhu, Black, Lesbian/Gay)

In this day and age, homophobia and homophobic attitudes can come in the form of classifying non-heterosexuality as “unAfrican”, “unchristian”, and “unnatural” (Vincent & Howell, 2014, p. 472).

Identity conflicts and mental health

The above experiences shared by participants further exemplify the identity conflict that often exists between religious identity or affiliation and sexuality (Finlay & Walther, 2003; Ho & Hu, 2016). The excerpts below detail how the participants exposure to anti-homosexual attitudes within religious environments has affected them:

“Then there'd be periods of time where I'd hate myself so much because I am like, ‘Why? Am I gay? I am not gay!’ . Denial at some point because you watch these videos... mentioned homosexuals under the same category, basically, as murderers, rapists, all of that. (P1, Akhona, Black, Queer/Gay)

“It's either I choose to continue being a Christian and not identify as lesbian or be lesbian and just accept that I am doomed to hell for eternity because that is what every other church pastor says. So, that was really difficult for me. And obviously, no one wants to go to hell.” (P2, Livhu, Black, Lesbian/Gay)

“No one likes to think that they were made by mistake. No one likes to think that something went wrong in their creation.” (P6, Sarah, White, Lesbian)

Akhona shared that she experienced self-hate and denial because her sexuality was often compared and equated to treacherous acts and criminal activities. Similarly, Livhu mentioned

that she felt that she had to choose between her Christian identity and her sexuality, as these are viewed as being in opposition to each other. She further explained that she experienced great difficulty with the idea that she was doomed because of her sexuality. Sarah's statement also highlights that distress is experienced when a person is made to feel as though they are a "mistake" or defective because of their sexuality or sexual orientation identity. Evidently, exposure to homonegative environments and the identity conflicts experienced by some homosexual individuals can sometimes lead to isolation, exclusion, and stress, which can further develop mental health problems (Ho & Hu, 2016). Participants in Ho and Hu's (2016) study also described feelings of guilt, shame, hopelessness, and other negative mental health outcomes due to internalised homonegativity because of their Christian beliefs.

Only God can judge

Most of the participants' experiences of religious organisations have demonstrated that there is often a clash between religion and sexuality. Furthermore, most participants shared that they experienced anti-homosexual attitudes from religious people and religious organisations. However, Esihle's experience below is part of the few sexual minorities who have not experienced overt condemnation or judgement from their religious affiliation:

"I do go with my partner to church... And you know, the first time I went to church with her, I thought the pastor was gonna be judgemental and all that, but he wasn't. So, I feel like people do accept us, and they believe they are not the right people to judge us, only God can judge us." (P3, Esihle, Black, Lesbian)

While some would assume that the tension between church culture and nonconforming sexual identities would result in fewer LGBTIQ+ attending church, Esihle shared that she attends church with her partner of the same sex. The majority of South Africans identify as Christians (Vincent & Howell, 2014) and traditional and mainstream Christian churches are reported to still condemn and be unsupportive nonconforming sexualities (Finlay & Walther, 2003; Ntombana et al., 2020). However, Esihle shared that she expected that the pastor would be judgemental, but she did not experience anti-homosexual attitudes at the church. Still the majority Churches that support pro-gay rights churches are in the minority (Finlay & Walther, 2003).

There's a lot to deal with

“There is a lot that you have to deal with because you are black, you are a woman, and now you are queer. It's just like... and religion... It's a lot to deal with because you have to deal with people at all angles. You have to deal with straight men, you have to deal with racists, you have to deal with people at church looking at you funny, and your family. It's just like, ah!” (P9, Dineo, Black, Lesbian/Queer)

Considering that lesbian students fall within diverse intersecting identity categories including dimensions of sex, race, sexual orientation, and religion, it cannot be assumed that they share identical experiences (Cech & Waidzunus, 2011). However, the above narratives show us that their diverse identities also contribute to their diverse experiences.

4.1.3. Theme 3: University Campus Experiences

Having considered their sexual identity development and experiences of their intersecting identities, the participants shared their experiences specific to the university contexts at Wits University. Participants shared how they experienced diversity and self-expression on campus, the LGBTIQ+ campus community, on-campus attitudes towards LGBTIQ+ students, and their suggestions on creating a LGBTIQ+ friendly campus.

Subtheme 1: Diversity and self-expression on campus. University campuses are microcosms of society, which have lectures, residences, health services, social clubs etc., however, these are reported to be heteronormative (Nduna et al., 2017). Here, the participants discussed their experiences of diversity and self-expression on campus. Among these were freedom of expression, non-gendered expression, as well as negotiating their safety on campus.

Freedom of expression

Some participants, such as Dineo, shared that the university space is one where they had the ability to explore and express themselves freely:

“You come to varsity; everyone is just like ‘Do you... Just do you!’. And university allows you to just explore yourself wildly.” (P9, Dineo, Black, Lesbian/Queer)

“University is a space where young people explore many of their multiple identities including their sexuality” (Nduna et al., 2017, p. 6). The exposure to higher education and its diversity promotes an environment that is appropriate for the development of LGBTIQ+ identity (Prado-Castro & Graham, 2017). Livhu expressed that she was fascinated by the diversity she

experienced when she came to university. She shared that the university space exposed her to different ways of identifying and self-expression, which she resonated with and felt inspired her exploration:

“So, when I came to varsity it was like, 'Oh!'. You know, completely different. You see people who identify. You see people who are very flamboyant, men that are flamboyant, you meet different identities. And that was most fascinating for me. Like, ‘This is some cool stuff man, I actually really love these people’. Until I was like, ‘Hmm... maybe I am part of these people’ and that was when I started exploring.” (P2, Livhu, Black, Lesbian/Gay)

For some individuals, university is seen as a queer friendly space that allows for freedom of expression of one’s sexuality and to encounter other gender- and sexually nonconforming individuals (Prado-Castro & Graham, 2017). Akhona shared similar sentiments and as she felt free “to be” and to express oneself. Akhona further intimated that online communities such as LGBTIQ+ social media pages were an extension of where she could express herself and interact with other gender and sexually nonconforming students.

“It was a good space, I guess to be, to express yourself... They used to have this LGBT pages on Facebook... I remember that is the first place I started when I made a decision to just - let me just be myself, let me start talking to other lesbians and stuff like that. So, the first place I went to, was the Wits LGBT page.” (P1, Akhona, Black, Queer/Gay)

Non-gendered expression

Some researchers state that butch and femme are the most common categories of lesbian identification and expression. However, Prado-Castro and Graham (2017, p. 96) state that these are “derivatives of the heterosexual male/female gender performance”, which place expectation on lesbian women to adhere to the norms of heterosexual relationships. Tebello stated that she does not conform to a binary or single gendered expression of her sexuality, but rather embraces both femininity and masculinity.

“You know with lesbians there is this thing of, there's a feminine presenting lesbian and there's a masculine-presenting one - the one who people would say is 'the man' in the relationship. So, with me, I feel like, I am not either of those. I feel like I found a way to balance both my femininity and my masculinity... So, that is another expression of my sexuality. Since I was young.” (P5, Tebello, Black, Lesbian)

Similarly, Cleo shared that she expresses herself in a “gender nonconforming” way and went on to explain that this meant not limiting herself in her dress style or her physical abilities. She too expressed that her self-expression encompassed embracing all parts of herself rather than just one. These narratives show that lesbian women are contesting existing gender binaries and categories of lesbianism by adopting more flexible constructions and expressions of their identities (Prado-Castro & Graham, 2017).

“So, for me, my expression is very much gender nonconforming. It's wearing whatever I want to wear on whatever given day, and doing – whether changing a car tyre or building

a shelf or – whatever... But for me, it's about being open to all parts of myself. Whether it is feminine part or masculine part, or whatever non parts.” (P8, Cleo, Black, Queer)

Unlike other studies, the participants of this study did not identify with or subscribe to any specific categories of lesbianism. Conforming to categories could limit the freedom of lesbian identity expression (Prado-Castro & Graham, 2017). All forms of feminine, masculine, and androgynous aesthetics and expressions should be promoted (Mishali, 2014)

Safety on campus

While some participants expressed their freedom of expression and described what self-expression looked like for them, others shared that their expression was dependent on the spaces that they were in. Prado-Castro and Graham (2017) point out that expression of lesbian identities in public or private space may sometimes be impeded by the fear of violence and experience of social prejudice. In the excerpt below, Sarah shared that she consciously negotiates her expression depending on where she could be exposed to victimisation. She explained that her decision to express herself is often determined by the space she is in and whether she feels it would be safe for her to openly express her sexuality:

“Talking to people that you've just met and coming out to them there's always a situation of ‘Would this be safe for me to come out here? Can I face a negative reaction from this person?’ And for the most part, in a public crowded space like a bus or like the Matrix, or the cafeteria... for the most part, you can pretty much assume it's safe because no one is going to try anything with you in such a public space.” (P6, Sarah, White, Lesbian)

Similarly, Alex shared that she negotiates her openness to express lesbian identity according to her location and familiarity with the people in the space. Relational context is one of the determining factors for the performance of sexuality (Prado-Castro & Graham, 2017). For Alex, familiarity with the people in the space is a determining factor of whether she feels safe to express her lesbian identity. She expressed a sense of safety within her department as she is familiar with the staff and students, hence feels safer to freely share her queer identity and experience without fear.

“So, in my particular field, in my particular department... I definitely feel much open... I very much shared my queerness, and my experiences, and all of that, with people there because I knew it was a safe space. I knew that the staff that worked there, that the other students... I am happy to talk about that and feel much freer... as opposed to other spaces where I don't maybe know people” (P10, Alex, White, Queer)

While some participants expressed the need to constantly negotiate their expression according to the space that they are in, Nikita shared that her openness meant she often plays the role of advocating for the LGBTIQ+ community:

“I mean I feel like I am quite an open person, especially to my friends and stuff... I feel like I am a lot more of an advocate. Feeling slightly like an ambassador because no one around me knows much and it's weird because I don't even bloody know much!” (P7, Nikita, Indian, Pansexual)

The excerpts above present the experiences of the participants in relation to their sexual identity expression on campus. The participants shared that they express themselves in different

ways and some of the participants experiences concur with Prado-Castro and Graham's (2017) view that individuals' physical environments, institutional settings, and relational contexts determine the expression and performance of identity.

Subtheme 2: LGBTIQ+ campus communities. Participants shared their knowledge and experiences of the LGBTIQ+ communities and events on campus. Public networks are reported to play a greater role of personal support and feelings of safety personal or informal support networks (Hulko & Hovanes, 2018). One of the mostly commonly mentioned events is the Wits Pride – an initiative launched by the Wits Transformation and Employment Equity Office (Transformation Office) – that is led by the Activate Wits student society with the purpose of “creating a non-heterosexist, non-cissexist, non-homophobic and non-transphobic university environment” (Wits Pride, n.d.). Livhu expressed that the Wits Pride and other sexual minority events not only had a fun atmosphere but were also spaces where she felt safe.

“I always attended Pride. Like, it has always been a vibe. You attend gay parties on campus, you are drunk, and you are still safe.” (P2, Livhu, Black, Lesbian/Gay)

In addition to the Wits Pride, Akhona shared her knowledge of another LGBTIQ+ space, commonly known as GALA. GALA, which stands for the Gay and Lesbian Archives, is an independent community archive project that is committed to the preservation of materials related to same-sex experiences in South Africa and has integrated various public awareness programmes to fulfil its purpose (Manion & Morgan, 2006). Akhona described that such societies create inclusivity and community for people with shared similar experiences.

“Wits used to have Prides and it used to have this other society. What was it called?

GALA. Yes, GALA. So, those types of spaces were very - where you meet like-minded people and stuff like that. It really contributes to you feeling like I am not the only one.”

(P1, Akhona, Black, Queer/Gay)

The resounding experience of most of the participants was that LGBTIQ+ communities are inclusive and safe spaces for sexual minorities on campus. Pride events are known for their visible parades and are purposed to create a safe space for the LGBTIQ+ community to come together and have fun (Milani & Kapa, 2015). Another participant, Esihle, stated that the Activate student society is an LGBTIQ+ campus community where she feels free to express herself and can meet other lesbian and gay identifying students. Moreover, she described the space as one where she felt visible and did not have to “hide” or “conceal” herself. While the recognition of diverse sexual orientations has created increased visibility of the lesbian population, some researchers also warn that it also increases the vulnerability to backlash, discrimination and hate crimes of those who disclose their sexual identity (Stephens & Boonzaier, 2020; Tshilongo & Rothmann, 2019).

“Well, I feel like on campus one gets free. You get to be yourself because we have Wits Activate and all that. So, I am so free when I am there because I know that there are a lot of lesbians there. There are a lot of, you know, gay people there. So, I feel like I don't even have to hide myself or behave a certain way to conceal myself.” (P3, Esihle, Black, Lesbian)

Most of the participants shared positive sentiments about their experiences of LGBTIQ+ spaces. The creation of LGBTIQ+ spaces create visibility and provides safety and a sense of

communal belonging for lesbian and other gender and sexual minority students (Tshilongo & Rothmann, 2019). While representation and inclusivity are important in all its forms, some LGBTIQ+ events, such as Pride, have been noted to be to have racial as well as socioeconomic issues, which further impact on the constituency (Craven, 2011). One of the participants shared a different experience of the LGBTIQ+ community:

“I felt so out of place because everyone wants to feel like this super intellectual. And I am like... wait a minute. I barely know English guys. Can we stick to normal words? Firstly, the knowledge that's been spoken is already putting people aside... So, with a lot of queer spaces that I have entered, I found that the energy is high intellect, high aggression, and I am not about that.” (P9, Dineo, Black, Lesbian/Queer)

One of the challenges of LGBTIQ+ raised in some studies is that they contribute to the creation of exclusive communities, as they tend to be separate from the larger campus community (Tshilongo & Rothmann, 2019). In the above, Dineo shared that she felt out of place in most of the LGBTIQ+ spaces that she was in, as these were characterised by intellectualism and “aggression”.

Subtheme 3: On-campus attitudes. Earlier themes revealed that participants experienced different treatment, reactions, or attitudes from various people. Attitudes toward homosexual individuals can be determined by factors such as gender, race, religion, and education (Nel et al., 2017). Here, the participants shared their experiences of people's attitudes specifically within the university campus environment:

Esihle shared that she had not experienced negative attitudes or bullying on the campus environment. She further indicated that she did not expect to encounter homophobia in the campus environment, as people in university are expected to be more aware and educated on nonconforming identities as well as the possible consequences of acting in an abusive manner. It is true that gender policies and practices are institutionalised in the South African higher education sector (Nduna et al., 2017). The reality is that most students in South Africa “are drawn from schools where compulsory heterosexuality and heteronormativity are institutionalized and normalized” (Francis, 2021, p. 279).

“There was no bullying or anything negative. And I don't think I came across someone who was homophobic or who made negative comments about the LGBTI, you know... I feel like it's a safe space. And I don't think I'd find someone from campus who's abusive because I feel like a lot of people there are made aware, and they're educated... They know the consequences of being abusive... I feel like they would be in trouble if they do that. So, I feel like they do respect women more than the ones who are not on campus.”
(P3, Esihle, Black, Lesbian)

Based on the premise that, in the current times, people are assumed to be less inclined to only discriminate against members of minority groups, some may believe that they do not

conform to heteronormative beliefs and are not homophobic (Herridge et al., 2019). While some participants may believe that urban-based campuses are more progressive, some students come from conservative communities and this may be reflected in their attitudes on campus (Nduna et al., 2017). In the extract below, Dineo expresses her understanding towards the reality that, because the individuals on campus come from different communities and backgrounds, some students may not have been previously exposed to nonconforming or nonnormative identities. Hence, she attributes their “funny” looks to curiosity and lack of previous personal exposure. Francis (2021) echoes the reality that very few South African university students would have personal experiences that value gender and sexuality diversity.

“From my experience, I would say people are curious. I feel like they don’t just know how to ask the questions they have. I mean people come from different backgrounds, very different backgrounds. Not everyone is coming from a very open-minded community or anything like that... So, when people are curious and people look at me funny sometimes, I am just like, you know what I can't be upset because I am asking the same questions bro.” (P9, Dineo, Black, Lesbian/Queer)

Nduna et al. (2017) suggest that nonconforming students who expect campus to be free of homophobic attitudes may find themselves disappointed by the reality that homophobic and sexist attitudes exist in urban-based campuses. In her account, Sarah mentioned that she experienced a display of negative attitudes and remarks towards homosexual individuals in a lecturer passed by a university lecturer. She expressed feelings of aversion toward this display of a homophobic attitude and stated that such behaviours and remarks from someone in such a position could incite and encourage other homophobic attitudes. Challenging heteronormativity

in helping professions is critical as LGBTIQ+ communities and allies look to such professionals for support (Nduna et al., 2017).

“There was a lecturer... he said something along the lines of 'And some of you are still in a delusional period where you are attracted to the same gender'. And he said that in front of a class of 400 students in the Education Department. And I think, especially, not only is that incredibly offensive but saying it to people who might secretly agree with that and letting those people go and teach in schools where there are gonna be vulnerable young people. I found that to be absolutely abhorrent.” (P6, Sarah, White, Lesbian)

Other participants, such as Nikita and Cleo, correlated attitudes towards nonconforming individuals with academic discipline. Nikita shared that she experienced individuals in the School of Arts to be more open-minded due to their exposure to diverse bodies in the programme. Contrastingly, she stated that she observed a lack of diversity and representation on the West Campus. The Faculty of Law and Faculty of Commerce are situated on the West Campus of Wits University (Boers, 1985).

Similar to Nikita, Cleo shared that the spaces she exists in are more inclusive, but questions whether different attitudes may be displayed in Faculties such as Engineering, which is known to be a male-dominated field (Cech & Waidzun, 2011).

“In the Arts School, I feel a lot more people were very open-minded. And there were a lot more people who, I mean you've seen people transition, you've seen people changing genders, changing their bodies, changing their mindsets... it was quite an open space... What I did notice though is that a lot of people from West Campus basically, weren't

there... But I feel like there is a lack of representation and a lack of understanding in those fields of thought.” (P7, Nikita, Indian, Pansexual)

“So, I feel like I don’t know whether it's the spaces in which I am moving... I would imagine that maybe if you were in, I don’t know, Engineering or whatever, it might look different.” (P8, Cleo, Black, Queer)

In addition to fields of study or academic discipline, some participants shared that their experiences differ according to types of student residences. Tebello shared that she experienced women’s only residences differently to mixed-gender residences. She explained that there were more lesbian identifying students in women’s only residences. Moreover, she shared that the men in the mixed-gender residences assumed that she was heterosexual and that she observed a change of behaviour when they learned that she identified as lesbian. Tebello’s account explains how men tend to equate the lesbian identity to masculinity, hence they would refer to her as “bro”.

“I stayed in an all-women res in first and second year, there was nothing there. And there were just a lot of lesbians there... I moved to a mixed res. Boys will see you and they'll make romantic advances towards you... Then they find out that you are actually lesbian... Now they start changing their tones towards you... Like they call you 'bro' or... things that they usually say to other boys. Now they interact with you as if they are interacting with other men.” (P5, Tebello, Black, Lesbian)

Living at a South African university residence is tough for some LGBTIQ+ students, as homophobia is reportedly still rife in male student residences (Kiguwa & Langa, 2017; Munyuki

& Vincent, 2017). Jones (2015, p. 181) further explains that heteronormative ideas of dichotomous and binary genders entrench the perception that women who do not engage in feminine styles or practices as being ‘mannish’. Additionally, research has found that men have more negative attitudes towards LGBTIQ+ individuals than women (Steffens, 2005). Although some participants openly express their lesbian identity, there was still a sense that society still categorised them in ways that conformed to gendered stereotypes. Prado-Castro and Graham (2017) state that people often employ labels that reproduce heterosexual gender binaries in order to make sense of the expression and performance of nonconforming identities.

“And what shocked me is that a lot of the house comm meeting members from different residences felt that they were entitled to not accept gay people... How do we have people in 2021, at such a prestigious university, who have access to all the things, still have such thoughts that our parents - who were from the 60s had?... So that is when the realisation came that you are actually not safe. Because yes, on campus, these people might not attack you or beat you up, but they can say hurtful things towards you, which is just as painful, and they can be the very same people who can watch you being beaten up off campus, and they would do nothing about it.” (P2, Livhu, Black, Lesbian/Gay)

Livhu’s experience is that people in student leadership roles in renowned education institutions can also have hostile and discriminatory attitudes towards non-heterosexual individuals. The above excerpt from Livhu corresponds with Nduna et al.’s (2017) views that – although people in urban towns are generally perceived to be tolerant, accepting, and supportive of sexual orientation and gender diversity – students are likely to emulate attitudes and behaviours that are reflective of the societies that they come from. Furthermore, Livhu expressed

that she, while she might not be attacked on campus, she still fears being intimidated or harassed by such students, even outside of the university campus. Negative attitudes towards homosexuality often leads to hate crime, harassment, and intimidation against those perceived as being deviant (Nel et al., 2017).

“I don't know how to put it into words. Because what I was trying to say also about the homophobia is like not experiencing it blatantly or directly or overtly...” (P10, Alex, White, Queer)

Alex's sentiments in the above excerpt are that the absence of overt homophobia does not mean that it no longer exists. While it seems that gender equity policies have cultivated more tolerant attitudes (Sekaja et al., 2021), discriminatory attitudes towards LGBTIQ+ students have not fully disappeared, but are rather less overtly displayed (Rosenbaum et al., 2021).

“Wits is kind of like a bubble. Everybody is taught to be accepting, you know, we're all educated. So that is another thing... In varsity, everybody is just woke... I feel like even if the people did have a negative attitude towards it, we were in a space where they couldn't do anything about it because you have this institution that is promoting safe space for everybody... It's not as friendly out here as it was at Wits.” (P1, Akhona, Black, Queer/Gay)

Similar to Alex, Akhona shared that people in the university campus are less likely to act on their negative attitudes towards gender and sexual nonconformity. She also mentions that the university is not a true reflection of society, as people are not as friendly and accepting as they are on the university campus. Tshilongo and Rothmann (2019) state that on-campus safe spaces

increase naivety among students, as it creates a somewhat false sense of security and caution against the assumption that these spaces are an indication of the country's acceptance.

Subtheme 4: University resources and support services. As discussed above, spaces that are supportive and understanding the challenges of sexual minorities can manifest in varied forms, as people, programmes, or organisations (Tshilongo & Rothmann, 2019). Participants' knowledge and use of the university resources and services were also explored. The majority of the participants were aware of the Gender Equity Office (GEO). Structures such as the GEO are one of the ways in which universities seek to challenge the status quo and bring attention to intersectionality and marginalised identities (Matthyse, 2017).

Most of the participants acknowledged the existence of the counselling services offered at the university, however, very few of them reported utilising the service. Nel et al. (2017) suggests that LGBTIQ+ students' low interaction with counselling services is probably due to the fear of being misunderstood or supported.

Nkosi and Mason (2017) state that university counselling services should fulfil the role of supporting individuals who are navigating their sexual orientation and proactively lead campaigns that promote and celebrate difference and diversity.

“The university itself has structures, it has societies where you are taught, or you learn about different sexualities. You learn about respecting people. We have a Gender Equity Office. We have a Wits Transformation office. We usually go full out trying teaching people about the different... just talking about the queer community, everything under the LGBTIQI+... You will get emails from CCDU, you will get e-mails from the Gender Equity Office themselves.” (P2, Livhu, Black, Lesbian/Gay)

“I know there is the Gender Equity Office. That's it right? There's a Gender Equity Office. And I think that is where they deal with - let's say stuff of... maybe if I... let's say I experience some sort of homophobic encounter on campus, I believe that is where I could report it to. With campus control too, I think it is accessible to everyone. And then CCDU, I am not really sure about how CCDU works with such matters. I am not sure if they have specific programmes available, for people, let's say, who are still questioning their sexualities, or those who have fully come out, but are struggling to adapt to the real world. So, I am not really sure when it comes to CCDU.” (P5, Tebello, Black, Lesbian)

“I think I once was having a rough time. I contacted the CCDU, and they said we think you should see a therapist, and I never heard from them again... It's inadequate, it's poorly managed, and there are very few resources actually... A lot of what they describe as their self-help sources are very shallow and have no real help in actual university.” (P6, Sarah, White, Lesbian)

“I know that there is something about a trans-clinic, I think. I'd never know whether it was actually linked to Wits or whether it was some other organisation. I know there is GALA for instance, which is like the Gay and Lesbian Archives. I've done some work with them before. Around story-telling and writing, but that was before I was at Wits. Ya, I mean in terms of policy I don't know. I know that there was that gender... what was it? Like gender awareness or something, that was started, office to deal with sexual abuse and whatever but I don't know if it's particularly from a queer lens or if it's broadly about sexual violence and stuff like that on campus.” (P8, Cleo, Black, Queer)

While Alex acknowledges the structures such as the Transformation Office and the GEO, she also mentions that heteronormativity is still pervasive at the university. She equates the university's official expression of transformation and inclusivity to a "persona... of being supportive". Milani and Kapa (2015, p. 81) state that "transformation is something of a catchword at Wits and in South African tertiary education discourse more broadly." Race and gender are more commonly mentioned than sexuality in progressive transformation politics (Milani, 2013; Milani & Kapa, 2015).

"I think, like, institutionally, Wits very much tries to have the persona of being inclusive of being transformed, of being supportive. And like, it's great that we have Transformation Office, it's great that we have a Gender Equity Office. And some of the things are good, sure. But I think that on a kind of // you know I think there are still a lot of heteronormativity of that kind of being, that kind of standard." (P10, Alex, White, Queer)

Stephens and Boonzaier (2020, p. 328) state that there is an "absence of adequate and effective legal and institutional support to give tangible effect to constitutional priorities." Moreover, Matthyse (2017) states that transformation, awareness raising, and implementation of institutional policy are necessary if educational institutions were to change the status quo.

Subtheme 5: Creating a LGBTIQ+ friendly campus. The main objectives of safe spaces are to improve the campus climate and environment for gender and sexually diverse students (Tshilongo & Rothmann, 2019). Considering the experiences they shared, some participants also shared their suggestions on how to create a more LGBTIQ+ campus. While participants acknowledge some of the current university efforts to create an inclusive space for LGBTIQ+ students, many of them expressed that more should be done.

“I feel like - you know there's Pride Week - where they usually have a week where draw a rainbow flag and they have a march and whatever. I feel like that is something that should be done more regularly... Awareness! I feel like awareness is the best thing. Also, campus control itself or security or whatever, should also be more vigilant of how they interact with lesbian-identifying students because there is also a stigma.” (P5, Tebello, Black, Lesbian)

The rainbow flag mentioned by Tebello is another Wits University anti-homophobia campaign called “Safe Zones”, which employs visuals such as rainbow colours and flags which are associated with and are the poignant symbols of the LGBTIQ+ movement (Milani & Kapa, 2015). In addition to the mentioned Wits Pride, the Transformation and Employment Equity Office has previously distributed branded t-shirts to further increase visibility and create awareness and a sense of belonging (Milani & Kapa, 2015). The above excerpt from Tebello mentions that these campaigns and initiatives should be done more regularly. Tebello, along with the other participants, recognised the need for more educational efforts for students and staff to break the stigma against gender and sexual diversity. This suggestion is supported by de Wet's

(2017) proposal for transformative action through the implementation of courses for students, staff, and university officials.

“I think every single discipline throughout the entire campus they need to have L.O, a Life Orientation type of module. A Humanities module, where they teach people the construct of race, and the construct of gender and the fluidity of sexuality.” (P7, Nikita, Indian, Pansexual)

“I don’t know if it is called ‘gender sensitisation’ workshop, but it has something to do like that. Where you talk about gender-based violence, you talk about the LGBTQI community, you talk about sexism, patriarchy, and all kind of stuff... It should be mandatory for everyone because you need to create a safe space for everyone that is going to be entering the university space.” (P2, Livhu, Black, Lesbian/Gay)

“I feel like, maybe there should be, I don’t know, like maybe meetings where they educate these people about abuse.” (P3, Esihle, Black, Lesbian)

The excerpts above endorse Ngidi and Dlamini’s (2017) suggestion that efforts for advocacy should contain education initiatives to raise awareness. Such anti-heterosexist pedagogy and education initiatives would challenge the normalised, hierarchical framework that privileges heterosexuality and depicts same-sex sexualities as deviant and "other" (Francis, 2021). Nikita suggested that the university should offer a module that educates students on diversities in race, gender, and sexuality. Current courses or modules are often offered as electives within the humanities faculties (Francis, 2021); however, some suggest that the content of those modules should be incorporated in the mainstream programmes and curricula

(Tshilongo & Rothmann, 2019). Likewise, Livhu recommends that the university should make such workshops mandatory and explains that these should include education on the concepts of gender, sexism, patriarchy, gender, and sexual diversity as well as violence. Esihle's contributions is that the education initiatives also need to educate and address issues of abuse.

“So, something like a queer-straight alliance could be nice for people to just talk and create space in terms of any kind of, I don't know if it's called sex education, like interventions around HIV/AIDS and STDs and stuff like that... It would be nice if the university hired more queer people in all departments so that we can have queer supervisors.” (P8, Cleo, Black, Queer)

In addition to more educational efforts, Cleo proposes that the university should create more spaces for alliances to be formed. Tshilongo and Rothmann (2019) are of the view that safe spaces and ally programmes have been developed abroad and in South Africa to create increased visible support and defend the rights of gender and sexually diverse students. Cleo further suggests that there should be more representation of queer staff across all university departments.

“I would suggest that Wits, sort of focuses on counselling and ya, on counselling of the LGBT because we really do go through a lot psychologically.” (P1, Akhona, Black, Queer/Gay)

The need for psychosocial support and mental health services is also advocated for by Akhona in the above excerpt, as she further mentions that LGBTIQ+ require support for the myriad of challenges that they experience. Tshilongo and Rothmann (2019) state that student

counselling and university health services should be trained on gender and sexual diversity issues.

4.1.4. Theme 4: Victimisation and Same-Sex Intimate Partner Violence

Although it was formerly mostly associated with heterosexual relationships, individuals in same-sex relationships are now more acknowledged to also experience intimate partner violence (IPV) (Sanger & Lynch, 2017). Participants discussed experiences of victimisation and same-sex intimate partner violence (SSIPV), their perceptions of SSIPV, as well as help-seeking behaviours and barriers thereof.

Subtheme 1: Experiences of victimisation and SSIPV. Here, the participants discussed their experiences of victimisation and violence in and outside of the university campus, more specifically, their experiences of victimisation and violence within their romantic or sexual relationships. Participants discussed misconceptions around women and violence in same-sex relationships, the types of abuse experienced by women in same-sex relationships, and experiences of reporting abuse and SSIPV.

Misconceptions

In the excerpt below, Akhona informs that lesbians share similar relationship experiences and challenges that occur in other relationships. She lists that violence, abuse, and unhealthy behaviours can happen in same sex relationship. Akhona alluded to having experienced sexual violence perpetrated by another female but stated that she struggled to label it as assault because females are not typically associated with the perpetration of violence.

“A lesbian relationship is the same experience. We go through the same things that everybody... There have been instances where things are violent or things are toxic, or things are abusive or sometimes GBV... I experienced something, but if it was a guy, I was definitely gonna be like 'this was a situation of rape', but because it's a girl... you know, but it was like a sexual sort of like... I don't wanna say assaulting me because you don't associate female... I guess it is a very real thing. It is there. Like gender-based, like violence in all-female space is there.” (P1, Akhona, Black, Queer/Gay)

The intersection of heteronormativity and the idealisation of lesbian relationships views women as gentle, passive, and non-aggressive (Irwin, 2008). However, the reality is that women are also capable of perpetrating emotional, verbal, physical as well as sexual abuse and other controlling behaviours (Peterman & Dixon, 2003). Hence, Akhona sheds light on this reality of the existence of violence and victimisation in all-female spaces and dispels the misconception that females cannot be violent or abusive.

Types of abuse

Intimate partner abuse can take many different forms such as emotional, financial, physical, sexual, and verbal and can also include threats and coercion (Brown, 2008). Livhu shared that she has been in an unhealthy relationship where emotional, verbal, and physical abuses were rife. She recalled an incident where her former partner was shouting and swearing at her and pushed her. This is an indication that violence in women's same-sex relationships can manifest in similar ways to IPV experienced by women in heterosexual relationships, ranging from psychological, physical, sexual, and economic forms of abuse (Lynch & Sanger, 2016). Livhu further shared that she avoided arguing and possibly aggravating her then partner to leave

the situation. Adjusting one's behaviour to avoid violence is one of the coping mechanisms used by women who experience SSIPV (Irwin, 2008).

“I was in a very toxic relationship. A person I was dating was very emotionally abusive... We had an incident where... from the shouting and the swearing and the shouting and the swearing, she became so angry that she was starting to push me... You know when people say, 'I saw red in their eyes'? That is what I saw. And I knew that, at that moment, if I keep arguing with this person, it is not gonna end well. So, I had to retreat and be like, you know what, whatever you say goes. So that they calm down and eventually I left.”
(P2, Livhu, Black, Gay/Queer)

Furthermore, Nikita shared that the violence in abuse in same-sex relationships is more nuanced. Individuals in same-sex relationships experience various levels of power and a complex mix of issues, such as invisible violence, poor communication, lack of social skills and an intergenerational transmission of violence (Lynch & Sanger, 2016). Nikita indicated that she experienced verbal abuse that was harsh but remarked that she was not severely affected by it. She also mentioned that she did not share or disclose this experience to anyone, instead she noted it for herself.

“So, I think when it comes to abuse and violence, then I think it becomes a lot more nuanced... So, for me personally, it was just like... type of comments. You know. That were quite deep. I didn't talk about it to anyone, but I feel like I could. It wasn't something that affected me really bad and like kept me up at night and all that nonsense. It was more like... okay that was harsh. Like that feels like could be verbal abuse, could be something to take note of if.” (P7, Nikita, Indian, Pansexual)

Tallis et al.'s (2020) study found that the majority of women in same-sex relationships experience emotional violence, but it often goes unacknowledged. Some mention that it is also possible that violence perpetrated by women is downplayed out of fear of furthering the stigmatisation of the LGBTIQ+ community (Lynch & Sanger, 2016). Irvin (2008) also lists minimisation as one of the coping strategies employed by women who experience IPV in same-sex relationship.

Reporting abuse

In the excerpt below, Esihle shared that she experienced sexual abuse in her past relationship. There is often a great silence around sexual abuse in same-sex relationships, compared to other forms of abuse (Tallis et al., 2020). Esihle indicated that she took the necessary legal action for her protection and reported the abuse to police officials; however, she was not taken seriously, but was ridiculed. This experience concurs with other studies that have found that same-sex partners seeking mainstream support are often faced with the risk of experiencing heteronormativity-based discrimination (Tallis et al., 2020). Furthermore, research states that the South African Police Service's (SAPS) capacity to address same-sex violence is either inappropriate or inadequate in training (Tallis et al., 2020).

“Ya, I have been in an abusive relationship. She was very abusive, I ended up doing a protection order against her and then I went to the police and told them everything, that she was abusive even sexually. They didn’t take me seriously. Instead, they just laughed... When it comes to lesbians, it does happen. You know the masculine ones sometimes they think they are men, and they just expect one to be submissive. They do

feel like men, and they do become very abusive. They do, even sexually.” (P3, Esihle, Black, Lesbian)

While some assumptions are made that lesbian relationships mimic heterosexual relationships, in that the masculine partner is often the dominant, and, therefore, most likely the perpetrator of abuse (Tallis et al., 2020), Esihle’s experience with more masculine presenting partners has been that such partners do take on a role that imitates male characteristic of dominance, which she also felt contributed to the occurrence of violence and abuse.

Subtheme 2: Perceptions ofSSIPV. In the previous subtheme, some of the participants shared their experiences of violence and abuse in their same-sex relationships. While other participants expressed that they had not experienced victimisation or violence in their intimate relationships, they still shared their thoughts and opinions about the SSIPV in lesbian relationships.

Violence in lesbian relationships is ignored

The excerpts below from Sarah and Esihle speak about how abuse is perceived when occurring in heterosexual relationships, compared to same-sex relationships. The belief that only men are perpetrators of violence perpetuates silence around violence in same-sex relationships (Tallis et al., 2020). Empirical evidence supports the notion that abuse in heterosexual relationships is considered more severe than in same-sex relationships due to existing gender stereotypes (Brown, 2008). Sarah explains that abuse can exist in any relationships, but the norm is that men are the abusers, hence, other forms of abuse outside the norm are usually not taken

seriously. Similarly, Esihle highlights that men or males are often viewed as abusive or that abuse occurs only in heterosexual relationships.

“There can be toxicity and potential for abuse in every relationship... The dynamic is ‘a man abuses a woman’, anything else is not taken seriously.” (P6, Sarah, White, Lesbian)

“You know, sometimes a lot of people think abusive people are only males, or people become in abusive relationships when they're only heterosexual.” (P3, Esihle, Black, Lesbian)

Tebello echoes the sentiments shared by a majority of the participants that attention is mainly given to heterosexual relationships, while homosexual relationships are not prioritised. Her opinion was that issues of lesbian relationships are often trivialised, as it is believed that the two women can resolve their own issues. There is also a misconception that women are not perpetrators of violence, thus lesbian intimate partner violence is not considered serious or life-threatening (Tallis et al., 2020). Lynch and Sanger (2016) concur that there is a lack of sensitivity toSSIPV, as abuse is often trivialised when perpetrated by women. They further argued that this attitude and view of lesbian relationships promotes violence within same-sex relationships. Moreover, the idea that non-physical abuse is not bad is a common myth that is embedded in society (Brown, 2008). These kind of attitudes towardsSSIPV are a result of prejudice and heterosexism, which contribute to the secondary victimisation and lack of adequate support and legal services for individuals who have experiencedSSIPV (Brown, 2008; Lynch & Sanger, 2016).

“I think the main focus, or the main attention is given to heterosexual relationships. I feel like abuse in same-sex relationships is usually... it's not prioritised because I think it stems from the fact that you are two women, so you will solve it on your own. There is no one who is stronger than the other. So, you will fix it... Which is not a healthy mentality to have because I think that sort of thinking promotes violence in same-sex relationships.” (P5, Tebello, Black, Lesbian)

The shared sentiment amongst most participants is that IPV in heterosexual relationships is prioritised and approached with more seriousness, whereasSSIPV or violence in non-heterosexual relationships is overlooked and trivialised. Similar to Tebello, Akhona relates the disparagement ofSSIPV to the fact that the female gender is associated with less physical strength and, therefore, assumed to be less strong or less harmful. However, Peterman and Dixon (2003, p. 42) point out that “domestic violence is not about strength; it is a pattern of behaviours designed to control another”.

Akhona’s opinion corresponds with Tebello’s, which states that violence amongst females is usually promoted, as she states that women have been advised to have chosen the option to retaliate to the violence perpetrated against them in same-sex relationships in order to fight back. Fighting back is a contentious topic that is often construed as mutual abuse and downplays the seriousness of violence in same-sex relationships (Irwin, 2008).

“Ya because, biologically, you guys both have the same strength... there is nobody who is automatically stronger than the other, as it is assumed in a straight relationship. So, ya, it's always 'Agh, you should have hit her back'... it's overlooked.” (P1, Akhona, Black, Queer/Gay)

In her statement below, Livhu shares a similar view with most of the other participants thatSSIPV and abuse in lesbian relationships are disregarded. Livhu classifies this belittlement of violence amongst women as sexist and relates it to the idea that only men are seen as possessing power and can misuse power to abuse others, whereas women are seen as incapable to perpetrating harm and violence.

“I think, more especially in relationships where there are two women, people do not think that it's possible for another woman to abuse the other lady. I don't know how they think that it is not possible, but they don't take it as seriously... And I think it also has to do with sexism. It's like, men think that they are the only ones who have the power to abuse people. They don't think women are capable of hurting people, which is very very problematic because women can be as dangerous as men.” (P2, Livhu, Black, Lesbian/Gay)

Although the participants below shared that they had not personally experienced intimate partner violence, they shared their opinions about SSIPV in lesbian relationships in relation to power dynamics between butch or masculine-presenting partners and femme or feminine-presenting partners.

Cleo shared that she has not experienced intimate partner violence, however, she opined that she knew of an incident where the butch woman was the perpetrator of violence towards her femme partner. This coincides with Lynch and Sanger's (2016) findings that sometimes a heteronormative relationship structure that includes binary gender roles may be a contributing factor to the perpetuation of violence in same-sex relationships.

“I mean I haven't experienced sort of intimate partner violence for myself. But I mean I've heard of, in the last five years, maybe or like butch woman and the femme woman who were in a relationship, and I think the butch woman was beating the femme person.”

(P8, Cleo, Black, Queer)

Likewise, Dineo stated that she thinks thatSSIPV is caused by power dynamics that come with gendered presentations in same-sex relationships, where the masculine party seeks to assert their power and control over the other. Hence, women who take on a more masculine identity are seen as taking on male traits associated with power, control, and aggression and seen as the norm is in a heteronormative world (Lynch & Sanger, 2016).

“I have never been in an abusive relationship. I don't know people who have in the lesbian community, but I think it stems from the need for someone to be masculine and portray that power because I've heard of people being very controlling in relationships. Like women being very controlling and some of them might just use violence as a way to assert themselves in that relationship.” (P9, Dineo, Black, Lesbian/Queer)

While some participants referred to butch-identifying or masculine-presenting partners as more abusive than their feminine-presenting partners, Lynch and Sanger (2016) assert thatSSIPV and abuse in women's relationships is not restricted by a binary, but has various motivations fuelled by attempts to exert power and control over one's partner. Moreover, feminine women can also be perpetrators of violence in same-sex relationships.

Subtheme 3: Help-seeking behaviours. Participants also discussed help-seeking behaviours amongst LGBTIQ+ individuals. Many of the participants who spoke about help seeking behaviours shared negative sentiments and a lack of faith in the available support services.

Dineo's statement below had a tone of confusion and disappointment, as she questioned the availability of spaces and platforms for lesbian individuals to talk about the issues they face in their relationships. She further expressed doubt or uncertainty regarding how to approach and deal with abuse in same-sex relationships. The excerpt below demonstrates Lynch and Sanger's (2016) observation that some lesbian individuals are not certain whether there is adequate help to support for them, should they be faced with issues in their same-sex relationships.

“My thing is like; how do you get people to talk about it? You know there is no real platform for people to talk about the abuse that they are facing in a same-sex relationship... How do you deal with that? I don't know. I don't even know how to approach the conversation.” (P9, Dineo, Black, Lesbian/Queer)

“If you are in an abusive relationship and it's a same-sex relationship, it is almost viewed as silly. Like how is that happening? Like, why? It's almost confusing, even for me, I am just like why? Why is now this toxic trait coming into your relationship? Like if anything, you should understand each other better because you are of the same gender.” (P9, Dineo, Black, Lesbian/Queer)

Individuals experiencing abuse in same-sex relationships are often faced with a lot of the same challenges and heteronormative discrimination when seeking support, as when they first

disclosed their sexual orientation (Brown, 2008; Tallis et al., 2020). It is for this reason that lesbian individuals often struggle with finding and receiving the appropriate help and support systems (Rollè et al., 2018). However, in her experience below, Esihle listed that she received supported from on-campus university services and was also referred to external services for further support.

“That's the thing, she is not from Wits. She is not studying there. But I did go to the Gender Equity Office, and I did get help... Well, I also tried CCDU. They did give me resources because they gave me contact details of POWA. I did talk to them, and I did get legal advice from them.” (P3, Esihle, Black, Lesbian)

Fortunately, Esihle shared that she received help from the GEO as well as through the university's counselling. University support services, such as the GEO, are there to address incidents of gender and sexual issues on campus and the counselling services are there to assist by offering psychological help to students (Ross et al., 2021). In addition to these university support services, she shared that she was also referred to People Opposing Women Abuse (POWA) for further support and received legal advice. Rollè et al. (2018) suggest that it is imperative that emerging IPV programs collaborate with the community and offer a range of services, starting with direct and tangible resources like legal assistance, 24-hour hotlines, counselling, and shelter, where necessary.

Barriers to help seeking on campus

Despite feeling free to explore and express their sexuality on campus, some participants stated that they would be reluctant to report issues of violence and abuse in their same-sex

relationships. Some studies reported that the lack of adequate and responsive professional support services can contribute to lesbian women remaining in abusive relationships, as they lack confidence that they will be supported, if they report the abuse (Lynch & Sanger, 2016).

In the excerpt below, Akhona expressed feeling safe to explore and openly express her sexuality in the university space, however, she shared that she did not share the same feeling about reporting or exercising her right to support services.

“I wouldn’t feel safe to report anything that goes wrong or enforcing my rights, but I definitely would feel safe exploring my sexuality, being myself, and being free to walk around with my partner...” (P1, Akhona, Black, Queer/Gay)

Similarly, Livhu’s statement below demonstrated a lack of safety regarding possibly reporting same-sex relational issues in the university context. Livhu stated that, although university support staff may not overtly harm as they would not risk losing their jobs, she did not feel they would be enthusiastic to help her as a lesbian female, compared to heterosexual individuals. This demonstrates that, even where resources may be available, lesbian individuals are hesitant to use them out of fear of secondary victimisation or a lack of confidence in their adequacy to provide efficient support to individuals reporting same-sex relational issues (Lynch & Sanger, 2016; Tallis et al., 2020).

“I don’t think it’s safe, but at the same time they won’t harm you because harming me would mean risking their jobs. So, they are not gonna say hurtful things in my face, but they won’t be as enthusiastic to help me like helping a straight person. But they would still do it out of ‘this is my job’... They are not creating a safe space; they are just doing their job. So, myself personally, I don’t feel safe.” (P2, Livhu, Black, Lesbian/Gay)

Similarly, Tebello shared that she did not have confidence in services provided by campus security or campus control, when it comes to supporting students who may be faced with issues relating to their sexuality. Rather, she felt that campus security is more equipped to handle general issues such as theft or violence.

“I don’t know why I feel like this, but I feel like campus control would not be very helpful in that respect. I feel like they focus more on things like; theft or someone was beaten up or you know things of a violent nature. So, I don't think they would take it seriously. I don’t know why.” (P5, Tebello, Black, Lesbian)

Previous studies have also found that gender is a strong predictor for the level of seriousness given to IPV, where violence against women in heterosexual relationships is perceived as more serious and more believable (Brown, 2008). Another opinion is that lesbian individuals are silent about the abuse that occurs in same-sex relationships to avoid bringing negative attention to the LGBTIQ+ community (Tallis et al., 2020). Although university and broader community services are available, i.e., the GEO and SAPS, very few LGBTIQ+, individuals report their complaints to the relevant authorities (Finchilescu & Dugard, 2021). Some believe that support should come from the lesbian community and that safe spaces should be created for discussion to address issues of violence in lesbian relationships (Tallis et al., 2020).

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This final chapter concludes the study. This chapter provides an overview and summary of key findings in relation to the study's objectives, research questions, and theoretical underpinnings discussed. Additionally, the study limitations as well as recommendations for future studies are discussed.

5.1. Overview

This study aimed to investigate and understand the experiences of lesbian students at Wits University by discussing the participants' experiences and perceptions of their lesbian sexual identity and their interaction with their other intersecting identities. The study wanted to gain an understanding and contextualise the participants' experiences by, firstly, obtaining their understandings and expression of what being lesbian means and looks like for them, as well as understanding their contexts that have influenced their experiences. Moreover, the study wanted to explore, specifically, their experience of the university campus, how they express themselves on campus and their perceptions on how they experience and are experienced within the campus environment, whether the university campus is a safe space and the communities that make up safe spaces for them, their awareness of the resources and support services available to them and their thoughts on how campus can be made more LGBTIQ+ friendly. Lastly, the research study wanted to understand the dynamics that exist within same-sex lesbian relationships by discussing the topic of intimate partner violence and how it occurs and is understood by lesbian individuals.

The above objectives of this research study were posed as three broad research questions which asked: 1) How do lesbian students define, express, and experience their sexual identity and other sociocultural identities? 2) What are the experiences of lesbian students at Wits

University? 3) What are the experiences and perceptions of violation and victimisation against and amongst lesbian individuals? All three questions were addressed through the four key themes and related subthemes that emerged from the data collected through semi-structured narrative interviews and analysed, using narrative thematic analysis. The four major themes that emerged are: 1) Nonconforming sexual orientation; 2) Navigating intersecting identities; 3) University campus experiences; 4) Victimisation and same-sex intimate partner violence. These themes reflected and represented the experiences of lesbian university students.

Participants experiences revealed that sexual orientation identity development occurs early in life and that sexuality begins to occupy the lives of developing adolescents from as early as primary school. The development of a sexual identity that is viewed as nonconforming to heteronormative standards often comes with an array of emotions such as confusion, doubt, internal conflicts, as sexual minority youths try to make sense of their same sex attraction in predominantly heterosexual settings. The study also found that there is no single appellation that is can be used to collectively designate or encompass all nonheteronormative identities and practices.

Additionally, these individuals negotiate various intersecting identities such as race, gender, religion, amongst others, which often impact on how they experience and are experienced by others. Most of the black participants felt that their blackness and femaleness meant that they were more susceptible to danger and discrimination, whereas the white participants shared that their whiteness privileged and protected them. The process of internal self-acceptance appeared to be more complicated for individuals from a Christian background, as some of them internalised homonegativity from conservative heteronormative religious institutions and individuals. Additionally, outward presentation and expression of gender and

sexuality also influenced their experiences, as most of the participants shared that their femininity or feminine demeanour was a protective factor from homophobia.

The process of self-acceptance was found to often commence in the university context, as some lesbian individuals were exposed to diversity and perceived that the university environment was a safer space for them to learn and explore their sexuality for them to move towards identity integration. The shared experience of the participants was that the existence of LGBTIQ+ student communities on campus created a visibility and a sense of belonging for sexual minority students to gather and have fun. While the university has gender and sexuality awareness campaigns and most students are assumed to be educated on matters of diversity, the reality is that not all people in the university space are accepting and supportive of non-conformist sexual orientation and gender diversity. Although many participants shared that there was less overt homophobia on campus, some shared their experiences of homonegative attitudes from some staff and students in the university lecture halls and residences.

Lastly, the study found that there are varying perceptions and understandings on why violence and abuse happen in lesbian relationships. While GBV and IPV are serious issues, it is also important to consider the issue of violence in same-sex relationships and recognise thatSSIPV exists in a variety of ways in lesbians' relationships. The experiences of the participants of the study reveal that SSIPV is often overlooked and trivialised, thus affecting individuals' ability to recognise the violence and their confidence in seeking support. Although there are existing supporting services, the participants shared that they face support and legal service-related challenges within the university setting, and in the general community as their issues pertaining to sexual minorities are not handled with appropriate and adequate sensitivity and seriousness. Hence their reluctance to seek support.

While this research study contributes to the understanding of the experiences of lesbian students and the recognition that heteronormativity does not function in isolation, but intersection relating to various aspects of life and systems, it acknowledges that the research presents with some limitations which are discussed below.

5.2. Study Limitations

It is important to recognise and acknowledge that limitations in research are inevitable and that there is still room for future improved research to be conducted.

One of the limitations of this study was the study size. While ten participants were initially recruited, only nine of the interviews were utilised in this study. This meant that the data collection and information gathering may have been limited. Nevertheless, this research study was able to collect saturated data, however, more data from additional participants might have improved the depth and breadth of the understandings by providing further insight into the complex experiences of lesbian students.

Secondly, the research study was conducted on an online platform. While this provided some benefits and convenience to the study, online platforms have their challenges and limitations. Some of the challenges experienced included poor and/or unstable internet connection, which affected the audibility and flow during some of the interviews. The use of an online platform required access to a device that allowed for videoconferencing, access to internet and a private space for the researcher and participants to conduct the interviews, which could have excluded potential participants who may not have access to the abovementioned (Akyirem et al., 2023).

The third limitation was the lack of demographic representation and inclusivity. While there was some diversity in the demographic factors such as race, the diversity was limited as majority of the participants were the same race. The sample consisted of cisgendered, lesbian students, and there were five Black South Africans, one Black Ugandan, one White South African, one White American, and one Indian South African. This may have compromised the heterogeneity of the sample. Therefore, the finding of the study may not be fully representative of the experiences of lesbian students from all demographic groups.

A final limitation is the disparity of power and dynamics between the researcher and the participants. This may have influenced the processes of data collection and analysis for the study. Furthermore, my positionality as the researcher may have affected the study, as I was not experienced or knowledgeable of some of the complexities faced by the participants of the study. However, my self-reflexivity assisted in ensuring that qualitative rigour was maintained and that I was able to mitigate any personal biases.

5.3. Recommendations for Future Studies

Despite the limitations mentioned above, this study has been able to explore understandings of lesbian students' identities and experiences, create awareness of some of the challenges they experience as a minority group and contributed a different perspective of lesbian experiences.

Based on the above-mentioned limitations identified in the study, future studies may benefit from selecting a larger and more representative sample of participants to ensure diversity, inclusivity and representation in the view and experiences of lesbian students. Additionally,

including and accounting for narratives of lesbian students from different ages, racial groups, religious backgrounds, and fields of study may be beneficial.

Although this research studies experiences, expressions, and perceptions of lesbian students to contextualise and gain a broad understanding of the narratives, future studies may benefit from focusing on one aspect of lesbian experiences to gain more insights and understanding in one focal area, such as effectiveness of university transformation and inclusivity campaigns and resources or the experiences of violence and abuse in same-sex relationship or effectiveness for example. This may assist in informing and strengthening interventions and support programmes for lesbian individuals within and outside of the university contexts.

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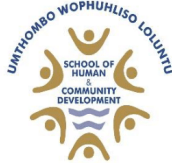
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Appendices

Appendix A: Information Sheet



Psychology Department
 School of Human and Community Development
 University of the Witwatersrand
 Private Bag 3, WITS, 2050
 Tel: (011) 717 4500 Fax: (011) 717 4559



Participant Information Sheet

Good day,

My name is Ntombikayise Dolly Ndaba and I am a Masters student in Community-Based Counselling Psychology at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. As part of my studies, I have to undertake a research project, and I am investigating the experiences of lesbian students in university under the supervision of Professor Malose Langa. The aim of this research project is to explore and understand the perceptions, expressions, and personal experiences of lesbian students within the university space.

As part of this project, I would like to invite you to take part in an interview. The interview will involve telling stories of your sexual identity and experiences in the university and will take around 60-90 minutes. With your permission, I would also like to audio record the interview using a digital device. This recording will be stored in a password protected laptop and only the researcher and supervisor will have access to this recording.

You will not receive any direct benefits from participation but there are no disadvantages or penalties if you do not choose to participate or if you withdraw from the study. You may withdraw at any time or not answer any question if you do not want to. The interview will be completely confidential and anonymous as I will not be asking for your name or any identifying information, and the information you give to me will be held securely and not disclosed to anyone else. I will be using a pseudonym (false name) to represent your participation in my final research report. If you experience any distress or discomfort at any point in this process, we will stop the interview or resume another time. If you need some support or counselling services following the interview, these are available free of charge at the Counselling, Careers and Development Unit (CCDU) at Wits West Campus (Tel: 011 717 9140/32). The Emthongeni Centre (East Campus) also offers counselling at a fee (Tel: 011 717 4153).

If you have any questions during or afterwards about this research, feel free to contact me on the details listed below. This study will be written up as a research report which will be available online through the university library website. If you wish to receive a summary of this report, I will be happy to send it to you (optional). If you have any concerns or complaints regarding the ethical procedures of this study, you are welcome to contact the University Human Research Ethics Committee (Non-Medical), telephone +27(0) 11 717 1408, email hrecnon-medical@wits.ac.za.

Yours sincerely,

Researcher:

Ntombikayise Dolly Ndaba – 079 891 2975
 841860@students.wits.ac.za

Supervisor:

Professor Malose Langa
 malose.langa@wits.ac.za

Appendix B: Consent Form for the Interview



Psychology Department
 School of Human and Community Development
 University of the Witwatersrand
 Private Bag 3, WITS, 2050
 Tel: (011)717 4500 Fax: (011) 717 4559



Participant Consent Form for the Interview

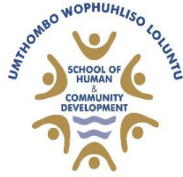
I, _____, consent to being interviewed by Ntombikayise Dolly Ndaba for her study on *Non-Conformity in a Predominantly Heteronormative Space: Experiences of Lesbian University Students*. The research has been explained to me and I understand:

- Participation in this study is voluntary.
- Refusal to participate in the study will involve no penalty.
- I may withdraw my participation and/or my responses from the study at any time before the research report is examined.
- I have a right to refuse to answer questions that I prefer to not answer.
- There are no risks or benefits associated with participation in this study.
- The interviews will be audio recorded. The recordings and transcripts will not be seen or heard by anyone other than the researcher and her supervisor.
- None of my identifiable information will be included in the research report.
- All information used in the research report will remain confidential, although I may be quoted in the research report.
- If I am quoted, a pseudonym (Participant A, Respondent B etc.) will be used.
- I am aware that the results of the study will be communicated in the form of a research report or journal articles.
- The research may also be presented at a local/international conference and published in a journal and/or book chapter.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix C: Consent Form for Recording



Psychology Department
 School of Human and Community Development
 University of the Witwatersrand
 Private Bag 3, WITS, 2050
 Tel: (011)717 4500 Fax: (011) 717 4559



Consent Form (Recording)

I, _____, give my consent for my interview with Ntombikayise Ndaba, to be audio recorded for their study. I understand that:

- The audio-recordings and transcripts will not be seen or heard by anyone other than the researcher and her supervisor.
- The audio-recordings and transcripts will be kept in a password protected laptop.
- No identifying information will be used in the transcripts or the research report.
- Although direct quotes from my interview may be used in the research report, I will be referred to by a pseudonym (false name).

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Appendix D: Interview Guide



Psychology Department
 School of Human and Community Development
 University of the Witwatersrand
 Private Bag 3, WITS, 2050
 Tel: (011) 717 4500 Fax: (011) 717 4559



INTERVIEW GUIDE

Welcome

Good day and welcome. Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study. I look forward to hearing your story and your experiences. My name is Ntombikayise. I am currently a student in the Masters of Arts in Community-Based Counselling Psychology programme. The topic for my Master's dissertation is *Non-Conformity in a Predominantly Heteronormative Space: Experiences of Lesbian University Students*.

Guidelines

The interview will proceed for approximately 90 minutes. I am interested in hearing all your perceptions and experiences. My role as the researcher and interviewer is to listen and guide this interview to gain an understanding of your perceptions and experiences. I hope that you are in a private and safe space that allows you speak freely and honestly. I am audio recording this interview, so may you please turn your phone off. I will refer to you by name during this interview, but the information that you share will be kept confidential. I may use quotations in my write-up, but I will not use your real name in my data and report.

Are there any questions before we begin?

Semi-Structured Interviewing Guide Questions

Questions

The following questions will be asked:

1. For how long have you been identifying as lesbian?
2. What was that initial process of self-identity like?
3. Have you publically come out as lesbian?
4. What was the process of coming out for you?
5. What does your identity as a lesbian female mean to you?
6. What are your opinions on labels and the labelling of sexual identity?
7. How do you express your sexuality?
8. What do you think people's attitudes are towards lesbians?
9. Have you encountered any discrimination or homophobia based on your sexual identity?
10. How do you campus environments (i.e. classrooms, residences, social spaces, the matrix, communal areas, etc.) in relation to your sexual identity?
11. What knowledge do you have about the gender and/or sexuality policies and resources that are available to you by the university?
12. Are there any improvements that you would suggest to these policies?

Appendix E: Research Permission Letter



OFFICE OF THE DEPUTY REGISTRAR

12 August 2021

Ntombikayise Ndaba
Student number (841860)
Master of Arts in Community-Based Counselling Psychology (MACC)

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

“Non-Conformity in a Predominantly Heteronormative Space: Experiences of Lesbian University Students”

This letter serves to confirm that the above project has received permission to be conducted on University premises, and/or involving staff and/or students of the University as research participants. In undertaking this research, you agree to abide by all University regulations for conducting research on campus and to respect participants' rights to withdraw from participation at any time.

If you are conducting research on certain student cohorts, year groups or courses within specific Schools and within the teaching term, permission must be sought from Heads of School or individual academics.

Ethical clearance has been obtained. Protocol number: (MACC/21/09)

Research expiration: (31 December 2023)

Nicoleen Potgieter
University Deputy Registrar

Appendix F: Copy of Advert

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED



Experiences of Lesbian University Students

Do you, personally, identify as lesbian?

Are you a student at Wits University?

Share your experience in a 60-90 min interview

contact Ntombikayise Ndaba (researcher)

at 841860@students.wits.ac.za



**Inclusivity
Diversity**

